

The FIERY SERPENTS

in Numbers 21:4-9 **were** / are ...

"Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread. So the LORD sent **fiery serpents** among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore 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. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live. So Moses made **a bronze serpent**, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if **a serpent** had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived." (Numbers 21:4-9)

about the

seriousness of unbelief

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

also in

Deut. 8:15 & 1 Cor. 10:9

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

an important part

of Jewish history (Deut. 8:15)

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

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both

natural & miraculous

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

causing

fiery inflammation

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

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closely linked to

the bronze serpent (John 3:14)

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

deadly but

overcome by faith (Jn. 3:15)

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

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not quickly

removed as requested

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

obviously

significant (John 3:14-15)

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

Descriptive



common sand viper

desert horned viper

Meditation

probably vipers like these

**

in line with

the point of 2 Cor. 5:21

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

probably difficult

to detect and avoid

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

ready to

strike quickly (Isaiah 14:29)

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

reminiscent of

the serpent in Genesis 3

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

reported

mostly in just five verses

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

to show that

God is just AND gracious

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

unusually

abundant and/or active

(Agree? yes, no, partly)

Directions: after reading through **Numbers 21:4-9**, John 3:14-16, and some quality articles on venomous snakes in the Sinai, Egypt, and Arabia, consider and discuss how the fiery serpents are described above. **Do you agree with the various points made? Would you change them in some ways? At the end, discuss the most important descriptive phrases and make applications.** In this, think about why God chose to use poisonous snakes *and* a bronze serpent. Obviously, we each should believe in the One foreshadowed by the bronze serpent (John 3:14), and, of course, we should not complain about God like the Israelites did (21:5). — © 2022 by Jon F. Mahar, Hakusan City, Japan and Alexander, Maine, U.S.A.

Why did God send deadly snakes?

Obviously, it was because the people spoke against God (21:5-6). However, they had often done so in the past as well without such severe consequences. (See Exodus 15:22-25, 16:1-5, and 17:1-7.) The difference in Numbers 21:4-9 seems to be that they did not complain because they lacked food or water. Rather, they loathed the food, the manna, that God had provided (21:5). So their complaining was like a thankless child throwing food on the floor, rather than a small child crying because of hunger.

Why didn't God totally remove the snakes?

After many had died, the people repented and asked for the venomous snakes to be removed (21:7). Rather than doing so, however, the Lord provided a way for individuals who were bitten to be saved (21:9). In Exodus, the frogs that plagued Pharaoh died and became a stinking mess, but for God's people in the wilderness the provision was better. The snakes which represented sin continued to bite the people, but each one could turn and look with faith at the bronze serpent in order to be spared. This was in line with Jesus' explanation of salvation in John 3:14-16 and Paul's teaching on the same in Second Corinthians 5:21.

Why is the fiery serpents passage so short?

It is only five verses. Yet, it seems to be important since the Lord Jesus cited the incident in John chapter three and Paul cited it in First Corinthians chapter ten. Moreover, Moses included it in his summary of key wilderness events in Deuteronomy 8:14-17. Why then is the original passage so short? We do not know, but the important, water-from-the-rock passage, Exodus 17:1-7, is also short. Some may wish to know what the rock that was struck looked like, but describing it would have distracted from the miracle. Likewise, describing the snakes in detail would probably have been distractive as well.

What kind of venomous snakes were they?

It is impossible to tell with certainty, and groundless speculation is unhelpful. Nevertheless, there are some indications that the snakes may have been desert horned vipers which are known for their stealth and quick strikes. (These may be referred to as fiery flying serpents in Isaiah 14:29.) Alternatively, they may have been common sand vipers which also hide in the sand but become more openly aggressive as their annual hibernation period approaches. Their being sent by the Lord (Num. 21:6) may have involved their natural aggressiveness at that time of year.

What are the applications?

Obviously, we each should personally believe in the One foreshadowed by the bronze serpent (John 3:14-15). Looking in Numbers 21:9 is much like believing in John 3:15. In addition, of course, we as believers should not complain about God's provision like the Israelites did. (Compare Numbers 21:5 and First Corinthians 10:9.) Each snake bite had to be taken seriously. Likewise, a sinful, unthankful heart of unbelief toward the Lord needs to be repented of quickly.