

# THE UPLIFTED SERPENT<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 10 March 2024**

The word for today: “ophidiophobia”, the irrational fear of snakes.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, about a third of us suffer from it, and I suspect that the other two thirds mostly don't like snakes anyway. Many years ago, Bev and I, with our son, Simon, were hiking in Tasmania. We passed several snakes on the track and were stunned to learn later that all the snakes in Tasmania are venomous. While walking on the Great Ocean Track in southern Victoria, I rounded a corner to surprise a large brown snake enjoying the sun. It reared up, ready to strike and then dived into the bush, for which I was very thankful. The eastern brown snake is extremely venomous.<sup>3</sup> Just because you fear snakes does not necessarily mean that you have a phobia. Self-preservation is also a good response.

Snakes have a bad image in the Bible. One appears in the Genesis creation myth, where it is described as being “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made”.<sup>4</sup> The serpent is the original tempter, asking a crucial question about our relationship with God, “Did God say?”, and then suggesting that what God said was not true. The temptation was to imagine ourselves as the centre of the creation, to imagine ourselves as God-like, not as creatures.

We know that snakes do not speak or argue as depicted in the story. So, the serpent represents something. The traditional answer is Satan, the fallen angel who seeks to destroy our relationship with God. The alternative answer is that the serpent represents our own natural tendency, that our failed relationship with God arises from our existence. This creates a tension between what might be seen as a presentation of our own immediate life and a larger version of what evil is.<sup>5</sup> We can understand this better if we realise that evil appears not only in persons but in organisations, nations, and other large movements. Individually and corporately, we act and combine in significant evil projects, some of which we control and others we do not.

Not only does the serpent appear at the beginning of our Bible, but it also appears at the end. Revelation 12 describes the war in heaven in which the dragon, often represented as a serpent, is cast down. This is a reappearance of the serpent from Genesis, now depicted, not as an ordinary animal, but as a cosmic figure, reflecting our earlier observation of the way that evil is woven into our existence. Revelation tells us that, in the end, the serpent, present from the beginning does not prevail.<sup>6</sup>

You can see where this is going. Today's Old Testament and Gospel both refer to one episode involving serpents. In our reading from Numbers, snakes appear among the wandering Hebrews and are interpreted as a judgement from God against their sins. What sins were they? Principally, impatience, that is, a distrust in a God who was taking too long. As on other occasions, they wished to be back in Egypt. Having earlier complained about having no food

---

<sup>1</sup> Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

<sup>2</sup> [Ophidiophobia - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Eastern brown snake - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:1

<sup>5</sup> R R Reno, *Genesis*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Grand Rapids MI, Baker Publishing, 2010, Chapter 2

<sup>6</sup> Joseph L Mangina, *Revelation*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Grand Rapids MI, Baker Publishing, 2010, Part III, Revelation 12

and having received the manna, they now complain that it is miserable. As we have already seen, the serpent is the symbol of evil, so their presence among the people can symbolise both their sin and its punishment.

Moses made a bronze serpent, put it on a pole for everyone to see. They recovered from the venomous bites. When Moses places the serpent on the pole and lifts it up, the people see everything that it represents: the sufferings of their journey, from which they recoil and the judgement against them. But there is something else in this symbol. It was customary after a battle to place the defeated enemy's head on a pole and display it to everyone as a sign of victory.

The act of turning and looking at a symbol recognized as a symbol of their sin and God's judgment on them amounts to a confession or acknowledgement of their sin. Furthermore, turning to this symbol of sin and judgment in order to live required faith in God, in God's mercy and desire for their good. Such an act was tantamount to a recommitment to God's way ...<sup>7</sup>

What is important for us is that everyone looked up at the serpent. So the question is, "what did they see?"

The bronze image remained important in Hebrew practice. 2 Kings reports that it remained in the temple until King Hezekiah who destroyed it in a reform movement in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. "He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan."<sup>8</sup>

As we have read, Jesus made a specific reference to this Exodus event, drawing an analogy between himself and the serpent. The analogy has two parts. The first, and most obvious, is a prediction of the manner of his death. The second feature of the analogy is the looking up. When we look up at the crucified Jesus, what do we see?

It will help us a little if we understand that the Exodus narrative talks about the people not having enough food or water. In each case, God intervenes. In turn, Jesus represents himself after the feeding of the five thousand, as the true bread that, like manna, comes down from heaven.<sup>9</sup> In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus represents himself as the living water.<sup>10</sup> This is another significant link that Jesus makes between his person and mission and the freedom from slavery represented by the Exodus. Tom Wright says:

This is very deep and mysterious, but we must ask: how can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting the snake on a pole? Wasn't the snake the problem, not the solution? Surely John isn't suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snakes that had been attacking the people?<sup>11</sup>

If, looking at the serpent, the Hebrews were reminded of judgement, victory, and the call to following God, so we, looking at the cross, are invited to see the same. Jesus

---

<sup>7</sup> David L Stubbs, *Numbers* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Grand Rapids MI, Baker Publishing, 2009, p. 169

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 18:4

<sup>9</sup> John 6:48-51

<sup>10</sup> John 4:7-15

<sup>11</sup> Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 1* (New Testament for Everyone Book 5) London, SPCK 2002 p. 32

through his resisting temptation and his obedience fulfills the purposes for which humanity was created, namely, to be obedient to God, to have God's image shine in and through them, and to be in restored fellowship with God, with each other, and the rest of creation.<sup>12</sup>

Before we imagine that we have fully understood the link between our two readings, we need to notice a significant difference. When the Hebrews looked at the bronze serpent, they saw a symbol of evil and an image of the actual venomous attacker. When we look at the uplifted Jesus, we look at one who is innocent. This one is the victim, not the perpetrator. Not only that, but the concept of "lifting up" refers both to the crucifixion as a physical lifting and to the resurrection as an exaltation. The two go hand in hand.<sup>13</sup>

We may be tempted to enter a discussion of how Jesus reconciles us to God through his death and resurrection. We have lots of choices, simply because theologians through the history of Christianity have struggled to find satisfactory explanations. We should not put our trust in such arguments, interesting as they may be. They all rely on metaphors and analogies, first, because nobody can know the mind of God and, second, because we experience a mystery best understood indirectly through images. In a recently published book, Bishop Peter Carnley has noted that our verbal attempts to encompass mysteries

have a ... modest purpose of identifying the nature of a lived experience; they allow for the cherishing of it and for inviting others into it. The religious object of Christian faith is not a theory to be believed in, but rather a person in whom we place our faith and trust.<sup>14</sup>

Our participation in the eucharist, the beauty of our music and liturgy, the physical sensation of our worship, all direct us to the same end.

We walk in the wilderness  
adorned with literacy  
cloaked in sophistication  
yet lacking in wisdom

We exult in our knowledge  
oblivious of our creator  
so – when bitten by vipers  
of sickness and depravity

...we seek the eyes  
of the bronze serpent of salvation  
that we may be healed  
from our own transgressions<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Stubbs, p. 171

<sup>13</sup> See Andrew McGowan [Jesus, Lifted up - by Andrew McGowan - Andrew's Version \(substack.com\)](https://substack.com/p/andrew-mcgowan-jesus-lifted-up)

<sup>14</sup> Peter Carnley, *The Subordinate Substitute: Another Wrong Turn on Carillon Avenue*, Wipf & Stock, 2024, p. 321

<sup>15</sup> [The Bronze Serpent – Smell The Coffee \(smellthecoffeeweb.com\)](https://smellthecoffeeweb.com/)





Eve and the Serpent

Furtmeyr Bible, Regensburg after 1465 (München, BSB, Cgm 8010a, fol. 10r)



A modern monument of the bronze serpent (which Moses erected in the Negev desert) on Mount Nebo, in front of the church of Saint Moses



The Crucifixion (1646)  
Alfredo Cano



*Der Engelsturz* ("Fall of the rebel angels")  
Peter Paul Rubens, between 1621 and 1622  
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek München