

SHARK BAIT! THE SERPENT IN ISRAEL

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The man in the rubber life raft was in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. As the sharks, which had been circling the raft, began to move in for the kill, he heard the sound of a helicopter in the distance. Summoning all the remaining strength that he had, he stood up and began to wave his arms and shout for help, even though he knew that he couldn't be heard.

The pilot saw his arms waving, came toward him and lowered his safety hoist. Just as the man was being lifted into the air, the sharks began ripping the rubber raft to pieces. The pilot said that the motion of his arms lifted up and waving had caught his eye. His uplifted arms meant the difference between life and death.

The illustration is a picture of what to do in times of trouble or crises. In Scripture, 'hands lifted up' speaks of prayer. In Psalm 28:1-2, King David said,

'To You, Yahveh, I call! My Rock! Do not be deaf to me. For if You are silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the Pit. Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to You for help, *when I lift up my hands* toward Your holy Sanctuary.'

Psalm 141:2, 'Let my prayer be set before You as incense, *the lifting up of my hands* as the evening sacrifice.'

In 1st Tim. 2:8, Paul wrote, 'I want the men in every place to pray, *lifting up holy hands*, without wrath and dissension.'

After Moses had sent Joshua out to fight Amalek he oversaw the battle from a nearby hill. When his hands were lifted up, Israel prevailed. When Moses got tired and his hands dropped, Amalek prevailed. In Exodus 17:8-16, it says,

"Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some men and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the Staff of God in my hand.'"

"Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed, but whenever he let down his hands, Amalek prevailed, but Moses' hands grew heavy, so, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands. Thus, his hands remained steady until the sun set and Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. Then Yahveh said to Moses,"

"Write this as a memorial in the Book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens!' And Moses built an altar and named it 'Yahveh *Nissi*' (Yahveh is my Banner). For he said, 'Yahveh has sworn (but a better translation would be: 'for [your] *hand(s)* upon the Throne of Yah,' which is the shortened form of the name Yahveh); Yahveh will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Just as *raised hands* meant the difference between life and death for that man in the Pacific, so raised hands to the Throne of Yahveh, intense prayer to God, meant the difference between life and death, victory and defeat, for Joshua and Israel. The picture of Moses' hands raised, literally, 'for [your] *hand* upon

the Throne of Yah' means, 'for your hands were lifted up to the Throne of Yah.' The NIV has, 'hands lifted to the throne of the LORD,' which is correct except for their use of *LORD* instead of Yah, but this explains how Israel prevailed against her enemy: Moses' hands were lifted up in prayer to the God of Israel.

Verse 15 has Moses making an altar and naming it יְהוָה נִסִּי (Yahveh *nissi*), which most English translations have, 'The Lord is my banner,' but the word for banner or flag is usually דֶּגֶל (*deh'gel*) as we find in Num. 1:52; 2:2, 3, 10, 18, etc., where God speaks to Moses and tells him that Israel should camp around their own flags or standards, each Tribe having their personal flag. The word is also seen for flag or banner in the Song of Songs 2:4, in the well known phrase, 'His banner over me is love.' If Moses wanted us to think that the altar was called *Yahveh is my Banner*, he could have used the word *degel*, but he chose to use the word *nissi*.

The Hebrew word *nissi* means, 'to raise oneself up, for example, by lifting or raising ones' hands,' that is to say, 'praying.' The noun means *something or someone* that is raised, 'a pole...standard' or 'banner,'¹ and so it can represent a flag or a banner, but a better translation for יְהוָה נִסִּי would be this:

'Yahveh is the One who *causes me to stand* in the midst of the battle by the lifting up of my hands,' meaning our prayers to Him, and primarily the prayers of Messiah Yeshua as our High Priest, whom Moses pictured.

Moses built an altar and named it Yahveh *Nissi*, *Yahveh is the one who causes me to stand upright or overcome in the midst of the battle. Yahveh caused Israel to stand* in the midst of her enemy's onslaught because of prayer.²

The Bronze Serpent

When Israel rebels against Yahveh and His anointed leader Moses, Yahveh sends fiery colored snakes to kill many sons of Abraham. Israel repents and pleads with Moses, and Yahveh tells him to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. When any Israeli was bitten, if he looked to the Bronze Serpent, he would be healed. Magic? Not from the God of Israel. Another teaching on how to survive today.

'Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom and the people became impatient because of the journey. The people spoke against God and 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 miserable food.' Yahveh sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.'

'So the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against Yahveh and you. Intercede with Yahveh that He may remove the serpents from us.' And Moses interceded for the people. Then Yahveh said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a standard. And it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.' And Moses made a Bronze Serpent and set it on the standard. And it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the Bronze Serpent,

¹ Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 553.

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament*, vol. 1: *The Pentateuch* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001; originally published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1866-91), p. 372. 'The lifting up of the hands has been regarded almost with unvarying unanimity by Targumists, Rabbins...and nearly all the more modern commentators, as the sign or attitude of prayer.'

he lived.’ (Num. 21:4-9)

The word for standard or pole, that the Bronze Serpent was placed on is נֵי (nais), and brings the two accounts together. It’s the same word that is used for ‘banner’ in Joshua’s account (the difference in spelling and pronunciation coming from the personal pronoun ‘my’ used in Joshua’s account). The Bronze Serpent represents Jesus in His humanity, associating with our carnality. Yeshua, ‘and the Son of Man must be lifted up, as Moses lifted up the Serpent in the Wilderness.’ (John 3:13-14).

In this He spoke of His crucifixion. He, like the Serpent, was ‘lifted up.’ In Scripture, precious metals as gold and silver symbolize deity and redemption, respectively.^{iv} Bronze, when highly polished, although not as precious as gold, shines up brighter than it (Ezra 8:27).

Bronze is to gold, what Adam was to God, before his rebellion. Adam was made in the Image and Likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), but was not God. After Adam chose to obey the Snake (Gen. 3:1-24), Adam became more like the Snake than God. Adam’s nature was now corrupt and consequently, all of us who come from Adam bear the same resemblance to the Snake that Adam did. Our very nature is not only far from God, it opposes God and His Ways (Num. 13-14). This is why we need the Messiah’s sacrificial atoning work; to forgive and to cleanse us from our sins and our sin nature.

Yeshua laid down His Glory of deity, pictured in the Bronze Serpent, so that Israel could see Him (Is. 53:2; Phil. 2:7; Col. 2:9). If He came as God the Son, in His full Glory, the Earth and the very Heavens themselves would melt away. How could we stand before Him (Mal. 3:2). But as Man (bronze), Israel was able to judge Him and His words. Most of us despised Him (Is. 53:3), but some of us believed He was the Messiah (Jn. 12:9, 11, etc.).

The Bronze Serpent on the pole, that saved those Israelis from certain death pictured Yeshua hanging from that Tree. He took upon Himself Adam’s nature before the fall, so he could be punished for our rebellion against God, as the Ideal Man. And we who know Him have been delivered from sin, death and Hell. Interestingly enough, the picture of Yeshua in Revelation speaks of His legs being as burnished bronze (Rev. 1:15; 2:18).

The Bronze Altar in the Tabernacle of Moses was made of two materials that both pictured Yeshua as Man: wood and bronze. Here we see a picture of Yeshua as the place of God’s sacrifice. Behind the Bronze Altar was the Bronze Wash Basin where the priests could literally cleanse themselves before and after they sacrificed, and before they went into the Holy Place. The Basin represents Yeshua as the One who cleanses us with His Word (Eph. 5:26).

Another place where bronze is seen to picture Yeshua as Man is the curtain or covering of goats hair. This was the second covering over the Tabernacle of Moses. This curtain was actually two curtains held together by 50 bronze clasps (Ex. 26:11). Both the goat and the bronze clasps picture Yeshua as the Man who would be used as an atoning sacrifice for Israel (Lev. 16).

The poisonous snakes pictured the consequence of rebellion to Yahveh: death. We are condemned to death because of our sin nature and weighed down with a burden that neither we nor our Fathers could carry. Sin, and its daughter, condemnation, kill us. Whenever we are bitten with sin, its job is to destroy us. Sin is bad enough but long after the sin stops, condemnation keeps on going. It’s relentless. Sin gets its power to condemn from the Torah: ‘Cursed is anyone who fails to do all these laws’ (Deut. 27:26). Who can deliver us from the bite of sin and condemnation which brings death?!

When the Hebrew who was bitten by the fiery serpents, looked to the Bronze Serpent on the pole, it says, ‘he lived’ (Num. 21:9); he was saved from the bite of death. The word for looked means, ‘to look with expectation, to hope in.’ So when they were dying from the bite of death, they would look with hope of being healed, to the Bronze Serpent, believing Yahveh’s word to them and they were saved from death.

Look! at your Messiah on the Tree and Live!

Cousin Amalek

It's more than interesting to note that Amalek is a relative of Israel. That day in Ex. 17, when Joshua fought against Amalek, Joshua and Israel were fighting their cousins. Jacob's twin brother Esau had a grandson named Amalek (Gen. 36:9-12). Num. 24:20 reveals a very telling prophesy by Balaam about the character of Amalek:

“And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, ‘Amalek was the first of the nations, but his end shall be destruction.’”

This not only affirms what Yahveh had said in Ex. 17:14-16, about being at war with Amalek from generation to generation and blotting out his memory, but it also speaks of *firstborn sons* not faring well, a theme of Scripture:

1. Adam, the firstborn son of God (Lk. 3:38) disobeyed God and ate from the tree.
2. Adam's firstborn son was Cain, who murdered his own brother Abel.
3. Abraham's firstborn son was Ishmael, who left the God of his father.
4. Isaac's firstborn son was Esau, who also left the God of his father.
5. Jacob's firstborn son was Ruben, who committed incest with his father's concubine.
6. King David's firstborn son was Amnon, who raped his half-sister Tamar, and was murdered by Tamar's brother, Absalom.

The firstborn son signifies the best, the strongest and the wisest, but all those firstborn sons fell far short of what Yahveh required.

Amalek אֲמֶלֶק *Ah-mah-lake* in Hebrew, comes from the word that means, ‘to vex, to sin, to make weary, to cause sorrow.’ Amalek is very close to us. Amalek is one of the descendants of Abraham, too. Amalek is our family, our relatives, our friends...and ourself! Amalek is us. Amalek pictures our pride and self-exaltation, which is rebellion and idolatry. This is why Yahveh strongly comes against Amalek. Pride cannot dwell in Yahveh's presence. So, we, with our own merits and good deeds could never *live* in Yahveh's presence, no matter how ‘good’ our deeds were. Our good deeds can never change our sinful and corrupt nature. We are both good and evil, but only He is pure and holy. We must be changed or transformed to be like Messiah Yeshua.

In Ex. 17:16 it says, ‘Yahveh is at war with Amalek from generation to generation!’ In Ex. 17:14 Yahveh says, ‘I will blot out the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens!’ This is Yahveh at war against our pride, but in 17:9 we are commanded to fight Amalek. How? By lifting up our hands in prayer to our Father and by looking at us crucified with Yeshua.

This is the teaching of Exodus 17, where Joshua *defeats* Amalek because Moses has his hands raised, and also, the symbolism of the Bronze Serpent, which spoke of us being crucified, so our nature could be transformed into Yeshua's nature. Amalek can only be defeated God's way. We can't tear out our own soul. God says to Jeremiah the prophet in 13:23:

‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.’

When Israel repented and asked to have the snakes taken away, God doesn't do that. Instead, He tells Moses to make a bronze serpent on a pole that reflects the very snakes themselves. The snakes weren't

taken away from Israel because they picture our carnal nature of pride and rebellion that won't leave us until we are glorified like Yeshua is now.

When we are bitten by pride and rebellion, if we look at Yeshua crucified, which also pictures us crucified with Him, we will be healed. We, like Israel before us, must look with expectation that we will be healed and we will be. We who believe are also crucified with Yeshua (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; 5:24). Sin and condemnation have absolutely no power over someone who is dead. If someone said to a corpse, 'Why you lazy, no good for nothing! You'll never amount to anything!' The corpse wouldn't even blink an eyelid. Those words of condemnation have no power over someone that's dead. As we see ourselves crucified with Messiah, sin and condemnation lose their power to destroy us. The bite of the Snake is neutralized.

Ex. 17:12-13 says that it took Joshua all day ('until the sun had set') to defeat Amalek. Why would it take Almighty God a whole day to defeat Amalek? A *day* is a complete unit of time and what the Lord is showing us is that He will cause Amalek, our pride and rebellion, to be totally defeated and removed at the end of the Age, another complete unit of time (Ex. 17:14; Dan. 9:24).

In our personal battle with Amalek, our carnal nature, it will take us the rest of our life, another unit of time, to learn how to die to self; to learn how to fight pride and rebellion, stubbornness and depression God's way, in Yeshua by His Spirit. When we lose heart, we must realize that we can overcome the bite of the Snake by lifting holy hands to God and seeing ourself crucified with Messiah Yeshua. Hebrews 12:12-13 says,

'Therefore, *strengthen the hands that are weak* and the knees that are feeble and make straight paths for your feet so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.'

Weak or slack hands indicate that one's prayer life is ineffective and powerless. The person has stopped looking to God for help. The Rabbis saw this about these two passages of Scripture many centuries ago and applied it to all of Israel. Both Moses' hands lifted up, and the Bronze Serpent, spoke of *heartfelt* prayer to God. The Talmud, in *Rosh HaShana* 29a, says,

"It is written, 'and it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand that Israel prevailed, etc.' Now did the hands of Moses wage war or crush the enemy? Not so! Only the text signifies that so long as Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven they prevailed, but otherwise they fell."

"The same lesson may be taught thus: It is written, 'make a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole, and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' Now did the serpent kill or did the serpent keep alive? No! What it indicates is that when Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but otherwise they pined away."³

The key to 'new life in God' is subjecting our heart to our Father in Heaven. He spoke about Messiah Yeshua in Mt. 17:5 saying, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. *Listen* to Him!' When Israel listened to God and looked at the Bronze Serpent they were healed. Messiah Yeshua said, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me' (Luke 9:23). The word for 'cross' is *σταυρος* (*stauros*) and means, an upright stake or *pole*.⁴ It's similar to the

³ Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Rosh HaShanah* (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), p. 29a.

⁴ Wesley J. Perschbacher, Editor, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1990), p. 377: 'a stake; a cross, Matt. 27:32, 40, 42.'

pole that held the Bronze Serpent aloft, picturing us crucified.

Only Messiah Yeshua can defeat Amalek in us and outside of us. This is God's way of giving His people Israel, both Jew and Gentile, a new nature (Ezk. 36:24-27); one that is like His. There is nothing that one can do to destroy pride within, because pride and rebellion are interwoven into the very fabric of our being. This is another interpretation for the tares and the wheat, and also, what Yeshua meant when He said, 'With Man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'

God has sent His Anointed One, Messiah Yeshua to lead us to the Father. Psalm 24:3-4 states,

'Who has the right to climb the Mountain of Yahveh? Who has the right to ascend into His holy presence? He whose hands are clean, whose heart is pure. Whose soul does not pay homage to worthless idols and who never swears to a lie.'

There has never been anyone on Earth that could ever have had the right to ascend God's holy Mountain except Messiah Yeshua. For all firstborns, all the best that Man could ever produce, have fallen far short of what God requires: a heart fully surrendered to the Father, total obedience and holy humility, but now, in Messiah Yeshua, God has given us that right. It says in John 1:12,

'But as many as received Him (Yeshua), to them He gave the right to become the Sons of God, to those who believe in His Name.'

It's not a mechanical belief. It's a heart-felt love for Messiah that pervades our whole being. This is biblical belief based on an experiential relationship, not a mental assent that 'Jesus is the Savior.' True belief is seen in all who have tasted of Yeshua's love and have 'sold everything' to buy the Pearl of great price.

Yeshua is the only One who is able to defeat Amalek within us. When we are bitten with strife and envy, doubt, depression and anxiety, pride and ignorance, let us raise our hands in mighty prayer to our Father. Let us see ourselves crucified with Yeshua and look to Him to heal us. This is the way to overcome our carnality in the battle for our soul.

After all, you don't want to be shark bait, do you?⁵

⁵ Revised on 14 January 2013.