

## The Serpent on the Ensign in Numbers and John's Gospel

Emilio G. Chávez

1. In Num 21:5, the people again speak against God and Moses, complaining about the lack of bread and water in the desert, and furthermore loathe the “worthless, contemptible” manna.
2. YHWH then sent fiery serpents (Heb. *hann<sup>e</sup>hashim has<sup>s</sup>raphim*) to them and many died. The people then acknowledge their sin and ask for Moses' prayer of intercession.
3. Moses does pray and YHWH tells him: “Make for yourself a *śaraph* (a fiery [serpent]) and put it *upon an ensign* (*‘al-nēs*) so that all who are bitten shall see it and live.” Note: the “ensign” (*nēs*) is a pole suitable for placing a cloth on it, thus “a flag or standard.” In Greek it is translated as *semeion*, “sign,” which is also used to translated the Hebrew *ot*, “sign” (as in Exod 3:12; 12:13).
4. Moses made the brass serpent (now called *nahash*, as in Gen 3:1) and put it *upon the ensign*, and all who had been bitten and looked upon it lived, Num 21:9.
5. In John 3:13-16, Jesus tells Nicodemus that “No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of man, and as Moses lifted-up the serpent in the desert, so lifted-up must be the Son of man, so that all who believe in him have eternal life.”
6. To be “lifted-up” is also used in John 8:28: “When you have lifted-up the Son of man then you will know that I Am.” In 12:31-32, Jesus says that now, his hour having come (v. 23), the ruler of this world shall be cast out outside (!), “and if I am lifted-up from the earth I will draw all to myself.” The evangelist then explains that Jesus is referring to his crucifixion.
7. In Aramaic, to be “lifted-up” means both to be “exalted” and crucified. It is a pun which works only in Aramaic: when Jesus is “lifted-up,” he is both “glorified” (see John 12:23-24) and crucified. Hebrew knows a similar pun; see Gen 40:13, 19.
8. In Isa 52:13, the Servant in the Hebrew text is “exalted, lifted-up and very high” (triple exaltation (cf. Phil 2:9-11). The Greek version, however, reduces this to two: “lifted-up” and “glorified exceedingly,” exactly as in John's Gospel.
9. “Signs” (Greek *semeia*, plural of *semeion*) are extremely important in John's Gospel: its first part is called the “Book of Signs” and the second the “Book of Glory.” One great *semeion* is the resurrection, as in John 2:18-22.
10. The Hebrew *nes* (ensign) also appears in Isa 11:10 (after the great “seven-gifts-of-the Spirit-vegetarian lion-messianic passage), where it is said that the same just-mentioned root of Jesse shall “on that day” stand as an ensign to the peoples, and that his “resting-places” (*m<sup>e</sup>nuhot*) shall be glorious. In v. 12, it is said that “he [YHWH] shall lift-up an ensign to the nations” and gather the outcasts of Israel. Here *nes* translated *semeion* (Greek for “sign”).