

HEALING AND HISSING SNAKES – LISTENING TO NUMBERS 21:4-9

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Abstract

The magical elements of the well-known account of the snake infestation and its remedy by a bronze serpent (Num 21:4-9) have been discussed often in commentaries and individual studies. This article directs attention to aural elements of this story including aural-sympathetic magic, repetition of key words in multiples of typological numbers, onomatopoeic use of snake sounding sibilants, interdialactical word plays, and narrative statements resembling ancient medical prescriptions in content and formulation. These elements, if not merely dramatic embellishments, may indicate that this etiological story served as an incantation for invoking the healing powers of Nehushtan.

“Does a snake put to death, or does a snake bring to life? (Of course not!) But when the Israelites would gaze upwards and subject their hearts to their Father who is in Heaven they would be healed; and if not, they would languish” (Mishnah Rosh Ha-Shanah 3:5).

This well known Mishnaic dictum expresses the normative Rabbinic attitude¹ towards the unconventional therapeutic method prescribed by God and administered by Moses for healing the Children of Israel who were bitten by divinely dispatched fiery serpents² as punishment for their incessant, and baseless complaints about their desert diet. What looks suspiciously to some like magic bordering upon idolatry,³ is in fact a way of enlisting the Deity’s assistance to overcome a serpentine scourge which God Himself had initiated. To be sure, the story itself states that after being inflicted with the poisonous snakes the people confessed their sin, and begged Moses to pray for succor from the serpents (v. 7). Moses did so, and God obligingly prescribed the remedy which did the trick (v. 8). The Mishnah

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1. Reinterpretation of this passage is not a Rabbinic innovation. Already in Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-7 we find: “For when the horrible fierceness of beasts came upon these, and they perished with the stings of crooked serpents, thy wrath endured not for ever: But they were troubled for a small season, that they might be admonished, having a sign of salvation, to put them in remembrance of the commandment of Thy law. For he that turned himself toward it was not saved by the thing that he saw, but by thee, that art the Saviour of all”. Cf. Maneschg, H “Gott, Erzieher, Retter und Heiland seines Volkes: zur Reinterpretation von Num 21,4-9 in Weish 16,5-14”, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984), pp. 214-229.
 2. This article uses “snake” and “serpent” completely interchangeably.
 3. The danger of idolatry lurking in this man-made serpent is demonstrated by later reference to Nehushtan, the bronze serpent made by Moses and eradicated by Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4) because it had become an object of worship. According to some scholars, the snake cut down by Hezekiah had not become a god after the fact as a result of the people’s backsliding, but had been a god or a divine representation from the beginning. Rowley, HH, “Zadok and Nehushtan”, *JBL* 58 (1939), pp. 113-141 proposed it was a Canaanite deity introduced to Israelite cult by David. Joines, KR, “The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult”, *JBL* 87 (1968), pp. 243-256 attributed it to Solomon. For a bird’s eye survey of numerous views on the origin of the bronze serpent see Fabry, H-J, s.v. נִחֻשְׁטָן, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. Botterweck, GJ, Ringgreen, H, Farby, H-J. tr. Green, DE. (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), vol. 9, pp. 370-380, esp. 379.

may have changed the order of events, placing the people's penitence and prayer after the manufacture of the bronze snake rather than preparatory to the act, as in the Bible, but it is certainly right in identifying the main active ingredients in the cure as prayer and God rather than the ritual prop. Although Jacob Licht remarks wryly "I don't believe that the Holy One, Blessed be He, performs salvation by artifice",⁴ Baruch Levine emphasizes that "prayer and magic are not mutually exclusive avenues of approach to powerful deities", are part of the same process, and the efficacy of magic is basically a function of divine will.⁵ As a matter of fact, Levine asserts:

The many attempts to explain away the account of this incident, on the grounds that, if taken at face value, it would conflict with biblical monotheism, reflect a basic misunderstanding of ancient Near Eastern magical phenomenology as known to us from comparative sources.

In this brief note, dedicated in friendship to Yehoshua Gitay, a master of biblical rhetoric, I wish to direct the readers' ears to several literary devices employed in the serpent story which echo the religio-magical aspects of the incident and add an additional twist which might be described as "medical".⁶ The auscultation performed here may also forward our understanding of the story's *Sitz im Leben*.

- 1) Exegetes and scholars have long recognized the use of a model serpent to cure snake bites to be an example of sympathetic or homeopathic magic,⁷ and that snakes were associated with healing in various societies throughout history,⁸ But, this magical strategy extends as well to aural aspects of the narrative, giving rise to practices which can be called "aural-sympathetic magic". In particular, the word for bronze, נְחֹשֶׁת, from which the snake is manufactured sounds similar to the word for snake, שֶׁנָּה, and the specific designation of the bronze serpent, נְחֹשֶׁת נִחְשֵׁת, repeats and emphasizes the crucial consonants. So the imitation of the snakes rests not only in the form and nature of the ritual instrument produced but also in the name of the material from which it is made.⁹

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4. Licht, J, *A Commentary on the Book of Numbers [XI-XXI]*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1991), p. 227 (Hebrew).
 5. Levine, B, *Numbers 21-36*, The Anchor Bible 4A, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 89.
 6. Note the comment of Biggs, R, "Medizin. A, In Mesopotamien", in *Reallexikon des Assyriologie*, 7, (Berlin: deGruyter, 1987-1990), pp. 623-629: "It does not seem possible to posit an early 'rational' medicine that was only later 'contaminated' by medical practices. Rather, therapeutic medicine and magical medicine co-existed and were complementary rather than in opposition to each other."
 7. Nachmanides on v. 8 provides a short discourse on sympathetic magic, which he would certainly prefer to call "sympathetic medicine". The principal is "the damage is removed by the one who causes the damage; and you will heal the disease by means of what has caused the illness." For use of model snakes in curing snake bites and with specific parallel drawn to Num 21:4-9 see most recently Ford, JN, "The New Ugaritic Incantation against Sorcery RS 1992.2014", *Ugarit Forschungen* 34 (2002), pp. 119-152, esp. 128-132.
 8. Milgrom, J, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Numbers*, (Philadelphia, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 459-460.
 9. Rashi on v. 8, explaining why Moses made a bronze serpent even though God had not so specified remarks: "It wasn't said to him that he should make it of bronze, but Moses surmised, The Holy One Blessed be He called it a שֶׁנָּה, so I will make it of נְחֹשֶׁת", a pun. Nachmanides and Abravanel suggest that bronze was chosen because it is red, assuming that the fiery-serpents were either fully or partly red. Gray, GB, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of Numbers*, ICC, (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1903), pp. 276 mentions some cases of bronze images relating to pests such as scorpions, mice, serpents and leeches being used throughout history and in several locations to alleviate infestations of those pests.

Using an object with a specific name in order to influence something bearing a similar sounding name is known from Mesopotamian texts as well. Walter Farber has discussed several incantations containing wordplays for various purposes such as: quieting the noise (*ḥubūru*) of an infant by use of dust from beer-vats (*ḥubūru*); achieving blessing (*karābu*) for a tavern by means of a basket (*kuruppu*); achieving purity (*lū ellēku*) for the petitioner by means of oil (*ellu*); and passing responsibility (*pīḥātu*) off on Ishtar by means of a beer keg (*pīḥu*).¹⁰ These instances, the likes of which there are many more, provide parallels to the biblical story, in which the bite (נשך) of serpents (נחשים) is cured by a serpent of bronze (נחש נחשת).

- 2) The effect of the aural sympathetic magic is enhanced or amplified by another well known magical means. The use of key words in multiples of three or seven times is a well attested and often studied characteristic of ancient near eastern and biblical literature, and especially in religious or magical contexts.¹¹ It is thus not unexpected that an additional “magical” element in this narrative is the use of two key words, or sounds seven and three times, respectively.

The main antagonists in the narrative are the snakes, נחשים, and the remedy is a snake made of bronze, נחש נחשת. The consonants נחש are found in the words נחש, snake, and נחשת, bronze, and these two words appear together for a total of seven times (vs. 6, 7, 9 [5x]).¹² It is significant that in creating the seven occurrences of the consonant cluster, the meaning of the words formed is apparently not as important as the cluster of consonants itself. Importance of sound, as opposed to lexical sense, accords well with the use of Mumbo-jumbo in magical incantations.¹³

Moreover, the serpents bite their victims, and the word נשך, bite, occurs three times (vs. 6, 8, 9).

- 3) The magical aural features of this pericope go even further. God’s command (v. 8) עשה לך שרף ושנים אותם על נס והיה כל הנשך וראה אותו וחי ויעש משה נחש נחשת וישמהו על הנס והיה אם נשך הנחש את איש והביט אל נחש הנחשת וחי, “And

10. Cf. Farber, W, “Associative Magic: Some Rituals, Word Plays, and Philology”, *JAOS* 106 (1986), pp. 447-449.

11. See Avishur, Y, “The Forms of Repetition of Numbers Indicating Wholeness (3, 7, 10) – in the Bible and in Ancient Semitic Literature”, *Beer-Sheva* 1 (1973), pp. 1-55.

12. This fact weighs against the Septuagint, Vetus Latina and Vulgate which read נחש נחשת instead of שרף in v. 8, in which case there would be nine occurrences of the consonants נחש. The reading is accepted by Moffat and NEB and may even have been known to Rashi, thus obviating Nachmanides’ reservation from Rashi’s comment on v. 8. But the Septuagint reading is certainly an interpretive correction, harmonizing the command with the fulfillment and explaining why Moses made a bronze serpent although he had been commanded to make a Seraph.

13. See Veldhuis, N, “The Poetry of Magic”, in Abusch, T, van der Toorn, K (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical and Interpretive Perspectives*, Ancient Magic and Divination 1, (Groningen: Styx, 1999), pp. 35-48, esp. 46-48.

Moses made a bronze serpent, and placed it on a pole,¹⁴ and it was that if the snake bit a person he would look at the bronze serpent and live/recover”. In this verse the sibilant sounds /s/, /š/, and /š/ occur eleven times, the first five times in consecutive words. In this vein we should also point to v. 6, וישלח ה' בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את, ה.עם וימת עם רב מישראל. Of the five sibilants in this verse, three are found in close proximity in consecutive words. It seems that only a deaf reader (or a snake who hears not an incantation) will not hear here the hissing of snakes.¹⁵

A similar phenomenon occurs in an often studied Ugaritic snake-bite incantation.¹⁶ This text is marked by a refrain which repeats ten times, each refrain containing two sentences displaying five sibilants /t/, /š/ and /s/ in five consecutive words:

Mnt.nṭk.nḥš.šmrr.nḥš.'qšr
lnh.ydy.ḥmt
hlm.ytq.nḥš.yšḥm.nḥš.'qšr
y'db.ksa.wyṭb

(Here is) <my> incantation against the bite of a snake that is venomous, a snake that is sloughed

From it (=the snake) let the charmer remove –

From it (=the snake) let him cast off venom

Let him, moreover, give drink to the snake, give food to the sloughed snake

Let him set up the chair, and take his seat

But the most pervasive use of snake-like noises occurs in some Akkadian snake incantations recently edited and discussed by I. Finkel.¹⁷ An Old-Babylonian incantation of highly poetic style reads (CBS 7005):

šuttuḥ lānam / damiq zumram
sumkinu šu sumkin gišmmarim
ina šubtim irabbiš šeru / ina šuppatim irabbiš bašnu
ša bašnim šitta kaggad ā ūšum / sebe lišān āšu / seba paraullu ša ki šādīšu

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14. This too may be an act of sympathetic magic, creating a נס-miracle by means of a נס-pole.
15. Attempt to echo the hissing of snakes may be found in other biblical pericopes as well. The best example is Gen 3:14 where Eve says in her own defense: הנהש השיאני. Although this means “the serpent beguiled me”, if we listen to it carefully and analyze it onomatopoeically we can hear her saying “the snake hissed at me”. A translator bent on capturing the flavor of the verse should render it “the serpent deceived me”. The onomatopoeic use of sibilants and palatals for imitating snake sounds in Ps 58:4-6 (חמת למו כדמות חמת נחש) (כמו פתן חרש יאטם אזנו: אשר לא ישמע לקל מלחשים חובר חברים מהוכם שנגנו לשונם כמו נחש חמת עכשורב תחת שפתימו סלה) (Ps 140:4); and אמ ישך “They sharpen their tongues like a snake, the venom of a spider is under their lips” (Ps 140:4); and אם ישך “If a snake which doesn’t hear a charm can bite, then there is no advantage to a snake charmer” (Eccl 10:11).
16. For the text see Levine, BA, de Tarragon, J-M, “‘Shapsu Cries out in Heaven’: Dealing with Snake-Bites at Ugarit (KTU 1.100, 1.107)”, *Revue biblique* 95 (1988), pp. 481-518. See also Ford, JA “The New Ugaritic Incantation”, p. 130. Levine and Tarragon, p. 517, discuss the parallelism in the refrain, which they consider unusual for a formulaic statement, but ignore the onomatopoeia which it emphasizes.
17. Finkel, IL, “On Some Dog, Snake and Scorpion Incantations”, in Abusch, T, van der Toorn, K (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretive Perspectives*, Ancient Magic and Divination 1, (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1999), pp. 213-213-250, esp. pp. 223-229.

amḥaṣ parbalâ u parakulla
šammānam šēri qīšim / šubādām šēri la šiptim
šēri qarāni ša itti wāšpīšu imtaḥṣu

Elongated of form, beauteous in body
 His (rotten) wood shavings are (rotten) shavings of palm-wood,
 The snake waits coiled in the dwelling; the serpent waits coiled in the rushes;
 As for the serpent, two are his heads, Seven his forked-tongues, seven the *parullu*-s of
 his neck.

I smote the *parbalû* (?) (snake), even the *parakullu* (snake)
Šammānu, the forest snake, *Šubādu* the snake that cannot be conjured away,
 (Even) the wine snake, who does battle with the exorcist (summoned against) him!

The second incantation, available in two nearly identical copies (IM 51292; IM 51328),
 reads as follows:

ašbat pi šēri kalīma u kursidam
šēri lā šiptim ašnunugallam burubalām
šandapšaḥuram barmam inīn
kupiam šēri zizi nazizam šēri aptim
īrub ḥūram ūši nušabam
imḥaṣ šallatam šabītam / alanam ḥamadiram uštelqi
ina šbbim šērum irabbiš / ina šppatim irabbiš bašnum
ša bašnim ššit pīšu sibiṭ [lišān ūšu] / sibiṭ u sibiṭ ulumīma ša libbīšu
ulluḥam šārātīm / palḥam zīmi
namurata ināšu / ina pīšu ūšam puluḥtum
elitašu ipaššid abnam
tūenninuri

I seized the mouth of all snakes, even the *kursindu* snake,
 The snake that cannot be conjured, the *aššunugallu* snake, the *burubalû* snake,
 The *šandapšaḥuru* snake, of speckled eyes,
 The eel snake, the hissing snake, (even) the hisser, the snake at the window,
 It entered the hole, went out by the drainpipe,
 It smote the sleeping gazelle, betook itself (to) the withered oak.
 The snake lies coiled in...; The serpent lies coiled in wool/rushes;
 Six are the mouths of the serpent, seven his tongues, Seven (and seven) are the...
 inside him/of his heart;
 He is wild of hair, fearful of appearance,
 His eyes are of awful brightness, fearfulness issues from his mouth;
 His very spittle can split stone!
En-e-nu-ru incantation.

I have emphasized in bold type the lines in which there is a preponderance of sibilants
 and interlabial sounds /s/, /š/, and /š/.

Another possible echo of serpentine hissing occurs in the famous Gilgamesh XI 305-
 306 where the serpent steals from exhausted Gilgamesh the plant “The Old Man Has

Grown Young”. This time, however, the alliteration involves in two places an interlabial but like-sounding /š/ rather than a sibilant:

šēru īešin nipiš šammu
[šaqum]mešilamma šammu iššī

A snake smelled the fragrance¹⁸ of the plant,
 [silently] it came up and bore the plant off.

It comes as no surprise that the use of sibilants in literary descriptions of serpents is not limited to ancient near eastern writings. Dr. Chanita Goodblatt (Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Ben-Gurion University) has kindly called my attention to John Milton’s depiction of the transformation of the Serpent of Paradise (*Paradise Lost*, Book X, ll. 504-562), which not only discusses the snake’s new voice but auditions it as well by sibilant laded lines such as ll. 504-509:

So having said, a while he stood, expecting
 This universal shout and high applause
 To fill his ear, when contrary he hears
 On all sides, from innumerable tongues
 A dismal universal hiss, the sound
 Of public scorn;...

And again in ll. 521-532:

...dreadful was the din
 Of hissing through the Hall, thick swarming now
 With complicated monsters, head and tail,
 Scorpion and Asp, and *Amphisboena* dire,
Cerastes horn’d, *Hydrus*, and *Ellops* drear,
 And *Dipsas* (not so thick swarm’d once the Soil
 Bedropt with blood of Gorgon, or the Isle
Ophiusa) but still the greatest hee the midst,
 Now Dragon grown, larger than whom the Sun
 Ingender’d in the *Pythian* Vale on slime,
 Huge *Python*, and his Power no less he seem’d
 Above the rest still to retain;...

All these passages indicate that authors writing about snakes had a propensity to imitate the serpent’s sound by using sibilants and similar sounding consonants. However, in the incantations cited, the use of onomatopoeia may have more a magical than a strictly literary purpose, again employing sympathetic magic. This may be the case as well of the bronze-serpent tale (See below).

18. This is how *nipšū* is translated by George, A, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vol. 1, p. 723, following CAD N/II, p. 248b, s.v. *nipšū* A 2, “the snake smelled the odor of the plant”. However, *nipšū* is a rare word for smell, which is usually *erešū*, and used mainly in medical texts. It has been chosen because of its association with *napāšū*, “to live” and certainly has here the connotation of “the scent of life”, indicating this snake may have intentionally stolen from Gilgamesh the long sought after elixir of life.

- 4) If we assume that the biblical author knew some foreign languages and was capable of relating not only to Hebrew, but to other tongues as well, we can find two additional word plays of magical importance.¹⁹

First of all, the Hebrew word for live or recover, חיה, resembles the Aramaic and Arabic words for snake, חויא and حيه, so using a snake to give life/heal could call upon this aural association. The same multilingual connection and precedent for the case at hand may already be implicit in the name explanation of Eve, חווה, in Gen 3:20, כי היא כל חי היתה אם כל חי, “for she was the mother of all living (persons)”. The name חווה, Eve, could derive from Phoenician חוי, to give life, and mean “giver of life, but there is no such form attested in Hebrew. It could also come from an Aramaic verb meaning “declare”, but this is used only in rare poetic contexts in Hebrew and adds little to the story. But it is equally reasonable to associate חווה with the Aramaic or Arabic word for snake, and this is how it has been explained by Genesis Rabah 20:11 and several modern scholars.²⁰ Nonetheless, the narrator explains it as associated with life. This explanation could be based on no more than the sounds of the words, or it could have in mind the Phoenician חוי, but it may be based on the author’s association of snakes with life both on a physical and on a linguistic level (snake is to life as חויא is to חיה).

On the other hand, the Akkadian words for “live” and “life” are *na’āšū*, and *nīšū* which bear phonetic resemblance to Hebrew נחש.

A writer who knew all these words, could associate Hebrew נחש with Akkadian *na’āšū* and Hebrew חי with Aramaic חוי and all these associations would lead him to use a נחש נחשת not only to treat snake bites (נשך נחש) but to give life (וחי). An attentive reader aware of all these words might feel himself awash in a swarm of hissing, life giving snakes.²¹

19. A famous example of such multilingual competence is found in the account of creating woman (Gen 2:21-23). Woman is created by taking (לקח) a rib (צלע) from the man. Later on, she is given the name חווה which is explained as “mother of all living (persons)” (Gen 3:20). It so happens, as pointed out by Samuel Noah Kramer and reiterated by Marvin Pope, William W Hallo and others, that the Sumerian word TI is translated into Akkadian as *leqû*, *šēlu*, and *balāpu*, meaning “take”, “rib”, and “live”. Only someone with knowledge of Sumerian could say that the Mother of all living (TI) is formed by taking (TI) a rib (TI). For other such wordplays see Rendsburg, GA, “Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible”, *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 354-357 and idem, “The Egyptian Sun-God Ra in the Pentateuch”, *Henoah* 10 (1988), pp. 3-15; Wolters, A, “*Šōpiyyā* (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*”, *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 577-587.

20. See Cassuto, U, *A Commentary on Genesis*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1965), pp. 113-114 [Hebrew].

21. An interdialectal word play may actually lie behind the use of snakes to punish the Children of Israel for their complaints. Punishment in the Bible is often meted out measure for measure, but there seems to be no connection between the Israelites’ complaint and the infestation of snakes. This has led various commentators to speculate about some connections between slander and snakes. Rashi, for instance, says: “let the snake who was punished for slander be used to punish slanderers; let the snake for whom every type (of food) tastes the same punish the ingrates for whom a single thing (the Manna) changes for them into various tastes”. However, by translating one word in the complaint into its Akkadian equivalent the connection between crime and punishment becomes vividly clear. The Israelites complain “why did you take us out of Egypt to die in the desert (מדבר)?”. It just happens that the Akkadian equivalent of Hebrew מדבר, “desert”, is *šēru*, and that this word is a homonym with the word for snake (The semantic correspondence is not total. Akkadian *šēru* is a broadly used term, overlapping Hebrew מדבר as well as שדח. Cf. *CAD* S pp. 138-148, s.v. *šēru* A; von Soden, *AhW* pp. 1093-1095; S. Talmon, s.v. מדבר, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. Botterweck, GJ, Ringgren, H, Babry, H-J, vol. IV, (Kohlhammer, 1983), pp. 659-695). In other words,

- 5) The use of aural associative magic enhanced by multiplication by typological numbers, as well as the use of word plays belong to the magical characteristics of the snake tale. But one additional aspect derives from the realm close to what we call “medicine”. Mesopotamia has yielded an abundant amount of medical omens as well as therapeutic texts which have been published over the years, and are now becoming the object of intense research.²² Some of the texts display a fixed literary formulation, resembling the cuneiform laws and omens. They start with a conditional conjunction *šumma*, “if”, that introduces a protasis describing some current situation, or in the case of medical texts the symptoms. This is followed by an apodosis in present-future tense with a sentence in the case of the laws, a prediction in the omens, or a prescription in the medical texts. The medical prescriptions sometimes contain an additional remark, a prognosis, thereby concluding with either the word *iballuṭ* or *inēš*, both of which mean “he will recover” or “he will live”. I cite here a few examples by means of illustration:²³

šumma KI.MIN *šaḥapa immar šipta tattanadašumma iballuṭ* (sa.gig XXVIII 68)²⁴

If, ditto (= he suffers from a long illness and), he sees a marsh boar; you will recite an incantation over him, time and again; and he will recover/ live;

šumma KI.MIN *ana qāt ili itâršû āšipūssu teppušma iballuṭ* (sa.gig XXVIII 69)²⁵

If, ditto (= he suffers from a long illness and), it changes for him into Hand of the God, you will do an exorcist’s rite to him; and he will recover/live;

šumma awilum libbašu mariš

arat errê tubbal tuḥaššal tanappi ina dišpi šikari u šamni ḥalši tamaḥḥaš

bālu patan tušaqqāšu ina šuburrīšu tūšēšeršuma

iballuṭ (Küchler beitr.11)²⁶

If a person’s inside is sick,

you shall dry out, crush and sift a leaf of colocynth, and you shall beat it in honey, beer and pressed oil. Without eating you shall make him drink. You shall squirt it into his anus;

and he will live/recover;

šumma awilum sualum mariš

ana šaḥāṭi Ú.EME UR.GI₇ *arqa tuḥazza kasâ ḥašlāi ana libbi tanaddi tuballal tanaqqi*

lu ina pīšu lu ina šuburrīšu išaḥḥaṭamma

iballuṭ (AMT 80 1:1-3)²⁷

If a person is sick with phlegm -

rendered into Akkadian, the Israelites’ complaint can be seen to be about dying by *šēru* snakes (𐎑𐎒𐎒, instrumental *bet*), and this is just what YHWH decrees upon them as punishment.

22. See Finkel, IL, “On Late Babylonian Medical Training”, in George, AR, Finkel, IL (eds.), *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of WG Lambert*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2000), pp. 137-223. At the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale held in London in July, 2004 a session was dedicated to current research on Mesopotamian medical lore.

23. For additional references see CAD B, 54b, s.v. *balātu* 1e; N II, 197b, s.v. *nēšu*, 1c.

24. Cited from Stol, M, *Epilepsy in Babylonia*, Cuneiform Monographs 2 (Styx Publications: Groningen, 1993), p. 87.

25. Cited from Stol, M, *Epilepsy in Babylonia*, p. 87.

26. Cited according to Herrero, P, *La Thérapeutique mésopotamienne*, ed. Marcel Sigrist, Mémoire no. 48, (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1984), p. 92.

27. Cited according to P Herrero, *La Thérapeutique mésopotamienne*, p. 93.

To get rid (of the phlegm) you should grind green “Tongue of Dog”, you shall throw in crushed mustard, you shall mix and pour;
 Either from his mouth or his anus, it (the phlegm) will be gotten rid of,
 and he will recover/ live.

In addition to these medical texts we should mention snake omens,²⁸ some of which start with conditional clauses mentioning snake bites such as (cf. CAD N/1, p. 54b, s.v. *našāku*, 1a):

šumma šēru ana amēli isniqma iṣbassuma iššukšu [x] qereb bēl dabābišu ikaššad (KAR 386:9, also *ibid.* r. 30 and *dupl.* KAR 389 (p. 350) ii 17, cf. KAR 385:37 and 40 (Alu).

If a snake approaches a man, attacks him, and bites him, [x] among his opponents will arrive.

The series of medical omens *enūma ana bī marši āšīpu illik*, “When the exorcist goes to the house of a sick person”, has a section of omens concerning snakes, predicting the death or the life of the patient.²⁹ So, for instance:

šumma šēru ana muḥḥi marši imtanaqut murussu irrikma iballuṭ (TDP p. 8 2:21).

If a snake falls time and again on top of the sick person, his disease will last long, and he will recover/live;

šumma šēru ana muḥḥi marši ša ūmī madūti maršu imqut maršu šū iballuṭma balṭu imāt (TDP p. 8 2:23).

If a snake falls on top of a sick person who has been sick for many days, that sick person will recover/live, but a healthy person will die.

But most important are several medical texts which start in the same way, dealing specifically with snakes (RC Thompson, AMT 92, 7:6; see also Köcher, BAM 42:63-65; Labat TDP 10:30):

šumma amēlu šēru iššukšu ŠUHUŠ urbati taqallap ikkalma inaeš

If a snake bites a person, you shall peel the root off an *urbatu*-reed, he shall eat it, and he shall recover/live.

It just happens that the story of the bronze serpent concludes with a similarly structured and worded sentence (v. 9b): והיה אם נשך הנחש את איש והביט אל נחש והנחשת והי. Translated in narrative context, as a continuation of v. 9a, this verse means “so that when a snake had bitten a man, he could look at the bronze serpent and recover” (NEB).³⁰ However, if we translate this sentence mechanically and in isolation from what comes before it, it can mean:

“and it will be:

If the snake bit a person –

he shall look at the bronze snake,

and he will recover/live”.

28. For snake omens in *šumma ālu* see KAR 384-386.

29. Labat, R, *Traité akkadien de diagnostics et pronostics médicaux*, 1, (Paris: Academie internationale d’histoire des science; Leiden: EJ Brill, 1951) p. 8-11 Tablet 2, ll. 19-30.

30. For the grammar of the verse see Levine, B, *Numbers*, p. 90.

This prospective understanding of the end of v. 9 would in fact be called for by the etiological nature of the story as explaining how Nehushtan is to be activated.³¹ Moreover, the content, vocabulary and syntax of this sentence (conditional pronoun, description of being bitten by a snake with verb in past tense, prescription of remedy with verb in future, prognosis with word meaning “he will live/recover”) is identical to that of the Akkadian medical texts in general and the last-cited line in particular. We find in v. 8 a sentence of different syntax but with the same content as v. 9: עשה לך שרף ושים אתו על נס והיה כל: “הנשוך וראה אתו והי בitten will see it and live”. Here too, there is a symptom (“anyone who is bitten”), a prescription (“Make yourself a fiery serpent, etc.”), and a prognosis (“he will recover/live”). In any case, the story of the bronze serpent contains two sentences which closely resemble magico-medical statements from Akkadian writings, and in particular some concerning snake bites. The cure described in the story may mix the magical with the miraculous, but the formulation is strictly medical.

In conclusion, the use of a bronze serpent for healing snake bites reflects a typical ancient near eastern admixture of religious (penitence and prayer) and magical (associative healing) means of healing. But the narrative itself employs additional literary devices stemming from sympathetic magic (the name of the item and the material from which the item was made, the sevenfold and threefold use of keywords, the use of alliteration echoing the hissing of the snakes), and also has employed a style typical of medical texts.

Would it be too much to suppose that the story, widely assumed to explain the origin and effect of Nehushtan (2 Kgs 18:4b),³² was actually recited as an incantation when invoking the therapeutic services of Nehushtan, enhancing the potency of the bronze object by the healing efficacy of the narrative? In this case, the story of Nehushtan’s origins might be compared to certain Mesopotamian incantations which start off with an etiological tale concerning the origins of the affliction and end with a prescription for the cure.³³ It would also mean that the rhetorical devices displayed by the story and of a magical nature were incorporated into the narrative for more than the reader’s delight, but in order to make the story effective in fulfilling its true, medicinal purpose and become by its recitation part of the remedy.

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31. Although the majority of scholars recognize the etiological nature of the ‘bronze serpent’ story and associate it with Nehushtan, Noth, M, *Numbers – A Commentary*, (tr. Martin, James D, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1968), p. 156-157 remarks: “The passage provides no aetiology of the ‘Nehushtan’ of II Kings 18.4, since it does not go on to say anything about the Israelites’ having somehow taken with them the ‘bronze serpent’ made by Moses and having set it up late somewhere in their country”. Nonetheless, he goes on immediately to claim that the “later existence of the ‘bronze serpent’ attributed to Moses was certainly the reason for the telling of the story of a plague of serpents in the wilderness”. It seems that this concluding sentence, interpreted as describing an ongoing custom, provides the missing formal sign of an etiological tale Noth finds wanting.
32. This is the view of the majority of scholars. For a dissenting opinion see Joines, KR, “The Bronze Serpent” who separates the Mosaic bronze serpent from the Nehushtan of Hezekiah’s day. The one she sees as a snake-bite cure of Egyptian origin, while the other she takes to be a fertility object of Canaanite derivation.
33. See, for instance, Landsberger, B, Jacobsen, T, “An Old Babylonian Charm Against *Merḫu*”, *JNES* 14 (1955), pp. 14-21, and p. 14, n. 5 for additional incantations with narrative introductions. See also Foster, B, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1993) vol. 1, pp. 113-145; vol. 2, pp. 840-898, *seriatum*.