

WATCH FOR SNAKES

A Devotional Meditation on Chukat (Decree) and Balak

Numbers 19:1-25:9; Micah 5:7-6:8; Genesis 3:1-24; Psalm 140:1-3;
Matthew 23:33-36; Luke 10:19-20; John 3:13-15; Acts 28:1-6; Romans 3:9-20;
1 Corinthians 10:1-13; 2 Timothy 3:1-9

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When Messiah Yeshua said he had given his disciples authority over serpents and scorpions, did he mean that literally? If so, then maybe there is some truth to the legend of Saint Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland.

It's true that the Apostle Paul suffered no harm when a Maltese viper bit him, but that actual event doesn't give us the full picture of what Yeshua meant. The literal is important, but it's only the start of our understanding. Actual events and characteristics are the basis for symbolic and abstract meanings that in time develop transcendent meanings of their own. Thus, the legend of St. Patrick and the snakes of Ireland isn't really about reptiles, but about the man of God's impact on the pre-Christian pagan culture of Ireland. That becomes clear when we look into the biblical symbology of snakes, or serpents.



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Let's first look at Yeshua's statement about giving his disciples authority over serpents. It's in Luke's Gospel:

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Luke 10:19-20 ESV

This isn't a statement about some mystical power, but about the identity of Yeshua's followers. They are no longer identified with the world, but with the King of the world. That means they are no longer susceptible to the world's woes – as in, they can't be conquered by the world anymore, even though we all know that in this life we still suffer trials and troubles. As for the serpents, it helps to remember that Yeshua and his cousin John the Baptist both referred to the spiritual leaders of Israel in their day as serpents and a brood of vipers. So maybe Yeshua wasn't actually conferring power over rattlesnakes, but over religious systems that have the appearance of godliness, but deny its power.

The transcendent status of identity with the King is something that only the Creator can bestow. Only the Creator is above all things. That's why the Messiah must somehow fuse the divine nature of the Creator with the mortal nature of humanity. How that happens is a topic for another time. For now, it's enough to understand that this is what Yeshua's followers proclaimed of him, and what he said of himself. He even said this in the context of his connection with a serpent:

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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.

John 3:13-15 ESV

This is a reference to something that happened to Israel as they wandered in the wilderness:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Numbers 21:4-9 ESV

Anyone who has spent time in a desert knows that serpents are part of the landscape. Thus, the first thing we should understand about this account is that the fiery serpents weren't an innovation God created specifically for the occasion of smiting the complainers among the Hebrews. They were there all along, but for some reason they weren't a problem until that moment. What changed?

This is where we look at the meaning of symbols. The first serpent mentioned in the Bible is the one Satan chose as his instrument of deception in the Garden of Eden. That serpent spoke enticing lies to Eve and her husband, weaving in bits of truth to disguise the venom in his message. That was enough to persuade our first ancestors to depart from the Creator's way, and as a result be ejected from his presence.

That is why serpents and the venom of serpents are associated with lying lips, violent hearts, and wicked motives. The unwary, gullible, and self-indulgent person is easy prey for such reptilian tactics. Actually, no one is immune, and everyone falls prey to serpents from time to time. The cure is to cling to God – not by holding up a bronze snake as a talisman or charm against sickness, but by proclaiming allegiance to the Creator of the Universe, learning his ways, and obeying his commands. That's the lesson Paul teaches from Israel's woes in the wilderness:

We must not put [Messiah] to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.

1 Corinthians 10:9-10 ESV

This is the dilemma: we either rise above the serpents in the power of Messiah, or we fall prey to them. Worse yet, we might even become the serpents and end up biting our brethren.