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Nehushtan and Serpent Symbolism in the Ancient Near East

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NEHUSHTAN AND SERPENT SYMBOLISM

IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In Numbers 21:4-9 the story is told of how Yahweh punished the Israelites by sending "fiery serpents" into their midst. After hearing the people's confession, Yahweh provided the means of healing in the form of the Bronze Serpent. This serpent was not heard of again until the time of Hezekiah, over five-hundred years later. It was destroyed as part of Hezekiah's reform, where it was designated as Nehushtan. What happened to the Bronze Serpent in the interim? And what was the theme of Nehushtan worship? This paper will endeavor to shed light on these questions by surveying the use of the serpent symbol in the ancient world, focusing especially on Canaanite sites and worship themes, the text of 2 Kings 18:4, and the religious milieu leading up to the days of Hezekiah. The syncretistic practices of Israel, which gave birth to Nehushtan worship, provide potent lessons for our generation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SERPENT AS A UNIVERSAL SYMBOL FOR WORSHIP

Of all the creatures in the animal kingdom none has captured the religious imagination of man as thoroughly as the serpent. The serpent symbol, in all its natural and mythical varieties, attained cultic significance in virtually every corner of the world. Moving eastward from the Ancient Near East, the serpent symbol can be traced through Elam and Arabia into India; in a westerly direction it stretched through Anatolia into Greece and Rome, thus gaining a foothold in western civilization. By way of Egypt the serpent symbol travelled through many parts of Africa. In terms of time, serpent symbolism continued beyond the worship of the god Nehushtan through the remainder of Old Testament times and even down to the Gnostic Ophite sect, and it continues to the present day in the form of the snake handlers cults in the United States.

The Serpent Mystique: Its Adaptability as a Religious Symbol

The serpent has many natural characteristics which make it suitable for describing the personal attributes and powers of a deity. Primitive religions also tended to be animistic, and the serpent, as a rather mysterious creature, would be a front-running nominee for a symbol in the worship of spirits, demons, or gods. In view of these things it is certainly possible to overstress the influence of one nation's religion

upon another. Serpent worship could have arisen spontaneously apart from any such influence. For example, it would be difficult indeed to trace the relationship between the Mesopotamian concept of a tree of life inhabited by a serpent and the American Indians' "medicine tree," which also housed a serpent.[1]

The serpent plays a host of different roles in the mythologies of the world, because no single characteristic stands out above all its other traits. The lion, for example, symbolizes strength or ferocity above anything else. The following is a list of the serpent's uncanny traits: a mysterious means of locomotion (see the wonderment expressed in Prov. 30:19), the power of some varieties to resemble their environment, its silence, the ability to remain perpetually watchful even during periods of apparent sleep, the strength to hold its head aloft for seemingly infinite periods of time, its habit of frequenting ruins and graves and other uninhabited areas, the ability to go long periods of time without food, its penetrating stare, the flicking of its tongue, the lustre of its body, and its "death and resurrection" through the sloughing of its skin.[2]

Serpent Associations

In order to give a proper background to the survey of particular sites and cultures, a brief look at general serpent associations will be

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[1]Ross G. Murison, "The Serpent in the Old Testament," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature, 21 (1905):129.

[2]Ibid., p. 115; W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, 36 (1920):277.

undertaken, reserving the bulk of specific instances of serpent symbolism for upcoming sections. Generally speaking, the serpent is negative symbol in the Scriptures, but it has a positive thrust in the Ancient Near East as a whole.[3]

Divine Powers and Attributes

The serpent symbolizes life itself and in this regard the fertility and growth of all vegetation. In locales where the sun was viewed as the source of all life, the sun's rays were pictured as individual serpents.[4] The connection between the sun and its serpent-rays is probably part of the religious scene at Beth-shemesh (see below). The serpent(s) spent the winter months in the underworld, completely hidden away from view. As the spring sun warmed the ground, snakes reappeared, and simultaneous with their appearance were the fresh sprouts of the new spring crops. Possibly this springtime picture gave rise to the worship of serpents as chthonic (underworld) deities.[5] The powers of spring were personified in the Mesopotamian gods Ningizzida and Tammuz, who were celebrated in the first two months of spring.[6] This life motif goes hand-in-glove with the various "tree of life" symbols and their simplified successor, the caduceus wand of healing. The Phoenician regions

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[3]John Skinner, Genesis, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 72.

[4]See the throne of Tut-ankh-Amen, James B. Pritchard, The Ancient Near East in Pictures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), plate 415, p. 145. Hereafter cited as ANEP.

[5]Albright, "Goddess of Life," p. 277.

[6]A. L. Frothingham, "The Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake God and of the Caduceus," American Journal of Archaeology 20 (1916):191.

were places where life and healing came to be emphasized and symbolized by the serpent.[7]

Along with fertility of the soil the serpent also symbolizes human fertility, or fecundity. Perhaps human and agricultural fertility are fused in the prevalent earth-mother goddess of Canaan. Fertility gods may have found their way into Canaan primarily through Mesopotamia; Egyptian serpent symbolism deals very little with the subject. The Assyrian mound at Tepe Gawra and the Assyrian relief of Bel fighting the Dragon both give evidence of the serpent as a phallic cymbol,[8] but many scholars believe that such serpent phallicism is overemphasized.[9] It is as the source of life that the serpent takes on this symbolism. The chief expression of divine powers of fertility in Canaan is the goddess Asherah.

Because the serpent molts or sloughs its skin, it became a symbol of immortality similar to the phoenix.[10] Immortality is possible through reincarnation or through life in another world, which is the mainstay of Egyptian mythology. Undoubtedly there is a connection between immortality symbolism and the serpent being used as a totemic symbol. As we shall see, Nehushtan is thought by some to be a symbol of David's ancestry. The Gilgamesh epic is a classic example of how the serpent represents immortality. It says of the tree of life:

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[7]Ibid., p. 191, 204.

[8]Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):247.

[9]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 116.

[10]Karen R. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 97; Albright, "Goddess of life," p. 277.

> A serpent smelled the fragrance of the plant, came up from the water, and took the plant. On its return, it shed (its) slough.[11]

The Wachaga people of South Africa (!) share to this day a legend to the effect that human beings in the beginnings of history actually did shed their skin and were thus immortal. But one day a boy, who had been sent away on a fishing trip, accidentally caught his mother "in the act," half in and half out of her skin. The mother promptly died, and immortality became a lost art.[12]

The serpent symbolized or embodied divine protection over this current human existence. The Egyptian uraeus was the protective amulet of the pharaohs.[13] Many of the pottery or terra cotta shrines which were found in private homes are thought to be the houses of pet snakes that silently patrolled the home and afforded a guarantee of divine protection. Thus, the serpent came to be known as a friend of man: Ross G. Murison believes that this aspect of serpent symbolism should be our number one consideration.[14]

But the serpent was also a destructive symbol, perhaps because of its stealth and its lightning-fast death strike.[15] In the epics of the colossal, primordial struggle between good and evil, the foe to be

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[11]As quoted in Albright, "Goddess of Life," p. 278.

[12]Mardiros Ananikian and Alice Werner, Mythology of All Races, 7 vols. (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1925), vol. 7:Armenian and African, p. 170.

[13]J. D. Douglas, The New Bible Dictionary (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1962), p. 1165.

[14]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 116.

[15]Skinner, Genesis, p. 72.

vanquished is the serpent-dragon, known by such names as Rahab, Leviathan, or the Canaanite form, Lotan. Because the snake is legless, it suggests that water is its natural habitat, and that it is "a fish out of water," so to speak.[16] The Egyptian god Apep (Apopis) was evil personified, and in Canaan the high place at Gezer was filled with the skeletons of infants approximately one week old.[17] Some Mesopotamian deities are a curious mixture of cruelty and benevolence.

If the serpent was at once a symbol of destruction and protection, of life and death, it could also be said to possess the power to distinguish between the two, that is, wisdom.[18] Positively, the serpert was considered to know the answer to many mysteries; on the negative side, it was subtle enough to stage a surprise attack on its victims.[19] The possibly related verb nahash (Gen. 30:27, Lev. 19:26, Num. 23:23) means to practice divination. If so, by charming the snake the enchanter showed his own wisdom in that he was able to outwit the snake. One cannot help but think here of how wisdom is personified in the Book of Proverbs (1:20).[20]

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[16]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 97.

[17]R. A. S. MacAlister, Bible Sidelights from the Mound of Gezer (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), p. 76. However, this massacre cannot be conclusively linked to the serpent symbolism.

[18]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 97.

[19]Kittel, Gerhard, and Friederich, Gerhard, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 5:566. Hereafter cited as TDNT.

[20]Murison, "The Serpent," pp. 117-18.

The serpent is also a symbol of healing. The primary witness to this is the caduceus, which became the staff of Aesculapius, the Greek God of healing and medicine.[21] Its relationship to Ningizzida and Tammuz, as well as to the Tree of Life, has already been mentioned above. The exact origin of the caduceus is open to speculation. K. R. Joines feels that it comes from Egypt, while A. L. Frothingham thinks it is of Semitic origin.[22] Frothingham has a most interesting presentation on this subject, tracing it down to the serpent god Hermes.[23] Perhaps the Phoenician god Eshmun, who represents healing, is a combination of Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths, since it stood at a kind of midpoint between the two cultures.

Relationships to Other Religious Symbols

In speaking of the serpent's connection with other symbols, the most that can be definitively said is that they existed side-by-side. Beyond that, one can only speculate about possible relationships.

The serpent and the bull appear together on many ancient sites. One possible reason for this is that the bull, like the serpent, symbolizes fertility. King Gudea of Lagash (an ancient city of Sumer, the modern name of which is Telloh- flourishing in the twenty-fourth century B.C.) is said to have placed a serpent and a bull to stand guard at the local temple.[24] In the Pyramid Texts (twenty-fifth to twenty-third

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[21]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 86; TWNT, 5:569.

[22]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 86; Frothingham, "Hermes," p. 195

[23]Frothingham, "Hermes," p. 175-204.

[24]Joines, "The Bronze Serpent," p. 248.

century B.C.) the serpent is given the nickname: "Bull."[25] The thirty-nine foot high Ishtar Gate of Babylon had serpents in conjunction with bulls.[26] This association could very well have a direct bearing on Hezekiah's reform, if the surmise is true that Judah adopted serpent worship in the form of Nehushtan to counteract Jeroboam's bull symbol in the Northern Kingdom.

The serpent's association with the dove appears to be a Mesopotamian idea. The dove served as a harbinger of spring and the return to life of the natural world. Shrine-house models at Asshur and Beth-shan conjoin the two symbols.[27] The gift of life seems to be the common ground between them. We are reminded of how the dove symbolized the world's return to life for Noah (Gen. 8:6-12, and also of Jesus' words: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16).[28]

Water, which stands as a religious symbol in its own right, is undoubtedly the most common symbol associated with the serpent. A commonality is found by considering water to be the source of life. Water jars ornamented with serpents have been found all over Canaan at many archaeological sites.[29] Mesopotamia is probably the chief source of this symbolism: life comes up from the water in the person of Ningizzida (Ningishzida).[30] In Mesopotamian art, water can be seen to flow in all

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[25]Ibid. [26]Ibid., p. 67-8. [27]Ibid., p. 71-2.

[28]W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 84.

[29]See Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 249 for a listing of sites.

[30]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 71.

sorts of strange courses which defy the law of gravity. But lest we get too enthusiastic about water-serpent associations, there are also many natural explanations to this pairing. Wells and cisterns were the haunts of many snakes which naturally seek wet areas.[31] Also, snakes "flow" along the terrain and follow a serpentine path just as rivers do. W. C. Graham and H. G. May suggest that this is why the Garden of Eden includes a serpent and is located by four rivers.[32]

Trends in Biblical Serpent Symbolism

There are in Palestine nine different families of snakes represented by as many as thirty-six species. These snakes are referred to in the Old Testament under seven or eight Hebrew words, depending upon one's translation. Since there was no standard technical terminology, we can only guess which variety of snakes is being referred to.[33] In all, the Old Testament mentions snakes eighty-five times with twenty-one of these occurrences in Isaiah.[34] Thus, only certain points of interest and general trends will be treated. Most Biblical references to snakes carry a connotation of evil.

The word nahash is the generic term for serpents, but in places where the Biblical author has no clear knowledge of the nature of the

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[31]Siegfried Horn, Seventh-Day Adventist Dictionary (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Associates, 1960), p. 983.

[32]Albright, "Goddess of Life," p. 277; Graham and May, Culture, p. 84, 87.

[33]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 1; Murison, "The Serpent," p. 119.

[34]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 11.

beast, the word tannin is used.[35] Often tannin is confused with tannim, the plural form of tan ("jackal"). (The term saraph (me'opheph) will be discussed in the following excursus.) The zohelim, or "crawlers," is a term which may have its roots in the Arabian word for Saturn zuhal, indicating remoteness.[36] The shephiphon (Gen. 49:17) is translated as "viper" which lies in ambush along the highways in the person of the tribe Dan. The eph'eh, probably a viper which lives on the sandy plains, and the siph'oni, perhaps the most dreaded of all because of its size or poison, both appear to be onomatopoetic words for the hissing sound of snakes.[37] The akhshubh may be the horned serpent which was so sacred to Jupiter disciples, who buried it in his temple, but it is possible that the word should be transposed to the form akhabhish, a word for a native poisonous spider.[38] The pethen (hence the word python?) was a favorite of snake charmers and thus probably a cobra, although it is translated with the word aspis in the Septuagint and in the New Testament (Rom. 3:13).[39]

Many of the Biblical references to serpents are simply negative symbols which carry no religious import whatever. The fact that most Palestinian snakes are relatively harmless indicates that the people of the ancient world had many unjustifiable fears concerning them. Biblical symbols normally pick up on just one characteristic of an object or

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[35] G. A. Buttrick, ed. Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:289. Hereafter cited as IDB.

[36] Murison, "The Serpent," p. 119. [37] Ibid. [38] IDB, 4:289.

[39] Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 3.

animal and then draw a comparison. For example, only the whiteness of sheep (not their wooliness) is the point of comparison with the teeth of Solomon's beloved (Song of Sol. 4:2). The serpent symbols are no different. The coming conquerors of Israel and Judah are compared with serpents who resist charming and bite instead (Jer. 8:17). The flicking tongue of a snake may help suggest that it "eats the dust" (Gen. 3:14): Yahweh's subjugation of all the pagan nations will cause them to "bite the dust" (Micah 7:17). The effects of alcohol are likened to the sting of an adder (Prov. 23:32).

Some serpent symbols carry more religious freight. Moses' rod, which can turn into a serpent, is the "sacramental" presence of the power of Yahweh prior to the construction of the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. The scene before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:8-13) shows that Yahweh himself, not the Egyptian uraeus, is our protection. The most frequent serpent symbol in the Scriptures is the Leviathon-Rahab-Tannin picture of a draconic monster of the deep and its parallel in the Yam-Tiamat-Lothan conception in pagan mythology. However, the Bible affords no unified picture on this subject. In some places the sea monster is described as having been already crushed (Ps. 74:14; 89:10), in other verses it is merely a neutral part of God's creaturely world (Ps. 104:26; perhaps Job 41:1), and in still other places it is an eschatological figure, or Saton himself, that will be defeated in the final conflict (Is. 27:1; Rev. 12:9-15). Volumes could be written on the serpent in Eden, where it uses its wisdom and allure for evil ends. Julius Wellhausen opined that Eve herself was pictured originally as a serpent,[40] but it has

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[40]Quoted in Murison, "The Serpent," p. 130.

been considered shaky at best to see Eve paralled in the Phoenician serpent goddess Chavva.[41]

Historical critics of the Old Testament have run amuck on discovering parallel serpent symbols in ancient pagan literature and symbology. However, from a conservative point of view, the serpent figures in the above paragraph are not true symbols at all; they indicate realities in God's created world. Indeed, it is equally possible that Mesopotamian creation myths are imperfect, tainted reflections of the true Biblical original. Genesis one to three is the norm: from this position we can account for the fact that there is no pagan parallel to the story of the fall of man into sin.[42] The overwhelming Biblical picture of the serpent is that it is just one part of God's creation and under his total control.

Excursus: the Nature of the Seraphim

A separate discussion of the seraphim is in order, because it is possible that Nehushtan was fashioned after such a creature. The word saraph appears seven times in the Bible. First Chronicles, which mentions a descendant of Judah by that name (4:22), need not concern us here. The story of the "Brazen Serpent" in Numbers 21 (retold in Deut. 8:15) contains two references which will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. Two verses in Isaiah (14:29 and 30:6) use the term in connection with me'opheph, meaning "flying serpents." The call of Isaiah in chapter six of his book is the only place where the word is used specifically of angelic, heavenly beings.

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[41] TWNT, 5:573.

[42] Ibid.

If we assume an etymological connection, the basic meaning of saraph is "to burn." This sense is reflected in Sharrapu, the Babylonian fire god, which is representative of the coronal rays of the sun.[43] But it is also possible that there is a cognate which has the simple meaning of "serpent." There is a cuneiform word siru, which means "serpent;" another possible derivation is the Arabian sharafa, meaning "princes." Later Jewish tradition adopts the cognate meaning: the author of Enoch 20:7 speaks of the "serpents (seraphim?) and cherubim of Paradise."[44]

The starting place in the search for a counterpart to the Biblical seraphim must be Egypt, where the winged serpent was a commonplace symbol. It stood for the sacral and royal authority of the pharaohs. The throne of Tut-ankh-Amen (mentioned above) has arms in the shape of winged serpents. The tomb of Ramses VI is guarded by similar creatures.[45] As early as the Fifth Dynasty, there appears the mythical griffin, a creature with a lion's body and a falcon's or eagle's head. The possible connection with the seraphim lies in its wings and its serpentine tail. By the time of the Eleventh Dynasty, the griffin is called by the name seref (or srrf), a burning creature. At Mari, Phoenicia, and Syria the griffin is named in connection with the Sacred Tree, and thus serpent-associations are further strengthened.[46] In the Twenty-first Dynasty

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[43]James Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Charles Schribners Sons, 1900), 3:887.

[44]Karen R. Joines, "Winged Serpents in Isaiah's Inaugural Vision," Journal of Biblical Literature 86 (1967):410; Hastings, Dictionary, 3:887.

[45]Joines, "Winged Serpents," pp. 412-13.

[46]R. D. Barnett, The Nimrud Ivories, (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1957):73-4.

(ca. 1200 B.C.) The Book of Pylons (Gates), and The Book of the Underworld, both speak of winged serpents. The Tenth Hour (chapter) of Pylons is guarded by Sethu, a winged uraeus. Similarly, The Underworld, in the Fourth and Eleventh Hours, describes serpents with four human legs and one pair of wings.[47]

In general, the flying serpents of Egypt serve as guardians of the Pharaoh, their graves, temples, and the underworld. Some think that the griffin is more representative of the cherubim (also winged) than the seraphim.[48] Another possibility is that the winged serpent is a mythical magnification of the cobra, whose hood resembles miniature wings. Each appendage to the Egyptian serpent symbol illustrates a task of the serpent. For example, the wings could describe the universality of a pharaoh's reign, and the feet could be used for towing Re's boat along its daily course.[49] Egyptian influence upon Canaan was always significant. Scarabs depicting winged serpents have been found at Gezer, Megiddo, Lachish, and Beth-shemesh.[50] In Isaiah's time, Egypt still exerted considerable influence, even though she was politically weak.

Moving eastward, Arabia appears to be the "proper home" of winged serpents. Herodotus is our primary source of information here. He talks about winged serpents that guard all the spice-bearing trees

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[47]E. A. Wallis Budge, The Gods of the Egyptians, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 1:218, 251.

[48]Graham and May, Culture, p. 251; Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 44.

[49]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 52.

[50]Ibid.

of Arabia. These serpents must be driven off by burning storax, a gum which produces an acrid smoke.[51] Herodotus even describes the mating habits of the winged serpents. In copulation the female devours the male, but in revenge the newborn serpent devours its mother's womb. In spite of such belligerent mating practices, Herodotus says that winged serpents still abound, but only in Arabia.[52] In one last reference of Herodotus, he speaks of a narrow mountain pass near the Arabian town of Buto. Each spring the winged serpents wend their way toward Egypt through this pass, but the ibis birds attack the serpents in this place and kill them off. The pile of backbones at Buto, to which Herodotus claims to have been an eye-witness, is evidence of the heroic efforts of the ibis.[53]

We move last to Mesopotamia for evidence of seraphim-like creatures. In the Babylonian epic of Adapa, the god Anu sends out his winged messenger Ilabrat (Sumerian Papsukkal) to investigate the whereabouts of Adapa.[54] There is, however, no mention of Ilabrat's bodily shape. The most significant find in relation to the seraphim has been located at Tell Halaf (biblical Gozan, ca. 1000-800 B.C.). A stone slab was found which contains the relief of a six-winged creature. The figure

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[51] T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse, Herodotus, 2 vols., trans. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1933), 2:135.

[52] Ibid., 2:137

[53] Idem, Herodotus (1931), 1:361-2.

[54] James B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 101. Hereafter cited as ANET.

has a human face and body, but it holds a serpent in each hand. The religious import of the figure is unknown, but it has been speculated that it was a symbol of royalty or purification.[55] The bottom pair of wings, incidentally, cover the figure's feet (compare Is. 6:2).

With all this background, we shall briefly look at the saraph passages in Isaiah. In the "flying serpent" verses (14:29, 30:6) some of the culture of Tell Halaf may have been adapted, or, because of the parallelism in the second verse, it is thought that Isaiah had in mind the eph'eh, the desert viper, which "flies" with terrifying velocity when it strikes at a prey,"[56] Still others think that the referent is the god Aqrab-emelu, the scorpion-god of the Gilgamesh epic.[57]

In Isaiah's call (chapter 6) there are at least two seraphim who sing the Trisagion to each other while they stand above the throne of Yahweh. If "burning" is inherent in the word seraphim, it is because of their appearance, which reflects the glory of Yahweh. If there is any earthly counterpart to these seraphim, it would have to be found in the Egyptian model of the flying serpent. Like Egypt's serpents, the seraphim are stationed at the "temple" (verse 1), they are in direct service of the "King" (verse 5), and they affirm the King's all-embracing authority. Also, the seraphim do the King's bidding by serving as his messenger.[58] One naturalistic explanation of the seraphim is possible: that we have here a poetic image of the Glory-cloud, where the seraphim

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[55] Horn, Adventist Dictionary, p. 982, fig. 429.

[56] IDB, 4:289 [57] Ibid.

[58] Joines, "Winged Serpents," p. 410.

symbolize the serpentine lightning bolts. In this image the cherubim would be billows of the Cloud itself.[59] The "living creatures" in Ezekiel and St. John's Revelation may be a combination of the cherubim and seraphim.

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[59]Hastings, Dictionary, p. 837.

CHAPTER TWO

SERPENT SYMBOLISM IN MESOPOTAMIA

In the following sections only serpent worship and symbolism will be discussed, and the respective pantheons of each kingdom will be named only in connection with serpents. The task of isolating each Mesopotamian kingdom is a difficult one because of ill-defined boundaries, areas of political control, and organizational time periods. There is also a very fluid situation in the cultures and religions of the Mesopotamian kingdoms: one civilization slowly develops into another, passing through an intermediate stage, and there is a great deal of carry-over from one to the next. Thus, the categories below are more general in nature.

Sumerian Symbols

Sumer provides us with the first examples of writing as well as one of the earliest examples of serpent symbolism. At the site of Jemdet Nasr, dating to the beginning of the third millennium or even earlier, seals on tablets have been found upon which the serpent predominates. The most common picture on these seals is that of a man holding a serpent in his hands.[1]

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[1]Stephen H. Langdon, Mythology of All Races 7 vols. (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931), vol. 5: Semitic, p. 89.

Arriving on the scene apparently shortly afterwards is the god Kur, which perhaps is a prototype of the Babylonian sea monster Tiamat. The Sumerians formed a sort of trinity comprised of the heaven god An (Assyrian Anu), the earth god Enlil, and the water god Enki, which became Ea, the Assyrian "god of the house of water."[2] Enki, likened to Poseidon, slew Kur, the mythical dragon of the deep, in a Sumerian tale of creation. Two other Sumerian creation stories name Ninurta (the Babylonian Marduk) and Inanna (Ishtar) as the conquering hero, but in each case Kur is the dragon that was slain. Kur is a winged creature, but too remote in time to be connected with the winged seraphim.[3]

It is thought that Sumer is the birthplace of the Mesopotamian stories about the Tree of Life in a garden Paradise. Three artifacts traceable to Sumerian times picture this theme: a bowl with a serpent next to a tree, another bowl with a serpent standing erect behind a woman, and a roll cylinder that shows a woman seated beside a date palm with a snake standing behind her.[4] In a most interesting fashion W. F. Albright attempts to trace the serpent and the Tree of Life in the Bible back to Sumerian origins.[5]

Assyrian Symbols

Standing as the middle chapter in the history of Mesopotamian

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[2]Ibid., pp. 89, 103.

[3]S. N. Kramer, Sumerian Mythology (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1944), p. 76-9.

[4]Langdon, Mythology: Semitic, pp. 177-79; fig. 68-70.

[5]W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature 36 (1920):271-79

theology and mythology, Assyria and its religion are particularly difficult to pinpoint, especially when it comes to defining what is peculiarly Assyrian. Although we cannot properly speak of an Assyrian Empire until the beginning of the First Millenium B.C., Assyrian cultural and religious influence extends back in time several hundred years, and the story of Assyria's development as a civilization goes back to still earlier times. By the time Assyria comes to full flower, Akkadian civilization has long since waxed and waned, and the epic Enuma Elish of Old Babylon has been told and retold for hundreds of years. Hence, the serpent symbols below stem from Assyrian culture, but not necessarily from Assyria as a homogeneous political unit. The task of drawing together the strands of Mesopotamian serpent symbolism will be reserved for the section on Babylon.

To speak about Assyrian serpent symbolism we move past Asshur, the head of the pantheon, and Nabu, "the Chief of the Scribes." The beginnings of serpent worship can be traced to the mound of Tepe Gawra, which is associated with Assyria because of its location, but not because of its time frame (3300-2500 B.C.). There, in an Early Bronze strata of the mound, have been found seventeen bronze (brass?) serpents, a potent example of serpent symbolism in its most raw form.[6]

As was stated above, Assyria adopted a Sumerian-style triad or "trinity" in the form of the heaven god Anu, the earth god Enlil, and the water god Ea. Ea was the patron of the arts and was depicted as having the head of a serpent.[7] Another adaptation from Sumerian theology is the

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[6]Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):246.

[7]Langdon, Mythology: Semitic, pp. 89, 103.

serpent deity Mush, who came to be identified with Tammuz as a vegetation deity. Mush was pictured with a human torso, but below the waist appeared in the form of a serpent. Mush-Tammuz was associated with Ningizzida, a male tree-serpent deity that received some prominence in Assyrian culture.[8]

One more serpent symbol has been located at Der, a city that had cultural connections with Assyria. There reliefs illustrate the worship of Sachan, a serpent god whose worship continued into Neo-Babylonian times.[9]

Omen literature, religious texts which observe the natural world, flourished in Assyria. These texts are based upon a form of panentheism, whereby the gods send messages to man through the actions of animals and other natural phenomena. This literature was a driving force behind astrology, but the serpent does not play a significant role in these texts.

Babylonian Symbols

Neo-Babylon, with its roots in the Old Babylon of Hammurabi, is a final step in the canonization of Mesopotamian religious mythology. Babylon had no deities that did not have some background in Mesopotamian tradition; indeed, Babylonian mythology seems to be a conscious effort to harmonize the various traditions. The Gilgamesh story of the serpent in the primeval garden has already been quoted (page 5 above), and it shows

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[8] Ibid., p. 90

[9] W. Emery Barnes, The Second Book of the Kings, The Cambridge Bible, vol. 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 94.

that the serpent was a symbol of immortality;[10] however, fertility is the primary emphasis of the Babylonian deities.

For a start we look at the city of Babylon itself. In the north wall was the Ishtar Gate, the imposing main entrance to the city. Flanking the archway were serpents set against a lapis lazuli background. These serpents were a strange combination of various animals; they had serpent-like tails, heads, scales, and forked tongues, but they had the hind feet of an eagle, the front paws of a lion, and the overall shape of a horse.[11] These serpents appear to be representations of Mushussu, who was the strongest of the eleven helpers of Tiamat in his struggle against Marduk. The gate was built by Nebuchadnezzar II, who mentions no less than four temples that were decorated with bronze bulls and snakes.[12]

The beautiful Esagila Temple (Esagila is the name of the temple proper, not a deity) had four entrances all flanked by a pair of serpents, who apparently were temple guardians.[13] These eight serpents were made of bronze, and may pose a possible purpose for the stationing of Nehushtan at Solomon's temple.

Diodorus of Sicily recounts how the Babylonian Queen Semiramis authorized the construction of some large monuments at the Temple of Zeus (Belus), an edifice devoted to observing the stars. Three statues

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[10]Gaalyahu Cornfeld, Adam to Daniel (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 20.

[11]Robert Koldewey, The Excavations at Babylon (London: McMillan and Co., 1914), p. 46; fig. 31. Langdon, Mythology: Semitic, p. 127; fig. 56.

[12]Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 248 [13]Ibid.

of hammered gold were built: a forty foot high standing figure of Zeus, a figure of Rhea seated on a golden throne, and a Hera statue which holds a serpent by the head (was it charmed?) in its right hand. Nearby there were two hugh silver serpents, each weighing thirty Babylonian talents. Even if Diodorus is guilty of epic magnification, we will never know for sure, because he adds that all these figures were carried off as spoil by the Persians.[14] The temple program for the Babylonian New Year Festival talks about the artisans who were commissioned for this project.[15]

There are a few other deities which involve serpent imagery. Ninlil, the Babylonian mother-god, is pictured holding a baby in her arms, and she is covered from the waist down with serpent scales. Nidaba, the goddess of corn, is also pictured as a serpent.[16]

Ningizzida has already been mentioned several times, and this deity is an excellent example of how mythological figures developed over the centuries. Originally Ningizzida was represented by a single snake and viewed as a mother-goddess even though she was often thought of as a male deity. (Myths are not very rigid regarding the gender of a deity.) King Gudea of Lagash mentions her already in Sumerian times as a guardian of the sun, although she was also thought to be a principle of arboreal life. By the time Ningizzida became associated with her twin Tammuz, she

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[14]T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse, Diodorus Siculus, 2 vols., trans. C. H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1933), 1:379-383.

[15]James B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 331.

[16]Langdon, Mythology: Semitic, pp. 78, 111.

had ceased to be pictured as a single snake and was now viewed as a human figure with serpents sprouting from her shoulders. A legend about her was circulated which said: if a child is born with a serpent's head (?), that is the work of Ningizzida. Tammuz was a "twin" because he also was called a mother-god, "the Mother Python of Heaven," and together with Ningizzida guarded the heavenly gate of Anu. In some quarters Ningizzida and Tammuz were united to form the Ushumgallana, the mighty serpent-dragon of heaven. Because Hammurabi favored the sun god Shamash, who personally gave him his famous legal code, Ningizzida is not mentioned in Hammurabi's pantheon, but she continued to survive in the tale of Adapa and the Omen tablets. Around this time or before, her original single-serpent symbol appears to have been doubled and spread westward in the form of the caduceus. By the Neo-babylonian era Ningizzida was described as being an agent of Ishtar. In reality, Ningizzida became Ishtar: Ishtar is also a mother-goddess and a human figure with serpents sprouting from her shoulders.[17]

One last serpent deity to be named is Siduri Sabita, the goddess of life and wisdom and the guardian of a vineyard paradise. Two interesting points from Albright's history of this goddess are that Ningizzida was a part of that history, and that traces of Siduri can be found in Ishtar.[18] Perhaps the caduceus is a merging of Ningizzida and Siduri symbols.

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[17]Langdon, Mythology: Semitic, pp. 77-8, 111, 150; Frothingham, "Hermes," pp. 175-95.

[18]Albright, "Goddess of Life," pp. 273, 279.

The Religious Inroads of Mesopotamia into Palestine

Specific applications of the above material will be made in future sections, but here only general trends will be discussed. Since this Mesopotamian material will be related to the worship of Nehushtan, naturally only those influences up to the time of Hezekiah are pertinent. However, the Neo-Babylonian scene is pertinent because it reflects a centuries-long development of religious traditions.

Since Palestine functioned as a funnel for trade routes around the Fertile Crescent, the cultural exchange between Palestine and Mesopotamia was practically continuous from the beginning of recorded history. But any cultural exchange is a two-way street: it can be argued, for example, that Mesopotamia adopted a general world-view that first carried the day in Palestine.

Sumerian and Akkadian culture reached Palestine through the Amorites, or the Amurru ("Westerners"). This people adjoined Palestine on the east and the north. As early as 2400 B.C. the Akkadian King Sargon made an expedition to the Amorites for building materials as did King Gudea of Lagash a few hundred years later. Meanwhile, the Amorites are known to have settled around Mari about 2000 B.C.[19] The Arameans also brought the two cultures into contact with each other. John Bright speculates that Abraham may have participated in the large influx of Arameans which took place at the beginning of the Second Millenium B.C.[20]

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[19] W. F. Albright, The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra (New York: Harper and Row, 1963, p. 24.

[20] John Bright, A History of Israel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 82.

The importance of Canaanite Hazor in this interchange cannot be over-emphasized. Hazor is the only city in northern Palestine or southern Syria that is named in the Mari texts, and Hammurabi is known to have had extensive relations with Hazor.[21]

The inroads of Assyria and Babylon will be covered more fully later. The Assyrians fill the void that was created by the fall of Samaria, and there are many indications that an exchange of religious symbols took place. The spouse of Anu came to be known as the goddess, Elat, which may mean "tree." This suggests the Asherah post which was destroyed in Hezekiah's reform. Marduk shared many characteristics with the Canaanite Baal and Hadad.[22] The Bible names three Assyrian deities which were introduced just prior to Hezekiah's reform. They are Cuthan, Nergal, and Succoth-Benoth (Sakkuth-Banita), a mate of Marduk (2 Kings 17:24,30).

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[21]Barnes, Kings, pp. 13, 14.

[22]Walter Wifall, The Court History of Israel (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1975), p. 155.

CHAPTER THREE

SERPENT SYMBOLISM IN EGYPT

Whereas Mesopotamian religion used serpent symbolism primarily to depict the source of life by way of its creation stories, the mother-goddesses of soil fertility, and human fecundity images, the serpent symbols of Egypt focus upon the perpetuation of life, both here and in the Great Beyond, through animism, sympathetic magic, and deities of the underworld. Two elements confuse our picture of Egyptian mythology. First of all, cultural and religious exchanges are known to have occurred not only between Egypt and Palestine, but also between Egypt and Mesopotamia. For example, it is speculated that the Egyptian deity Hathor is a derivative of Ishtar.[1] Secondly, although serpent symbols have been found in private Egyptian homes, the Egyptian gods were not popularized to the extent that they were in Mesopotamia; instead, they were tied more closely to the ruling dynasties of Egypt. Thus, Egypt had a more fluid pantheon, because the personal preferences of each ruler determined which god or gods would be afforded national prominence. The abrupt shift to the worship of Aten in the Amarna period illustrates this point.

Primary Serpent Associations

Serpents play a minimal role in Egyptian creation mythology.

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[1] W. F. Albright, Archaeology and the Religions of Israel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 76.

Mention is made of a primal serpent named Kneph, but the chief creation gods, Atum and Ptah of Memphis, have no serpent associations. The evil serpent-demon Apep (Apophis) was known as the supreme opponent of Re, but their struggle was an ongoing one and not linked to the question of origins. In the twenty-first dynasty mention is made of the underworld beetle-god Khepira, who was thought in those late years to represent the germ of life, and her chamber was guarded by the two-headed serpent named Ter. Even here, the serpent's role is the protection of life, not the origination of it.[2]

Two serpent symbols could be found which were associated with fertility. In the reign of Amenophis II (ca. 1450 B.C.) has been located the harvest god Ernutet (Rnnutt). A relief dedicated to this god has been found which depicts a man holding a snake with both his hands while he is kneeling in adoration. This is a rare Egyptian occurrence of serpent worship in its purest form.[3] The other symbol is hardly native to Egypt, but reflects Canaanite influence: a relief of Qudshu-Astarte-Anath has been unearthed which dates to around 1200 B.C. (This odd syncretism may indicate Egyptian confusion over the Canaanite pantheon.) The goddess is holding a lotus in her right hand and a serpent in her left while she is standing on a lion. Astarte and Anath were incorporated

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[2]E. A. Wallis Budge, The Gods of the Egyptians, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 1:224.

[3]W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature 36 (1920): 272; R. O. Faulkner, "A Statue of a Serpent Worshipper," Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 20 (1968):154-5.

into the Egyptian pantheon by calling them the daughters, or eye, of Re, but Astarte is also called the daughter of Ptah.[4]

Sympathetic magic is peculiar to Egypt, and the Brazen Serpent in the wilderness could very well be Yahweh's accomodation of this Egyptian practice. Sympathetic magic appears to be based upon the animistic belief in jinns, animal embodiments of spirits. It involves the manipulation of exact images of the creature that is presenting a danger (compare 1 Sam. 6:4), and the wearing of protective amulets. Perhaps the voodooistic practice involved in the Execration Texts is based upon similar religious theory. There, names of enemies were painted on bowls, which were then ceremoniously smashed. Horus, the son of Osiris and often pictured as an infant god, is a prominent symbol in the practice of sympathetic magic. He is represented on many amulets and is called "the stopper of all snakes."[5] In one representation Horus is pictured with two snakes and a scorpion in each hand while he straddles two crocodiles.[6] In another figure Horus is engraved on a stone slab which is attached to a basin beneath it. He is holding a snake in each hand, and apparently, water that was poured over the slab and collected in the basin would assume the protective properties of Horus.[7] Here is a clear parallel to the Brazen Serpent: serpents are repelled by a serpent image.

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[4]I. E. S. Edwards, "A Relief of Qudshu-Astarte-Anath in the Winchester College Collection," Journal of Near Eastern Studies 14 (1955): 49-51.

[5]Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):252.

[6]Keith C. Seele, "Horus of the Crocodiles," Journal of Near Eastern Studies 6 (1947):43, pl. 1.

[7]Ibid., p. 48, pl. 3.

Since Egypt mythology tells how Horus defeated Seth, the destroyer-god of the storm and foreign lands, Horus came to be the protector of Egyptian royalty, only in this regard he was symbolized by the serpent (cobra) alone. The was-scepter of the pharaohs was often shaped like a serpent.[8] In the Amarna period it became popular to adorn the royal crown with the uraeus, a stylized cobra, called Buto or Wazit.[9]

When Osiris was killed by Seth and later revived by Isis, the serpent became a protective amulet even in graves and in the underworld. Glass serpent amulets have been found upon mummies, and sometimes serperts' heads were thought to protect the dead from snakebite. The thirty-fourth chapter of the Book of the Dead is entitled: "Chapter of not allowing a person to be bitten in the underworld by a serpent."[10] (compare above, page 13).

The Religious Influence of Egypt on Palestine

As with the treatment of Mesopotamian influence on Palestinian religion, we shall speak here only in general terms. Parallels between the Egyptian and Canaanite pantheons, evidence from specific sites, and Egyptian influence following the Israelite occupation will be reserved for later sections.

The influence of Egypt upon Palestine was bound to be significant.

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[8]Karen R. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 85.

[9]J. D. Douglas, The New Bible Dictionary (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1962), p. 1420; Budge, The Gods, p. 224.

[10]E. A. Wallis Budge, The Mummy (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964), p. 265.

for Palestine was more or less a vassal of Egypt for upwards of a thousand years. By the time of Abraham, Egypt was already suffering from old age. The Amarna letters bear witness to the long-standing political and economic relationship between the two areas. By the nineteenth century B.C. trade by way of donkey caravans had reached its peak.[11]

In spite of the fact that Egypt held sway over her northern neighbor for so long a time, her grip on that area was not a continuous and firm one. Repeated expeditions were required to renew her control over fortresses which had already been conquered. Thutmose III conducted no less than seventeen campaigns against Palestine (ca. 1490-36 B.C.), and Seti I (1302-1290 B.C.) campaigned as far as Galilee and captured Beth-shan. Many other such excursions were undertaken, but the invasion which most pertains to the subject of serpent symbolism is that of the Hyksos.

The Hyksos truly confuse the picture of the relationships between Egyptian and Palestinian religious symbols. When the Hyksos invaded Palestine, they did not bring with them an Egyptian religious system. They themselves were foreigners to Egyptian culture when they gained control of Egypt and established their empire in 1730 B.C. The Hyksos were a Semitic people (one of their kings was named Jacob), who came from the general area around the top of the Fertile Crescent.[12] When they overran Palestine around 1700 B.C. they introduced a strange hybrid religious

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[11] W. E. Albright, The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 6.

[12] Ibid., p. 10.

system. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Hyksos carried to Egypt a set of religious symbols which were almost entirely Mesopotamian in origin and type. These symbols the Hyksos bathed in Egyptian mythology, and then they were (re)introduced to Palestine as Mesopotamian deities wearing Egyptian garments. Thus, when one speaks of the relationship between an Egyptian god and a Canaanite deity from the Hyksos period, he is safest in simply saying that the two gods are akin to each other, leaving unanswered the "chicken or the egg" question. The Hyksos were finally crushed by Amosis, the founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty, in 1580-70 B.C.[13] Perhaps Amosis is the "Pharaoh who did know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8).

The Hyksos are so very important to our subject, because they are without a doubt the most important single factor in determining the shape of serpent symbolism in Palestine as we come down to the time of the Israelite occupation. Their influence can be seen in the fact that around 1700 B.C. a whole new set of serpent symbols appear on the scene in Palestine.[14]

In regard to the symbols introduced by the Hyksos, a few of these symbols favor an Egyptian background, such as the dove symbols and the general emphasis on the animal kingdom, which still prevailed in the time of Ezekiel (Ezek. 8:7-12).[15] But other symbols lean to the direction of

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[13] Ibid., p. 11.

[14] W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 52; Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 248.

[15] Graham and May, Culture, p. 85; Albright, Archaeology and Religions, p. 165.

Mesopotamia. The Hyksos brought with them the mother-goddess-of-the-earth figure as well as the Sacred Tree symbol, which appears on pottery all over Palestine.[16] The serpent symbol they brought represents primarily the origin of life and agricultural fertility.[17] Mother Earth, the Tree, life, fertility - all these come from Mesopotamia.

Two other items need to be mentioned. One of them is Egypt's relations with the 'Apiru, spoken of in the Amarna Letters. John Bright's explanation of these nomads is a commonly accepted one: the name refers to a general class of nomadic peoples and not to a specific ethnic race. Thus, the Hebrews could be classified among the 'Apiru, but the two would not be coterminous.[18] The second item is closely related to the first: the question of the relationship between the worship of Yahweh and the monotheism of Aten worship. The majority of scholars get excited at the possibilities, but a few stalwarts remain unmoved by it all.[19] Personally, the author favors the stalwarts.

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[16]Graham and May, Culture, pp. 52, 89

[17]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, pp. 20, 74.

[18]John Bright, A History of Israel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 85.

[19]Albright, The Biblical Period, p. 15.

CHAPTER FOUR

SERPENT SYMBOLISM IN OTHER AREAS

The major cultures in the Ancient Near East which have some bearing on serpent symbolism in Palestine have now been surveyed. But, in order to get a complete picture of ancient serpentology, we turn to other examples of serpents in religion which are more on the fringes of the above civilizations in terms of location or time. The following collection was selected on the basis of two criteria: each example shows the influence of a culture already named, or it continues, expands, or highlights one of the main serpent-themes we have already seen.

Arabia

With the exception of a few caravans which travelled between the widely scattered oases, commercial trade routes circumvented Arabia, but this area was not left untouched by serpent symbolism. The Arabs called snakes by the word ilahat, which means "goddess." Serpent pendants found in the Arabian desert perhaps point to the Arabian Moon God, who was represented by a serpent. We include here the Nabatean fortress of Petra, because it is in the same general geographical area and shows how serpent symbolism continued here beyond the Old Testament period. A monument has been found there which pictured the figure of a boy carrying two serpents.[1]

[1]W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature 36 (1920): 274; Karen R. Joines,

Elam

We mention here Susa, because it shows how serpent symbolism spread to the eastern outskirts of Mesopotamia. The serpent symbol unearthed there is significant on two other counts: it is made out of bronze, and it has been dated from the twelfth century B.C., a time when serpent symbols were flourishing at the opposite end of the Fertile Crescent. Also, we might include that it is one of the few examples of a serpent standing alone, unconnected with any other religious symbol.[2]

India

India is obviously beyond our geographical scope, but it is named because it continues the major themes of the hero-god versus the ancient dragon and the power of fecundity. Using a motif perhaps moving eastward from Mesopotamia, Persia told the story of Vis Varupa, a three-headed serpent that was slain at the beginning of time. Still further east, India has recounted the legend of how Indra, the hero-god, defeated the demonic serpent Ahi.[3] Modern Indian religion perpetuates the ancient association of the serpent with human fertility. On the festival Naga Panchami, young women offer to the serpent-god Nagu a bowl of milk with the prayer that they might bear many offspring.[4]

Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 91; Birger A. Pearson, Religious Syncretism in Antiquity (Missoula, MT:Scholars Press, 1975), p. 80, note 3; John C. Gienapp, The Serpent Motif in Genesis Three: Some Systematic Implications Drawn From Its Place in the Thought of Early Israel (Research paper, 1964), p. 21.

[2]J. D. Douglas, ed., The New Bible Dictionary, (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1962), p. 1422.

[3]Stephen Langdon, Mythology of all Races, 7 vols. (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931), vol. 5: Semitic, p. 130.

[4]Personal interview with Bhushana Rao Dasari.

Phoenicia

The serpent-goddess Chavva has already been mentioned (above, page 12). The Baal epic of Ugarit includes the annual death and resurrection theme as well as the ancient dragons Yam, Tannin, and Leviathan (Lothan). A gold pendant dating from 1450-1365 B.C. at Minet el-Beida, the port of Ugarit, has two snakes engraved on its back. A grave at Ugarit from Middle Bronze Age II contained a Hyksos style water jug which was decorated with a serpent. Lastly, a Phoenician coin minted in Rome bears the figure of Eshmun, the goddess of healing as a standing figure holding a snake in each hand.[5]

Syria

An Asherah type fertility cult was present in a Hittite shrine dating from the seventeenth century B. C. in northern Syria. A bronze statue was found there grasping a snake and a staff. A similar figure dates from around 1200 B.C. and is holding a snake in each hand. These figures are paralleled in Canaan by many symbols.[6]

Anatolia

The Cicilian plain shared a common culture with northern Syria. As early as 3500 B.C. the mother-god figure is detectable. Serpent symbolism continued all the way down to Phrygian times in the worship of the god Sabazios (Sabos), who is described as a serpent. In his honor a

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[5]W. F. Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 84; Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968): 247; Stephen Langdon, Mythology of All Races, vol. 5: Semitic (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931), p. 77.

harvest festival was celebrated, in which live snakes were carried about in winnowing baskets and fed honey cakes and wine. As part of the same holiday, women drew gilded serpents between their breasts in order to acquire fertility by means of sympathetic impregnation.[7] Thus, we see the fertility theme carried forward through the centuries. The vine or vineyard were also common fertility symbols in Anatolia.

Crete

A mother-deity was also present on this island in the Palace of Minos at Knossos. Once again, it was the figure holding two serpents. The same palace contained another interesting artifact: a bowl divided into four compartments and set upon a stand. The stand was comprised of four curved legs, and a groove running from the bottom to the top had been carved into each leg. Apparently the grooves were designed to accomodate snakes, that could slither up the legs to drink from the bowl.[8] If this assessment is true, then we have evidence here of snakes who were welcomed into living quarters as friendly guardian house pets.

Greece and Rome

From these cultures we will produce just one piece of evidence to show that serpents continued to be associated with immortality. It is an etymological clue: the Greek word geeras and the Latin word

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[7] R. D. Barnett, The Nimrud Ivories (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1957), p. 33.

[8] W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 82, 87n.

senium. Both words mean "old age" and have the alternate meaning, "the slough of a serpent."[9]

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[9]Albright, "Goddess of Life," p. 278.

CHAPTER FIVE

PALESTINIAN EVIDENCE OF SERPENT WORSHIP

Against the background of the ancient world as a whole we can now home in on the more immediate influences which set the tone for the worship of Nehushtan. While volumes have been written about each of the sites below, only those aspects that have a direct bearing on serpent symbolism and worship will be surveyed. An attempt will be made at the beginning of the next chapter to pull together some of the influences and deities named here into a composite picture.

Beth-shan (Tell el-Husn)

With this site and all the others listed Hyksos influence can and will be assumed. But as it was carefully delineated above, signs of Egyptian domination do not necessarily imply that the serpent symbols found in a given site have traditional Egyptian associations. After the Hyksos were defeated in 1580-70 B.C. they left their religious mark on succeeding Egyptian dynasties as well. Further Egyptian domination is quite obvious at Beth-shan. Thutmose III captured Beth-shan after the Battle of Megiddo in 1468 B.C., and Seti I recaptured the city in 1290 B.C. These two campaigns are responsible for three centuries of Egyptian control as is evidenced by Egyptian style coffins found at Beth-shan down into the eleventh century. Cartouches of Ramses II have

also been found there in a temple from the Late Bronze II age.[1]

The name Beth-shan itself has sparked considerable discussion. By simply transposing the shin and the nun one gets a possible shortened form of the word nahash, although the missing middle character, supplied in the alternate spelling ("Beth-shean"), is an aleph. W. C. Graham and H. G. May have suggested that the original name is "Beth-Shahan" and have thereby proposed that the site was s shrine to a serpent deity named Shahan or Shihan, a Canaanite counterpart to Ningizzida (compare also Sachan, page 21 above).[2]

A series of four temples has been found at Beth-shan. They are devoted in the main to the worship of Mekal (Mukal), the Lord of Beth-shan, and possible also of Resheph, a pestilence god. The presence of dog and lion sculptures indicate native Canaanite influence.[3]

All of the serpent symbols come from the temples. In a Late Bronze II temple there was a pottery figure of a serpent with human breasts, and underneath one breast is a cup, presumably for catching the milk. It resembles in many respects the Hathor-Ashtoroth figurines which are found here and everywhere in Canaan.[4] One suggestion is that it is

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[1]Frances James, The Iron Age at Beth-shan (Philadelphia: The University Museum-University of Pennsylvania, 1966), pp. 5; 345, fig. 115-5; 347, fig. 116-6; W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936): p. 83. Hereafter cited as ANEP.

[2]Graham and May, Culture, p. 84; Stanley A. Cook, The Religion of Ancient Palestine in the Light of Archaeology (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 117.

[3]W. F. Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 79; Jack Finegan, Light from the Ancient Past (Princeton: Princton University Press, 1946), p. 142.

[4]James, The Iron Age, p. 345, fig. 115-5; p. 347, fig. 116-6.

symbolic of the marriage institution, not of a goddess.[5] Another is that it is a life symbol picturing the serpent bringing life up from the earth in the warmth of spring.[6] In any event, it is some kind of a sex symbol (in the cultic sense!), because especially in Canaan, agricultural fertility and human fecundity are closely related.

Another artifact bearing a serpent symbol is dated from Iron Age I, approaching the time of Israel's united monarchy. It is a tapered pottery vase or stand which has four snakes slithering along its sides. Toward the top are four small openings or windows upon which are perched four doves. A curved lip around the top edge suggests that it was an offering or incense stand, because it could accomodate some kind of vessel. There are many possibilities as to its religious significance. We have already noted that the dove was a common companion of the serpent: this suggests that it was some kind of life symbol. The four serpents could represent the four life-giving rivers of Eden, although this sounds a trifle far-fetched.[7] Yet another theory is that it is a snake tube, a home for guardian pet snakes like we saw on Crete.[8] The overall impression left is that it is some kind of life-fertility symbol which represents attributes of the main diety, Mekal.[9]

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[5]Graham and May, Culture, p. 83.

[6]Karen R. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament, (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 66.

[7]Graham and May, Culture, p. 84.

[8]Ibid., p. 66, 87.

[9]Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968): 249; James B. Pritchard, The Ancient Near East in Pictures, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 194, pl. 585. Hereafter cited as ANEP.

Two shrine houses were found at Beth-shan, both of them also dating from Iron Age I. None of the sources indicated their size, but they must have been two to three feet high. The first is a two-story affair with windows all around both floors. A serpent glides along the wall of the first floor, and an Ashtaroth figure stands on a ledge which is part of the second floor.[10] The second house shrine has three stories. On the third floor is a naked Asherah figure, on the second two god-like figures are seen in combat, and on the first floor a serpent, probably belonging to Asherah, has come out of a window to bite the god-figure on the left. This scene shows how Asherah, not to be confused with Ashtaroth, was possibly an enemy of Baal. The two goddesses were not identified with each other until later times.[11] Both shrines are also ornamented with doves; thus, all of the possibile religious associations and uses mentioned for the pottery stand are possible for the shrine houses as well.[12]

Along with a few other miscellaneous pieces such as a bowl decorated with a painted serpent, all the evidence indicates that the serpent was a focal point in the cult of Beth-shan.[13]

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[10] Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 249; ANEP, p. 195, pl. 591.

[11] W. F. Albright, Jahweh and the Gods of Canaan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1968, p. 123.

[12] John Gienapp, The Serpent Motiff, in Genesis 3: Some Systematic Implications Drawn from Its Place in the Thought of Early Israel (Research Paper, ST. Louis, MO, 1964), p. 20.

[13] Cook, Ancient Palestine, p. 117.

Beth-shemesh (Tell er-Rumeileh)

Beth-shemesh was the only fortified city in the Valley of Sorek, which formed the boundary between Judah and Dan. Like Beth-shan it was captured and later recaptured by Egyptian forces. Signs of heavy Egyptian influence are in evidence in the fine jewelry and pottery scarabs found there.[14] In fact, Beth-shemesh could be construed as the Canaanite counterpart to Heliopolis, otherwise called On. We shall save for last a discussion of the name Beth-shemesh.

Two archaeological finds point to serpent symbolism in Beth-shemesh. Three water jugs or vases were found in what was an apparent cemetery dating from the Middle Bronze II Age. Each jug was embellished with a serpent.[15] The second piece of evidence is dated between 1500-1200 B.C. It is a large plaque bearing a relief of a fertility goddess (Asherah?) that is draped with a serpent.[16] The serpent symbolism at this site is again connected with fertility, but if the site of the three jugs was really a cemetery, then we have a new angle on the Canaanite serpent symbol, a perspective we shall also see at Jericho.

If the "Shemesh" part of this site's name is a proper noun ("Shrine of Shemesh"), then many possibilities are opened up to us. The Mesopotamian sun god Shamash did find its way to Ugarit under the

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[14] Finegan, Light from Past, p. 145.

[15] Elihu Grant, Beth-shemesh (Haverford, PA: Biblical and Kindred Studies, 1929), p. 145, fig. 2.

[16] Ibid., p. 35 (pl.).

name Shapash,[17] but to what extent was this deity worshipped in Canaan? The two other Canaanite outposts named Beth-shemesh demonstrate that some kind of wider influence was at work. Some liberal scholars have speculated that the whole tribe of Dan was originally a Canaanite group devoted to worshipping the sun.[18] It is well known that Egyptian mythology linked the serpent and sun symbols together, and the placement of serpents at graves points even more strongly in the direction of Egypt. However, if the jugs were used for transporting water, we are also pointed in the direction of Mesopotamia. A Mesopotamian relief shows Shamash presenting to Ishtar a jar filled to overflowing with the water of life.[19]

Tell Beit Mirsim

W. F. Albright identified this mound as the Biblical city of Debir, but his proposal has now been widely abandoned.[20] A convincing alternative identification has not yet been offered. Egyptian presence at this site is indicated by a beautiful Egyptian scarab of Amenhoteph III.[21] The worship objects there were found in a state of disrepair, because they were all thrown into a pit toward the end of the thirteenth

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[17] Albright, Archaeology and Religion, p. 83.

[18] T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland, Encyclopedia Biblica vol. 3 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902), p. 3387.

[19] A. L. Frothingham, "The Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake God and of the Caduceus," American Journal of Archaeology 20 (1916):183, fig. 4.

[20] Keith Crim, ed., Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Supplementary Volume), (New York: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 222

[21] Finegan, Light from Past, p. 139.

century B.C. Albright interprets this incident to be the work of the invading Israelites, who at the time had a great disdain for religious images of any kind.[22]

A limestone stele measuring thirty by sixty centimeters was uncovered at Tell Beit Mirsim. Its location was a private home or palace, but it is a religious object nonetheless. At first the figure engraved on the stele was thought to be a tree, but closer examination revealed that it was a woman from the waist down clad in a flowing gown reaching down to the ankles. Wrapped around her legs is a large, well-modeled serpent.[23]

The symbol dates from Middle Bronze Age IIC, the end of the Hyksos' domination, and there is general agreement that the woman represents a fertility goddess. The snake appears to emerge from the ground, thus indicating the earth-mother concept. And there could be a sexual association: the head of the serpent rests on a thigh near the genitalia.[24]

Gezer (Tell el-Jezer)

In 1468 B.C. Thutmose III captured this city in the same campaign in which he subdued Beth-shan. Until recently the famous Gezer Calendar was long reputed to be the earliest known extrabiblical example of Hebrew, but hieroglyphics are also found here. Along with Hazor and Megiddo, Gezer was rebuilt by King Solomon, according to 1 Kings 9:15.

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[22]Albright, Yahweh and Gods, p. 194.

[23]W. F. Albright, "The Second Campaign at Tell Beit Mirsim," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, 31 (1928):3-6. Hereafter cited as BASOR.

[24]Graham and May, Culture, p. 82; Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 246.

Two artifacts here relate to serpent symbolism. In the high place area was found a six-inch long bronze serpent with its head slightly raised.[25] The other piece is an Ashraroth plaque: a female nude holding her breasts and flanked by two serpents.[26] Both items fall within the Late Bronze Age.

We have come to expect to find the serpent symbol associated with the fertility goddess, but the small bronze serpent raises more questions than it answers. Since it was found in the high place area, it was undoubtedly a religious object, but the problem is that when a symbol is found standing off all by itself, it becomes increasingly difficult to relate it to other symbols or religious themes. Also, the serpent was found in a cupmark, a small, round depression chiseled into the rock; no one knows for sure why these cups were made. It was mentioned earlier that infant skeletons were also buried in the same area. And still further, the Gezer high place contains eight monoliths lined up in a row. Three explanations present themselves for this archaeological mystery: either they are the standard furniture (maṣṣeboth?) of a high place or memorials to kings, or funeral stela.[27] As to the serpent, R. A. MacAlister readily associates it with the worship of Nehushtan.[28]

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[25] R. A. S. MacAlister, The Excavation of Gezer 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1912), 2:399, fig. 488.

[26] Ibid., 3:220, fig. 221.9.

[27] Finegan, Light from Past, p. 145. Carl F. Graesser, "Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine," Biblical Archaeologist 35 (1972):34-63.

[28] R. A. S. MacAlister, Bible Sidelights from the Mound of Gezer (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), p. 76.

Hazor (Tell el-Qedah)

Hazor is probably the most important political center of any site to be covered. Coming from Mesopotamia, it was the first major Canaanite outpost on the major ancient trade route around the Fertile Crescent. Its importance is attested to at Mari, Amarna, and in the Execration Texts; but the Biblical witness also bears this out: Hazor is called "the head of all those kingdoms" in northern Canaan (Joshua 11:10), and the Jabin of the Judges period is called the King of Canaan (Judg. 4:2,24).[29]

But Hazor was an important cultic center too. Four Canaanite temples were built there which date from the eighteenth to thirteenth century B.C., and one of them is sometimes thought to provide a parallel to the design of Solomon's temple.[30] The presence of the bull symbol there suggests that Hazor was destined to become the first cultic center of the Northern Kingdom. The presence of a clay model of an animal's liver shows strong Mesopotamian influence.[31] Hazor also has a row of steles comparable to those found at Gezer. The stela number six has on it a pair of uplifted hands which frame a circle. The circle could be a sun symbol, but others think it is a moon-symbol for the goddess Qadesh.[32]

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[29] A. Malamat, "Hazor-'The Head of All Those Kingdoms,'" Journal of Biblical Literature 77 (1960):12-19.

[30] Y. Yadin, "The Fourth Season of Excavations at Hazor," Biblical Archaeologist 21 (1959):2,3.

[31] Ibid., pp. 6-12

[32] Birger A. Pearson, Religious Syncretism in Antiquity (Missoula, MT Scholars Press, 1975), p. 78

In what is designated as the Area H Temple holy of holies, two bronze serpents were found along with a bull symbol.[33] The silver-plated cult standard of the same era is the most famous find from Hazor. It had been kept in a jar of unusual shape, and it bears the familiar figure of a fertility goddess flanked by two serpents.[34] From the stratum immediately below that of the cult standard comes a thin bronze sheet into which is hammered the figure of a woman nine centimeters high.[35] A thin line engraved diagonally across the woman's torso could be a serpent, but it could also be simply the edge of a poncho-like garmet she is wearing. One last find is a collection of two bowls and three vases from the approximate time of Hezekiah.[36] All these vessels are decorated with serpents.

The two bronze serpents, the fact that they were in a cultic holy of holies, and the vessals from Hezekiah's day all combine to make Hazor very pertinent to the worship of Nehushtan. To this we can add the fact that Solomon rebuilt this city, and it may have provided fuel for Solomon's syncretism.

Megiddo (Tell el-Mutesellim)

Megiddo occupied a strategically important place overlooking to the north the plain of Megiddo. Egyptian domination is apparent in the collection of 200 carved ivories which were found there.[37] Along with

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[33]Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 245.

[34]Pearson, Syncretism, p. 78; Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 246.

[35]Y. Yadin, Hazor (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 117.

[36]Joines, Bronze Serpent," p. 249.

[37]G. A. Buttrick, ed., Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:342.

Hazor and Gezer, it was rebuilt by Solomon. But Megiddo has cultic significance too, as is borne out by its hugh round altar from the middle of the third millenium and one of its temples, which could also have served as a pattern for Solomon.[38] A pottery stand similar to the one at Beth-shan was found there, but it bears no serpent symbolism.[39]

Two bronze serpents standing alone come from Megiddo's worship area, one from stratum ten (1650-1550 B.C.) and the other from stratum 8B (1250-1150 B.C.).[40] These two serpents complete a highly significant picture: all three Canaanite cities rebuilt by Solomon contained isolated serpents, unattached to any other symbol. Nehushtan was also an isolated symbol and made of the same material. These facts strongly suggest that Solomon, under the influence of these cities as well as the influence of his marital alliance with Egypt, reintroduced Nehushtan as a worship symbol with new, pagan connotations.

Also at Megiddo was an eighteenth century cultic bowl. Around the outside are the heads of four bulls separated by four vertical serpents.[41] This object reinforces the bull-serpent association found at Hazor. In addition, two water jars decorated with serpents come from Megiddo. On one of them, the molded serpent is on the single pouring handle as if in search of water.[42] Ashtaroth figurines, with hands on

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[38]Albright, Archaeology and Religion, p. 143.

[39]ANEP, p. 194, pl. 582.

[40]Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 245.

[41]Ibid., p. 248.

[42]H. G. May and R. M. Engburg, Material Remains of the Megiddo Cult (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pl. 22.

their breasts, continue the theme of fertility in serpent symbolism.[43] All the above figures are Late Bronze.

Shechem (Tell Balatah)

Shechem is mentioned often in the Scriptures in the time up to and including the conquest of Canaan. It is perhaps best remembered as the site of Joshua's farewell message and covenant renewal ceremony (Joshua 23 and 24). There is no evidence of any destruction occurring between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries.[44] After the occupation, Shechem largely fades from view.

Three Late Bronze serpent-symbols have been found at Shechem. Again, two isolated bronze serpents were found there, according to the testimony of Joseph Callaway, field supervisor for G. Ernest Wright.[45] Also, the plaque of a woman enwrapped in a serpent was located that is very similar to the one at Tell Beit Mirsim. Albright sees a definite connection between the two figures.[46] Finally, we find here the ever-present water jug decorated with a serpent.[47]

Jericho (Tell es-Sultan)

Of all the archaeological sites in Canaan, Jericho has the longest known history which is dated by some back to the Seventh Millenium. It

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[43] Ibid., pl. 31.

[44] W. F. Albright, The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 30.

[45] Joines, "Bronze Serpent," p. 245.

[46] Idem, Serpent Symbolism, p. 64.

[47] Ibid., p. 69.

was a veritable stronghold of the Hyksos; thus we might expect very strong Egyptian influence. Of course, Jericho, "the City of Palms," constitutes the first opposition encountered by the Israelites west of the Jordan.

The principal evidence of serpent symbolism is a water pitcher with the stylized characteristics of a bird. Two snakes were molded onto the pitcher, and once more, one of the snakes is slithering down the handle toward the brim in search of water.[48] Egyptian influence is apparent in the bird characteristics and in the fact that it was located in a tomb (Middle Bronze II). The presence of a nearby libation bowl leads John Garstang to conclude that an Egyptian mother-goddess is involved here.[49]

Taanach (Tell Ta'annak)

Taanach goes back in history as far as its northern neighbor, Megiddo. Egyptian influence is heavy here, as is evidenced by the presence of Egyptian tombs and cuneiform tablets.

A serpent's head was found here in the worship area.[50] We are reminded how at various times in Egypt serpent heads were thought to afford protection for the dead. Another object is a statuette of a man grasping a snake. The figure appears to some to be engaged in combat

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[48] K. Kenyon, Excavations at Jericho, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: British School of Archaeology, 1960), vol. 1, fig. 162; p. 560, pl. 18-3.

[49] John Garstang and J. B. E. Garstang, The Story of Jericho (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1948), p. 102.

[50] Gienapp, Serpent Motif, p. 21

with the snake; this has led to the conclusion that it represents a god's struggle against the primordial serpents of chaos.[51] One last item of interest is a figure of Ashtaroth who is holding a cup over one of her breasts.[52] It bears no serpent symbolism, but it is reminiscent of the pottery serpent with cup that we encountered at Beth-shan.

Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir)

We list this site separately even though there was no specific serpent symbol found there. Its significance for our discussion lies in its great antiquity (ca. 3000 B.C.) and in its great fosse temple. This temple gives us a great deal of information about the Canaanite religious scene in general, which is the backdrop for the use of the serpent symbol in Canaan. Also, an offering stand resembling Beth-shan's pottery stand was found there.

This concludes our sweep of the significant serpent symbols at Palestinian sites. One last site, Timna, will be saved for the next chapter under the discussion of Numbers 21.

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[51] Graham and May, Culture, pp. 250,273.

[52] P. W. Lapp, "The 1963 Excavation at Ta'annek," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 173 (1964), pp. 40,42.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WORSHIP OF NEHUSHTAN

We now come to the circumstances around, and the actual story of, the worship of Nehushtan. An effort will be made to tie together historical strands and religious emphases from the foregoing material, and then general conclusions will be saved for the last chapter.

The Religio-cultural Scene at the Time of the Occupation

At the end of the nineteenth century B.C. there was a significant rise in the number of city-states dotting the land of Canaan. The Hyksos invasion and the ensuing incursions of Ramses II and Seti I had helped Egypt to maintain a firm hand in the area, but just prior to the Israelite conquest, the number of local princes doubled as the Canaanites played upon Egypt's weakness.[1] The Amarna letters bear witness to how King Abhi-Khiba of Jerusalem still labored under Egyptian control,[2] but in general the political scene was ripe for the invasion of Yahweh's army under Joshua.

When Joshua crossed the Jordan, the Canaanite pantheon, which up to this point had been extremely fluid in the names and functions of

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[1] W. F. Albright, The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 4, 25.

[2] Samuel A. B. Mercer, Extra-Biblical Sources for Hebrew and Jewish History (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 13.

its deities,[3] had assumed somewhat of a final shape. We can mention here only a few of Canaan's principal deities which were named previously. The head of the pantheon was El, a rather impersonal and remote deity, who plays a very limited role in the mythological tales.[4] Shamash, the sun god, may have played a more important role in Canaanite religion than the historical evidence documents (compare the section on Beth-shemesh and Ezek. 8:15,16).[5] The pestilence god Resheph was listed in connection with Beth-shan. He was a chthonic deity called "the Burner" and destructive in opposition to a healing deity like Eshmun of Phoenicia.[6] As an underworld god he stands at the opposite end of the universe, far removed from any heavenly, seraphim-type creature. Hauron (also Horon-compare the city Beth-horon) was an underworld figure like Resheph and resembles the Mesopotamian military champion Ninurta.[7] Tammuz appears to be related to the Phoenician cow goddess Koshar, in addition to the Mesopotamian associations mentioned earlier.[8]

The Baal epic of Ugarit assigns to Baal ("Lord") the position occupied by El, and Baal became the Canaanite counterpart to Marduk.[9] Baal's terrestrial home was Mount Casius, or Mount Zaphon, and in mythology he was the destroyer of the chaos monster, usually known in Canaan

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[3]Albright, Archaeology and Religion, p. 71.

[4]Ibid., p. 72. [5]Ibid., p. 83. [6]Ibid., p. 79.

[7]Ibid., p. 50; W. F. Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1968), p. 138.

[8]Albright, Yahweh and the Gods, p. 147.

[9]Idem, Archaelogy and Religion, pp. 84,117.

as Lothan.[10] He also figured in the agricultural theme of death and resurrection and thus took on fertility associations as well. For the religious mind of the fifteenth century B.C. even "Lord" was too general a name for their chief deity. Baal became known as Hadad, the storm god, a name which could be viewed as the more personal name of Baal.[11]

The goddess Asherah merits separate attention. At Ugarit the consort of Baal was Anath, a sex goddess, who was at the same time a symbol of life and the violent destruction of life. Perhaps with the help of Hyksos and other Egyptian influences, Anath, Asherah, and Ashtaroth became interchangeable titles, as we can see in ninth century Samaria.[12] The Egyptian Qudshu ("Holiness") appears to be an amalgamation of all three goddesses. Asherah must be distinguished from Ashtaroth (Astarte) because they are listed separately at Ugarit. Albright says that Asherah was originally a sea goddess who also was said to defeat the chaotic monster of the depths: the name Asherah, says Albright, is a shortened form of the name - "The Lady who Traverses the Sea."[13] The word Asherah also came to be used of the symbol of the goddess. The asherim were wooden poles, or possibly whole trees stripped of their foliage, which played a central role in the rites of the "high-places" (some even think via

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[10] Idem, Yahweh and the Gods, p. 125.

[11] Idem, Archaeology and Religion, p. 72; Idem, Yahweh and the Gods, p. 124.

[12] Idem, Archaeology and Religion, p. 74-5.

[13] Idem, Yahweh and the Gods, p. 121.

male prostitution).[14] Perhaps the Philistine Dagon, the grain deity, is related to this whole picture, because from the waist down its image is a sea creature.

So far in this chapter we have undertaken an abbreviated survey of deities related to serpent symbolism in Canaan. The importance of Asherah to our discussion is truly great. She has been linked to the serpent symbol at every turn. But now we would do well to look at general religious tendencies at the time of the occupation.

The Israelites entered a land of highly organized religions, with a pantheon and local shrines and priests.[15] The overall picture was one of divining dancers, ritual prostitution, human sacrifices, and the sacrificing of a great variety of animals, such as deer at Gezer.[16] All of these practices, so repugnant to the modern mind, were done in the name of "Holiness." By this time, the serpent had become primarily a symbol of life and fertility; the older serpent-association with death and the afterlife, as we saw at Jericho, had largely disappeared.[17] The principle surviving medium of religious symbols is the stele,[18] but we can include here the many figurines of Asherah.

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[14]Eric W. Heaton, The Hebrew Kingdoms (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 75.

[15]Albright, Abraham to Ezra, p. 27.

[16]Idem, Archaeology and Religion, p. 92-3; Idem, Abraham to Ezra, p. 17.

[17]Karen R. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 99.

[18]Albright, Archaeology and Religion, p. 114.

Albright gives the most succinct description of religion in Palestine at the time of the conquest. Because of its position in the Fertile Crescent, Palestine represents a mediating theological position in the ancient world, but on the whole the religion of Palestine is most closely allied with Mesopotamia.[19] Whereas serpent symbolism was found all over the world at this time, W. F. Albright calls the Palestinian preoccupation with serpent symbols characteristically Canaanite.[20] The conquest meant for Israel a shift in lifestyles, a shift detectable in the prescriptions of Deuteronomy. Israel left behind her the nomadic existence and assumed the settled, agricultural way of life. The Canaanites obliged the newcomers by teaching them agricultural methods and agricultural beliefs.

All of the Former Prophets point out what was a basic shortcoming in Israel's conquest of Palestine: the conquest was not total. Pockets of pagans and paganism survived for generations to come. It is truly significant that the list of surviving civilizations in Judges 1 includes sites where serpent worship was practiced: Megiddo, Gezer, Beth-shan, and Beth-shemesh! Also significant is the fact that these sites and the other ones listed in the previous chapters are on the fringes, or frontiers of the Promised Land. Canaanite religion survived and even flourised at the local bamoth. The high places were the scene of many festal and sacrificial agricultural feasts, where worshippers could catch the cool west wind and celebrate every abomination listed above in a picnic atmosphere.[21] Canaanite religion also survived in the presence of masseboth.

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[19] Ibid., p. 91. [20] Ibid., p. 76. [21] Ibid., pp. 106-7.

These pillars appear to have been the male counterparts to the asherim.[22] It is suggested that they were erected in honor of notables, or that they were funerary, celebrating the afterlife.[23]

In the time leading up to Hezekiah's reform, external factors continued to exert external influence on Israel, particularly as she grew progressively weaker. Egypt continued to plague Israel through the invasion of Shishak (918 B.C.) and down to Hezekiah's time. The remains of the Northern Kingdom tell the story of continued Mesopotamian influence. Canaanite practices tended to be increasingly subsumed under the growing Assyrian pressure.

The Scope and Nature of Hezekiah's Reform

The destruction of Nehushtan was part of a larger reform undertaken by Hezekiah. The following discussion will deal mainly with religious aspects which have relative pertinence to the subject of serpent symbolism.

Considerable discussion surrounds time factors in Hezekiah's reform and Hezekiah himself, who is said to have been twenty-five years old when he began to reign (2 Kings 18:2). Chronological arguements cannot delay us here, but suffice it to say that problems do exist. The total number of years in the remaining monarchs of the Southern Kingdom adds

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[22] Francis Davidson, The New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1953), p. 328.

[23] W. F. Albright, "The High Place in Ancient Palestine," Vetus Testamentum supp. 4 (1957):242-58; Idem, Archaeology and Religion, p. 105; Carl F. Graesser, "Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine," Biblical Archaeologist 35 (1972):34-63.

up to 110 years, which brings us back to 696 or 697 B.C. However, the data of 2 Kings 18 gives us a closing date for Hezekiah's reign of 686 B.C. The ten year discrepancy is accounted for by positing a co-regency, either between Jotham and Ahaz or between Ahaz and Hezekiah.[24] The fall of Samaria occurred three or four years into the reign of Hezekiah. It would be interesting to know if the reform had already begun by this time, or if the fall of the North gave impetus to the reform.

Solomon was only king of the united monarchy to introduce formally to Israel foreign worship practices, although such practices started more informally even before Joshua had crossed the Jordan. His construction of high places devoted to Chemosh and Molech set the tone for future rulers. In Judah his son Rehoboam continued the syncretistic practices of his father and even expanded on them (1 Kings 14:23,24). Solomon's marriage alliance with Egypt bore bitter fruit for his son in the invasion of Shishak. The reign of the next king, Asa, is characterized by the expression which was to become proverbial: "But the high places were not taken away." Meanwhile, in Israel (narrow definition) Jeroboam started his new national religion, which was designed to be a "look-alike" of Judah's. While the national religions of both kingdoms survived, Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian worship forms thrived alongside them. This syncretism will be further explored in the last chapter. In the minds of the people, the Ark and Nehushtan could live in peaceful co-existence with each other.

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[24]Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary (London: Oliphants, 1962), p. 357.

Ahaz, the predecessor of Hezekiah, epitomized the idolatrous practices of Judah, and thus Ahaz truly set the stage for Hezekiah's reform. By placing a copy of the Damascus altar in the temple, Ahaz placed Yahweh into an inferior position, but Hezekiah worked in the opposite direction by repudiating any deity associated with Assyria.[25] It has been speculated that Ahaz received Nehushtan from Assyria, but apart from Biblical considerations, this theory does not allow enough time for the serpent to attain the level of a deity.[26]

On the international scene, feeble alliances were the stock and trade of Judah's foreign policy. As the Assyrian Rabshakeh intimates, Judah and Egypt were closely associated at this time (2 Kings 18:21).[27] But of course, all foreign relations paled under the threat of Assyria. How many campaigns did Sennacherib stage against Judah? The bulk of critical scholars maintain that there was just one, and that 2 Kings 18:13-16 and 18:17 to 19:37 are simply parallel accounts of the same event.[28] One major reason given for this thinking is that the annals of Sennacherib name only one such campaign.[29] However, the Biblical evidence does point to two campaigns. The one that Sennacherib does mention

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[25]H. H. Rowley, "Hezekiah's Reform and Rebellion," John Rylands Library Bulletin 44 (1962):425.

[26]Ross G. Murison, "The Serpent in the Old Testament," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature 21 (1905):126.

[27]Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 50.

[28]John Gray, I and II Kings, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 657-60 and Brevard S. Childs, Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series, vol. 3 (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 118-120; John Bright, A History of Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 282.

[29]Heaton, Hebrew Kingdoms, p. 75.

is normally dated 701 B.C. He mentions how he took captive 200,150 people, how Hezekiah was hemmed in like a "bird in a cage" and overwhelmed with Sennacherib's splendor, and how Hezekiah paid him a tribute of 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver.[30]

Next comes the questions concerning Hezekiah's motivations for the reforms. From the believer's point of view, it might be sufficient to say that Hezekiah was led by the Spirit of God to renounce and actively eradicate all forms of idolatry which belittled the God of all grace. However, also by the Spirit, different factors were probably also at work. In the Old Testament theocracy, where "church" and state were one, religious, social, and political factors were all related and of one piece.

Surely the reform was spurred by Yahweh's prophets of the day, Isaiah and Micah. While Hezekiah worked for external change, the prophets spoke for an internal change in the hearts of the individual people.[31] The active role of Isaiah in the Assyrian confrontation shows how political and religious matters went hand-in-hand. Literary critics speculate that the material of the reform account may have come originally from a collection of sayings about Isaiah or from the mouth of Isaiah himself.[32] (See Is. 36-39.) The fact that Isaiah himself did not

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[30]Nadav Na'aman, "Sennacherib's Letter to God on His Campaign to Judah," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 214 (1966): 25-39; Mercer, Extra-Biblical Sources, p. 49; James B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 277-8.

[31]Davidson, Commentary, p. 328.

[32]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 73-4.

complain explicitly about the worship of Nehushtan has led some to think that Isaiah's own motivation in the reform was purely political.[33] That opinion could hold only if one had never read the Book of Isaiah or if one assigned a "ghost writer" for all sixty-six chapters.

The goal of Hezekiah's reform was to restore the pure religion of Yahweh to all Israel and Judah.[34] In order to do this the eclectic policies of his father Ahaz had to be reversed, and the worship of Yahweh had to be recentralized in Jerusalem.[35] The idea was not to establish Yahweh as the head of a pantheon, but to worship Yahweh as the only God, in the spirit of the First Commandment. Nehushtan not only violated the prohibition against graven images, but its worship was also an affront to the monotheism characteristic of the Old Testament. Possible evidence of this centralization process is seen in the local temple at Arad in southern Judah. There in the inner sanctuary a plastered maṣṣabah was found, which appears to have been constructed after the directions of Deuteronomy 27:2. Thus, the pillar could have been a legitimate symbol in the worship of Yahweh, but there is evidence that the Arad shrine was closed around Hezekiah's time, presumably out of deference for the central sanctuary at Jerusalem.[36] M. and Y. Aharoni, however, prefer to

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[33] Ibid.

[34] James Hastings, ed., Dictionary of the Bible 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 510.

[35] S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, C. A. Briggs, and J. A. Montgomery, Kings, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1951), p. 480.

[36] Walter Wifall, The Court History of Israel (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1975.), p. 158; Birger A. Pearson, Religious Syncretism in Antiquity (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 81.

date this find in the time of Josiah.[37] By once again centralizing worship in Jerusalem, ties with the house of David would be strengthened, which has led to the theory that Nehushtan was a totem symbol of David's clan (see the next section).

On the international scene, the whole western area of the ancient world was in varying stages of revolt against Assyria, and in the east Merodach-Baladan of Babylon was also being most uncooperative. Hezekiah, with his religious fervor, could have caught quite easily the spirit of revolt.[38] The role of the Northern Kingdom in the reform is most intriguing. It indicates that Assyria's hold on Palestine was relatively weak, and it is also possible that Hezekiah wanted to reunite the North and the South in the worship of Yahweh.[39] From a purely monetary standpoint, Hezekiah's small nation faced an incredible financial burden supporting a large central sanctuary, and revenues from the North would have greatly alleviated this burden.[40] The reform and the revolt were intimately connected: the battle for political supremacy was at the same time a struggle over the supremacy of the gods.[41] In the religious struggle, Ahaz had raised the white flag at Damascus, while he secretly kept the bronze

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[37]Mariam and Johann Aharoni, "The Stratification of Judahite Sites," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 224 (1976): 87.

[38]Rowley, "Hezekiah's Reform," p. 429.

[39]John H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, Isralite and Judean History, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 442.

[40]W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 206.

[41]Rowley, "Hezekiah's Reform," p. 429.

altar of Yahweh for himself (2 Kings 16:15). But Hezekiah would make no such compromises. In this political context, the destruction of Nehushtan can be seen as one victory for Yahweh and one defeat for Assyria, both politically and religiously.

How broad in scope was the reform of Hezekiah? Some would say that Hezekiah did not effect any reform at all, but that the stories about him were Chronicler's imaginative projections of Josiah's reform into the past. Another thought is that only the destruction of Nehushtan was authentic,[42] while yet another opinion is that the Nehushtan reference proves that Hezekiah did have a reform of his own.[43] There is no doubt in this author's mind that Hezekiah did effect a reform, but there is some question as to the extent of it.

One view is that Hezekiah began with the temple, including Nehushtan, and then removed the high places in the vicinity of Jerusalem. (We should mention here that no definite proof exists for even placing Nehushtan in the temple!)[44] The high places might have been those made by Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:23), which were undoubtedly near Jerusalem,[45] but the evidence above of the Arad temple suggests a wider scope. Second Kings 23:13 states that Josiah destroyed Solomon's high places, so

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[42] Ibid., p. 425.

[43] Gray, Kings, p. 670.

[44] H. D. M. Spense and J. S. Exell, I and II Kings, The Pulpit Commentary vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 357.

[45] J. R. Dummelow, A Commentary on the Holy Bible, (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1957), p. 240.

Hezekiah's work must have been somewhat limited, and probably not as extensive as Josiah's. Whether Hezekiah did his work only in Jerusalem or in all of Judah or even beyond - the question is related to the length of time involved. It is possible that the reform continued over several years.[46]

The reform of Hezekiah occupies just one verse in 2 Kings (18:4), but it takes up three whole chapters in 2 Chronicles (29-31). The Chronicler's account is deserving of a whole volume by itself, but here we can only highlight a few points of interest. Of course, critical scholars see so much theology in Chronicles that they question the historical aspects of the account, but such questions result only from a priori decisions about the text. The Chronicles account is set in Jerusalem; the resultant fervor from what transpired there led to religious campaigns far into the north, but these excursions may not be a part of the reform proper (31:1). Nehushtan could be included in the ritually unclean things which were removed from the sanctuary (29:5,16). Noteworthy is the involvement of the North Kingdom, which was mentioned above. Judah and all Israel were summoned to the celebration (30:1), and the sin offering was sacrificed for all the people of both kingdoms (29:24). The opening of the doors to the temple (29:3) could mean that Ahaz's private entrance had been sealed off, but it does not necessarily mean that everyone was denied the right to worship. The heartfelt enthusiasm of the worshippers is reflected in the relaxation of the cleanliness rules (30:19) and in the doubling of the Feast of Unleavened

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[46] F. W. Farrar, The Second Book of Kings, the Expositor's Bible (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), p. 288.

Bread (30:23). The reference to each man's return to his own possession (31:1) after the holiday reminds us of the conclusion of Solomon's dedicatory service and how the people joyfully returned to their homes (1 Kings 8:66). The cult (in the academic sense) of Yahweh was restored: the worship, center, all the worship practices, the festivals, an organized clergy, and a dedicated laypeople. For these people, the "Little Passover" they celebrated became the greatest Passover of all (30:2).

The Text and Context of II Kings 18:4

The whole reform of Hezekiah is covered by just this one verse in the second book of Kings. Although there was much popular enthusiasm for the reform according to the Chronicler's account, Manasseh would shortly undo everything his father had accomplished. The apparent weakness of Hezekiah (18:14-15) can be construed either as a delay or as a temporary setback in the reform, but perhaps it spells the conclusion. Second Kings 18:4 is part of the introductory paragraph for Hezekiah's reign. The length of this introduction, far longer than most, is in and of itself a tribute to Hezekiah, but the brevity of the actual reform report has produced the speculation that the author of it wrote in Josiah's time and that he did not want to detract from the reform of his contemporary.[47] The suggestion has been made that 18:13 should be read as "the twenty-fourth year of King Hezekiah": thus, more time is allowed in this period for Hezekiah's reform.[48] This argument, of course, also

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[47]Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Hezekiah's Reform and the Deuteronomistic Tradition," Harvard Theological Review 72 (1979):23.

[48]Rowley, "Hezekiah's Reform," p. 411.

has a bearing on the time considerations mentioned in the last section. Chronicles tells us that the reform involved the temple first and the high places second; if Nehushtan had become a piece of temple furniture, then Kings has reversed this order.

There is no end to the theories regarding the source of this verse. As mentioned above, some see Isaiah as the source, but the majority of scholars assign priority to Kings. The opening demonstrative pronoun and the use of the perfect tense with a waw consecutive are seen to be later phenomena, but "J" is sometimes posited as the author because of the negative attitude toward serpent worship.[49] To this we might ask: who of any possible authors would see serpent worship in a positive light? The brevity of this reform account suggests a summarization which comes from an annalistic source or an archivists's note.[50]

The first targets of the reform in this account are the high places and their furniture, the maṣṣeboth and the Asherah. All these items are associated with Canaanite fertility practices, and Nehushtan could very well fit into this overall picture. The singular asherah (capitalized in the Revised Standard Version) poses somewhat of a problem. It has been suggested that its inclusion is an interpolation, because Josiah's work (Chapter 23) has the appearance of a brand-new undertaking.[51] Perhaps the singular form signifies a national Asherah of which all others were representations.

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[49]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 125,129.

[50]Driver, Plummer, Briggs, and Montgomery, Kings, p. 480.

[51]Graham and May, Culture, p. 52.

We now come to the center of this discussion, the object called Nehushtan. Undoubtedly it was made of bronze (copper and tin) or of copper (as found naturally), because brass, an alloy of copper and zinc, was unknown material at that time. It was probably in the temple area, although its location is not specifically named. Brown-Driver-Briggs translates the word "bronze-god" while Koehler-Baumgartner has "serpent idol of bronze." The Septuagint has neesthan, more or less a transliteration of the Masoretic vocalization. Undoubtedly the word should be treated as a proper noun (compare Jehoiachin's mother, Nehusta, 2 Kings 24:8), but the Nahal Nehushtan at Timna (see below) is the only possible evidence of there being a deity by that name. The use of qara lo with Nehushtan supports a proper noun usage. The various translations for the term usually refer to the material, not the shape, of the idol. Most renditions see it as a contemptuous title meaning: "thing of brass."[52]

The suffix an has several possibilities. It could be an old accusative ending which is usually in the form am,[53] or simply a denominative ending,[54] or a diminutive ending. Another possibility is that an energic nun was added to what was originally to an o ending (compare Megiddo and Jericho. If an is actually the suffix, then the main body of the word is nehosheth (bronze), but if tan is the complete

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[52]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 125.

[53]J. A. Montgomery, "Hebraica," Journal of the American Oriental Society 58 (1938):131.

[54]Hastings, Dictionary, p. 510.

suffix added to nahash (serpent), then we are faced with a different problem. The tan could be a shortened form of tanin, the creature of the deep. This author's inclination is to construe the suffix as a simple denominative.

Those who attempt to answer the question as to how Nehushtan came to be present in Hezekiah's reform fall into two camps: those who take 2 Kings 18:4 at face value, that this image is the very same one constructed by Moses, and those who do not. Those in the first camp remind us that bronze is a durable substance, and, as archaeology has proved, Nehushtan could have very easily survived the centuries going back to Numbers 21. It could have been left at the wilderness outpost of Zalmonah and later stored away in one of the side chambers of the temple.[55] If Nehushtan was the genuine article, the work of Moses' hands, then Israel found herself in a quandary: an item associated with Moses was certainly worth preserving, but it was also an item that had outlived its usefulness, and there was the prohibition against the display of any such image. Storage was the only alternative.

The second group, who sees no connection between the Bronze Serpent and Nehushtan, is itself divided into two subgroups. The first subgroup dismisses any possible connection simply by saying that the Bronze Serpent never actually existed; Numbers 21 is an aetiological story specifically designed to attach importance to Nehushtan.[56] The second subgroup discounts the statement that Moses made the serpent.

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[55]Farrar, Kings, p. 292; Graham and May, Culture, p. 203.

[56]Gray, Kings, p. 670.

It theorizes that Moses' name was attached to Nehushtan in order to lend authority to the idol and to give an excuse for worshipping it. Nehushtan, the theory goes, was of very recent construction, dating from the time of David, Solomon, or Ahaz.[57] If it is reckoned with the Solomonic era, then it is pleaded that Solomon, under foreign influence, placed the serpent in the temple as a symbol to counteract the bull-symbol of the Northern Kingdom, thanks to the help of the Phoenicians, who were so gifted at working with bronze, (1 Kings 7:13).[58] This second camp has produced a scheme that is as full of pitfalls as it is full of theories. There is no compelling reason not to accept what has been written.

In speculating upon what Nehushtan signified in the days of Hezekiah, scholars have brought forward virtually every serpent association listed in this paper. In the conclusion to this work, we shall consider which associations merit the most attention. Here just a few additional suggestions can be named. Nehushtan may have symbolized the authority of Moses, or it may have been the first national symbol of the nation of Israel.[59] There is one other interesting theory: if the molten sea in the temple (1 Kings 7:25) represented the Mesopotamian god Marduk (?), then Nehushtan could have stood for another deity from that

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[57]Murison, "The Serpent," p. 125.

[58]Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):256.

[59]Graham and May, Culture, p. 81.

area, such as Sharrapu (see page 13 above).[60] The temple-guardianship idea puts 2 Kings 18:4 into an interesting light: Yahweh himself, not a snake, is the one who keeps Zion inviolate.

The word kittath (an intensive Piel form), "broke into pieces," can be taken as meaning "pulverized" or "ground into powder." I. W. Slotki believes that Hezekiah called the bronze serpent Nehushtan only after he had destroyed it.[61] Then we have the picture of Hezekiah gloating in triumph over a pile of rubble that used to be a "god."

The participial form of the word qatar has the import of continuous action, but there is a possibility that an intermittent action over a long period of time is meant. The word definitely portrays an action of worship accorded to a deity. The phrase "until those days" does not tell us when the worship of Nehushtan started, but obviously only when it ended.

Finally, the word qara in this verse requires attention. The Masoretic text simply says, "he (Hezekiah) called it Nehushtan." If Hezekieh is the subject of the verb and no one else is implied, then most assuredly the name Nehushtan is a contemptuous epithet given to the idol on the spot. The mainstream Septuagintal tradition preserves the singular, although the Syriac, Targums, and the Lagardian edition of the Septuagint have the plural. However, even the singular form can have a plural sense, if it is taken to be an impersonal or collective (of all Israel) form: "it was called." The removal of the characters

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[60] T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland, eds., Encyclopedia Biblica (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902), p. 3357.

[61] I. W. Slotki, Kings, (London: Soncino Press, 1950), p. 272.

n-h-sh and the positing of a haplography involving lo leaves us with the name Leviathan.[62] This author prefers the basic meaning of the words as was listed first, but regardless of what title is given or not given to the serpent, the question still remains concerning how a "bronze thing" could ever come to be worshipped.

The Relationship of 2 Kings 18:4 with Numbers 21:4-9

The connections between the Bronze Serpent and the image Nehushtan has already been treated. This presentation works under the assumption that Numbers 21 is not an aetiological story, but that it actually happened and deals with the very same image found in Hezekiah's time. However, time would be needed to elevate the bronze serpent to the level of an object revered in its own right.

Many solutions to the question of why the wilderness serpents were "fiery" or "burning" have been offered. Some see this description as being simply a picturesque way of describing the creature's deadliness or ferocity.[63] Others connect the description with the serpent's bite and the burning effect of its venom. Still others see a connection with the serpent's appearance: the color of its skin (a copperhead?) or the fact that it gleams when it slithers along in the desert sun.[64] One theory holds that the fiery serpents are the parasitic guinea worm filariae medinensis, which enters the human system in the

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[62] Cheyne and Sutherland, Encyclopaedia, p. 3387.

[63] Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 7.

[64] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 139, n. 1; R. Laird Harris, ed. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 571.

drinking water. The worms issue from the skin through boils which resemble snakebites.[65] The answer most plausible to this author is that the snakes were the saw-scaled viper, echis coleratus, which is so plentiful in the deserts. This snake has a powerful venom, but the poison can require up to four days in order to take effect. This delay would have provided the time necessary to form the bronze serpent, the cure for those who had already been bitten.[66]

The seraphim once again became a subject of discussion in this story as a possible solution added to the above listing (see above, pages 9-13). By drawing together this passage and all the Isaiah references and by presuming that we are not dealing with homonyms, one gets the picture that the seraphim were flying serpents, either earthly or celestrial, and that Nehushtan was a representation of these creatures. To the above treatment of seraphim we can add the popular Egyptian legend that serpents sprout wings when they grow old. In the opinion of this author, the seraphim cannot be totally discounted from being a part of the background to Numbers 21; however, the argument which makes a strong connection between the bronze serpent and the seraphim is not a very convincing one. It involves the formation of a composite picture from three different types of literature: an historical narrative, poetic imagery, and theophanic language. Such a procedure seems precarious indeed. Wisdom 16:1-7 views the wilderness serpents as being

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[65] Murison, "The Serpent," p. 123

[66] Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea, The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia 5 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 5:357.

writhing, earthbound creatures. It would seen that any connection made between the serpents and the seraphim in Numbers 21 would involve the conscious accomodation of contemporary beliefs and legends. If such a composite picture can be framed, then a reconciliation of both positive and negative connotations is in order.

While the Bible clearly identifies Nehushtan with the bronze serpent in the wilderness, any serpent theology involved in both stories is worlds apart. There is an enigma in Numbers 21: the molding of the bronze serpent is contrary to all the consures against the worship of graven images.[67] Religious symbols as such (compare the temple cherubim) were not forbidden. This contradiction suggests that Yahweh did in fact adopt and adapt serpent theology to which the Israelites had been exposed. Then, of course, we have only to look in the direction of Egypt with its animistic practices of sympathetic magic, although it must be quickly added that no bronze serpent has ever been recovered from Egypt.[68] Egypt's theology is given a new, instructive twist: Yahweh himself, not a piece of bronze, is the source of all healing. On the other hand, there appears to be very little of the healing aspect of serpent theology at work in the worship of Nehushtan. Here, fertility powers seem to be the more likely association, but there will be more on this in the conclusion. If there is any common ground between the two stories, it would be in the area of divine protection. In the New Testament, the bronze serpent is applied as both a law and Gospel

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[67] Murison, "The Serpent," p. 123.

[68] Joines, Serpent Symbolism, p. 85.

symbol. It serves as a warning against a hardhearted antinomianism in 1 Corinthians 10:9, and as a symbol of the cross in John 3:14.

The evidence at Timna, on the western side of the Arabah thirty miles north of Ezion-geber (Elath), still needs to be examined. The primary source of information is a book by Beno Rothenberg.[69] In a valley which has come to be known as Nahal Nehushtan was an Egyptian temple dedicated to Hathor. It was built against a rock formation called Solomon's Pillars. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Kenites, perhaps a clan within the Midianites, cleared out this temple and adapted it to their purposes. In the Midianite phase of this temple (ca. Iron Age I) was found a slender copper serpent twelve centimeters long.[70] The material for this worship object presents no mystery: the area was the scene of extensive copper mining, and traditionally the Kenites were known as metal workers in the Arabah. The last phase of this temple appears to have been in the form of a tent-shrine structure.

Upon this evidence Rothenberg builds a theory to account for the Biblical occurrence of the bronze serpent in the wilderness. He says that there was a "Midianite Cult of the Copper Snake" in which Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, served as a priest. Since Jethro serves priestly functions in the Scriptures (Ex. 18:12-27), it is postulated that Jethro gave Moses the idea for the bronze serpent and that an

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[69] Beno Rothenberg, Timna-Valley of the Biblical Copper Mines (Lancashire, B. G.: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 65, pl. 19; p. 154, 182-4.

[70] Ibid., p. 65, pl. 19; Suzanne F. Singer, "From These Hills," Biblical Archaeology Review 4 (1978):16-25.

image like the one found in the Timna temple served as a model for Moses' serpent. Also, the tent-shrine at Timna allegedly served as the model for the "Tent of Meeting."

This is one of those theories for which it is difficult to put together arguments either pro or con. A few mental gymnastics are required to fit this theory into the Biblical witness, which includes God's specific instructions to build the bronze serpent as well as the divinely-given details for the building of the tabernacle, which is surely synonymous with the tent of meeting. From an historical critic's point of view, the task of blending the two elements may be an easy one, but from a conservative point of view, the best one can say is that Yahweh used Jethro for passing along his instructions. The Israelite camp in the wilderness was a large one, and if the Timna serpent was a model for Moses' serpent, a telescope may have been required to look upon it and be healed.

The Question of a Jebusite Serpent Cult

The principle champion of this theory is H. H. Rowley, whose article on the subject is universally quoted.[71] His presentation is an elaborate one, and we can give only a brief summary of it here. Nehushtan, the theory says, was already present in Jerusalem when David conquered the city in 994 B.C. It was housed in a shrine in Jerusalem under the care of Zadok, a local priest, who maintained his leadership even after the capture of the city. The custodianship of the sacred

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[71] H. H. Rowley, "Zadok and Nehushtan," Journal of Biblical Literature 58 (1939):113-141.

Jebusite serpent could be broadened to include the Levites. The name Levi is traced by some to Leviathan, and mention is made of the Arabic word lawa, which means "to coil."[72]

According to critical theory, the story of Melchizedek ("Zedek is my king") in Genesis 14 is an aetiological tale, fabricated in order to support the continuing worship of the serpent. Psalm 110:4 is also said to link Melchizedek with a continuing priesthood. The names Adonizedek ("Zedek is my lord") and Zedekiah ("Yahweh is Zedek") also lend support to the close association of this name with Jerusalem. Additional evidence is seen in the relatively sudden appearance of Zadok in David's time and in the fact that Zadok was connected with the Ark and the sanctuary (2 Sam. 15:24-25). Also, the Serpent's Stone near En-rogel, just south of the juncture of the Kidron and Hinnom valleys, seems to have cultic significance: Adonijah offered sacrifices there in his campaign for the throne (1 Kings 1:9). The Spring of the Dragon (tanin) in Nehemiah 2:13 is probably the same site.

Rowley's proposal is noteworthy, because it shows that we do not have to look to other nations or even to other areas of Palestine to find foreign influences that could lead to the worship of Nehushtan. If Nehushtan was actually in Jerusalem, we are as "close to home' as we can get. However, beyond stating that there was local influence of a general nature, the improbabilities of the theory multiply, and we are left with nothing more than circumstantial evidence. If there was such

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[72]Eduard Nielsen, Shechem (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1957), pp. 265-6.

a local god, David or Solomon could have appropriated it as a symbol of his authority and lineage.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NEHUSHTAN WORSHIP

The evidence of serpent worship has now been surveyed, and this chapter will attempt to identify the motivating forces behind the worship of Nehushtan. Certainly we are in no position to write a comprehensive "Systematic Theology of Nehushtan," but by the ancient mythologies, the Biblical witness, and the silent witness of archaeological findings, we can draw at least tentative conclusions and speak of probabilities. In spite of the dogmatic assertions of many scholars, it is truly difficult to find agreement even in "two or three witnesses."

The Person of Divinity versus Divine Attributes

There are basically two ways that a religious symbol can be used: as a representation of the deity itself or as a symbol of one of the deity's attributes or powers. The religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia show a progression, or development, from the former usage toward the latter. In both cultures primitive snake-gods lost their individual identities and were absorbed into pantheons as symbols of the main deities' characteristics. Once again, the minor Mesopotamian god Ningizzida serves as an illustration: originally he (she) was an isolated deity symbolized by a lone serpent, but in his final form, Ningizzida

had been reduced to small groups of serpents sprouting from the shoulders of Ishtar.[1]

When a minor god was incorporated into an elaborate pantheon, it may have retained its individual identity to a certain extent, perhaps as a personification of divine or natural powers, but many symbols appear to have lost almost completely a separate identity. Egyptian animism lent itself especially well to a multiplicity of gods, spirits, and demons, but the pharaohs tended to have their own favorite deities. The monotheism of Atenism attests well to this, although this movement was parenthetical in Egyptian history.

In the view of this author, it is most likely that a serpent symbol represents an individual god when the symbol stands alone, unassociated with any other religious symbol. But even when it stands alone, one cannot rule out the possibility that the symbol still represents the main deity of the locality, or one facet of him.

In Canaan we have seen that the serpent symbol rarely stands alone. As in the other cultures we examined, the serpent is linked to some other symbol in the majority of cases. It is held in a figure's hands, wrapped around a figure, draped over a figure, or flanking a figure. (The fact that the figure is usually Asherah-Ashtaroth is truly significant, but will be treated in the next section.) The Canaanite serpent is also seen with other symbols which were listed above; water, the dove, and the bull.

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[1] A. L. Frothingham, "The Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake God and of the Caduceus," American Journal of Archaeology 20 (1916), p. 196.

The archaeological scene in Palestine has led at least one man to conclude: there was no special serpent deity in Canaan.[2]

If the above picture is accurate, then the question remains: what happened in the case of the Israelites and their worship of Nehushtan? The answer provided by W. C. Graham and H. G. May is that Israel bypassed the animistic stage in religion, with its zoomorphic personifications of divine powers, but yet Israel adopted the symbols of that very same animism.[3] Maybe the answer can be put more simply. While all the pagan cultures of the ancient world were progressing away from animistic pluralism, Israel was moving in the opposite direction, that is, in her idolatry against Yahweh. As will be more fully explained in the next section, Israel started out from Sinai reconfirmed in her monotheism, but then she regressed toward a religious middle ground that she could share with Canaanite paganism.

Syncretism and the Foreign Religions

In this section we shall use a specialized application of the word syncretism: the propensity of the Israelites to worship foreign gods and engage in foreign worship practices while all along continuing (the pretense of) the worship of Yahweh. In a sense, the word syncretism serves as a title for the Israelite regression spoken of above. The classic prophetic view of this syncretism is seen in Elijah's complaint:

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[2]Stephen Langdon, Mythology of All Races, vol. 5, Semitic (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931), p. 78.

[3]W. C. Graham and H. G. May, Culture and Conscience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 81.

"How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (2 Kings 18:21, RSV). Syncretism in worship practices led to polytheism in beliefs, a polytheism under which Nehushtan could play a religious role, major or minor, on a Jerusalem hill devoted to Yahweh.

The whole of the Old Testament witness can be viewed from the perspective of syncretism and the battle against it. From the harlotry of the Plains of Moab to the weeping for Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14), syncretism stands out as the cause of Israel's downfall. Even later on at Elephantine, the reference to Anat-Jahu suggests that Jahweh was thought to have a consort as also the evidence at Quntillat Ajrud suggests,[4] so the hard lessons of divinely guided history appear to have gone unheeded. While every imaginable form of religious adultery continued, neither king nor subject felt the need to rededicate Solomon's temple to the name of another deity; indeed, although the observation of the appointed feats suffered, the doors of Yahweh's temple remained "open for business" almost without interruption. In such an atmosphere, the worship of Nehushtan could receive the contemporary appraisal of being an expression of humanistic cooperation, not theological apostasy.

The most stirring accounts and descriptions of Yahweh's power and covenant faithfulness, such as at the Exodus, in Deuteronomy, or in the Psalms, are uncompromisingly and thankfully monotheistic. But to those who would compromise this belief came the words: "Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you." (Judg. 10:14, RSV).

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[4]Ibid., p. 90. Ze'ev Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" Biblical Archaeology Review 5 (1979):24-35.

In spite of all this, Israel opted for syncretism. Two causes for this syncretism have emerged, and both of them are very pertinent to the scope of this paper.

The first cause is the fact that the conquest of Canaan was never completed. The Promised Land after the occupation was left "a little bit pregnant" with the seed of foreign religious influence. Gezer and Megiddo, places where the serpent symbol was part of the local cult, continued to flourish. At Sinai the covenant was presented in either-or terms and involved a clear-cut choice between "life and good" and "death and evil" with the resultant blessing or curse (Deut. 30:15,19). With this theology fresh on the peoples' minds, Moses' rod and the Bronze Serpent presented no immediate temptation to syncretism. The same theological mindset prevailed after the conquest at the Shechem gathering of Joshua. "Choose this day whom you will serve." (Joshua 24:15, RSV). However, in the very next generation after Joshua, Baal and Ashtaroth already left their mark on Israelite religion. Already here the trend toward syncretism was established, and the serpent symbol, well established for hundreds of years in Canaan, was readily available to Israel. One of the first concrete signs of syncretism following the conquest was the ephod of Gideon, an idol which in some respects was possibly similar to Nehushtan (Judg. 8:27).

The second cause of religious syncretism was an individual--none other than King Solomon. The governmental machinery he established was especially prone to syncretism.[5] Since Solomon's kingdom was

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[5]Albright, Archaeology and Religion, p. 155-6.

patterned in many ways after other foreign kingdoms of the day, one could say that it was designed, consciously or not, for syncretism. The word which might most aptly describe Solomon's kingdom is the word "secularism."[6] The realm achieved such grandeur that religion became just one more arm of the government, just as the temple became one wing of the capitol's complex of buildings. As magnificent as the temple was, its construction took seven years, while the rest of the complex took thirteen years (1 Kings 6:38 to 7:1). With such a state of affairs, it was so very easy to take the next step in theological thinking: any religion or religious feelings which served the welfare of the state became acceptable. The introduction of Canaanite deities and worship practices into Solomon's kingdom was almost inevitable: thinking politically, wealth and prestige were on the side of Canaanite religion.[7] Thus, Solomon gave birth to a whole dynasty of kings whose hearts were not wholly true to Yahweh. "But the high places were not taken away." (1 Kings 15:14).

In view of this situation, Solomon, over all the other Biblical personalities, is the most likely candidate for the person who introduced Judah to the worship of Nehushtan. Foreign religious influences overran Solomon's kingdom very quickly from within Canaan and without (1 Kings 11:1-6). A significant part of that influence involved serpent symbolism, and here again, the bronze serpents of Hazor, Gezer and Megiddo must be mentioned. The abuse of religious images we saw at Tell Beit Mirsim indicates that the Israelites had a natural aversion to

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[6] W. F. Albright, The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 61

[7] Ibid.

sacred objects, but images survived in areas toward the frontier periphery of Canaan. There are indications that Solomon did in fact adopt pagan religious symbols. One piece of evidence for this is Solomon's throne, which was adorned with a calf's head and accompanied by lions (1 Kings 10:19,20). Another clue is found in the temple itself, which included biological symbols of all kinds: trees, flowers, gourds, bulls, and the like (1 Kings 7). While the temple was patterned after the divinely designed tabernacle, it must be remembered that not all of the temple's interior appointments were divinely inspired, but rather they were inspired by Tyre, the native home of Baal. The Tyrians, incidentally, were known for their craftsmanship in the use of bronze (1 Kings 6:13,14). The local high place of Solomon (1 Kings 11:7) stands out as a monument to a glorious kingdom, which welcomes with open arms the creeds of all peoples.

The reform of Hezekiah must also be seen in the terms of syncretism and the interplay of politics and religion. Ahaz, who is the runner-up in the vote for a single instigator of Nehushtan worship, made religious concessions as the result of political concessions. Although we do not mean to question the motives of all the people involved in Hezekiah's reform, it does appear that new-found hopes for political independence spurred the new drive for religious independence, Hezekiah was "like David," (2 Kings 18:3) but was totally unlike Solomon. His whole reform can be seen as a drive to abolish syncretism and to establish a "remnant" (2 Chron. 30:6) which would worship Yahweh and him alone.

What was the theme or themes involved in the worship of Nehushtan? We include this question under the discussion of syncretism, because

Israel simply did not have a serpent theology or a single serpent emphasis of her own, as we saw in the wide range of Biblical uses of the serpent symbol. A theme for the Nehushtan symbol had to be borrowed from Israel's neighbors.

The starting place for answering this question is the wilderness, where the bronze serpent was first constructed. Obviously, the serpent represents the healing powers of Yahweh in Numbers 21. If it can be said that Yahweh was accommodating for his own purposes a religious usage of the day, there is good reason to believe that Egypt was the source of the symbol. Israel had recently come from Egypt, and sympathetic magic has been shown to be a trademark of Egyptian serpent symbolism. It is difficult to know where to place the evidence at Timna. Certainly the evidence there can explain the materials and craftsmanship that went into the building of the serpent, but the theological theme attached to the bronze serpent of Timna is not readily apparent.

By the time of Hezekiah, it appears that the bronze serpent had for the most part lost its original associations. Too much time elapsed between the two Biblical references, and, unless we hold to the doubtful possibility that Nehushtan was worshipped continuously throughout the interim period, continuity of theme was also bound to be lost. We look to a more immediate theme for Nehushtan worship, looking to the Canaanite pantheon which Israel had largely adopted.

It has been demonstrated how both Egypt and Mesopotamia exerted a significant influence on the theology of Canaanite religion. However, the investigation of Palestinian sites has shown that there was a trend away from the worship themes of Egypt. The Hyksos did more than any

other group to introduce the serpent symbol to Canaan, but even their symbols represented Mesopotamian themes in Egyptian dress, and only the earliest levels of the most ancient sites displayed purely Egyptian themes, such as those connected with the burial of the dead. Thus, we can narrow down the theme of Nehushtan worship to a Canaanite theme which shows Mesopotamian influence. At this point we must review the serpent associations listed in chapter one and then pick out the most likely candidate.

The number one choice is the Canaanite fertility theme, which stresses the origin of life in the form of agriculture and human reproduction. This theme was by far the most prevalent serpent emphasis found at the archaeological sites. Although it can be argued that 2 Kings lists Nehushtan as a separate item, still all the objects named in 2 Kings 18:4 deal with this fertility theme. The whole Old Testament witness supports this conclusion in its references to ritual prostitution and in its identification of idolatry as harlotry.

But the most severe temptation to lean in the direction of a fertility theme is found right in 2 Kings 18:4--the goddess Asherah, the consort of Baal. In almost every site, the serpent can be linked to her. She was the Canaanite version of the earth-mother goddess, a figure that draws together into one picture agricultural fertility and human fecundity. The further serpent associations with the bull, the dove, and especially water can all be seen as a support cast for an overarching fertility theme, because all three are life-fertility symbols.

Did Nehushtan symbolize the fertility powers of Yahweh? This author thinks not. The Biblical injunctions against idolatry show

clearly that Judah and Israel had learned well the art of thinking polytheistically. One would hope that the name Nehushtan itself might provide a clue to answering this question, but as was shown in the discussion of 2 Kings 18:4, there are just too many possibilities of meanings to give a definitive direction to us. If Nehushtan was a Yahweh symbol, then it can be argued that Hezekiah should have torn down the whole temple, because it was filled with biological symbols. The most natural interpretation of qarah lo in 2 Kings 18:4 is that Hezekiah himself gave the serpent symbol its name; thus, if the serpent was associated at all with Yahweh, it would perhaps be as Asherah (Anat?), the consort of Yahweh.[8]

Finally, fertility stands out as the theme of Nehushtan worship, because there simply is no other compelling alternative. We can rule out immortality and sympathetic magic: they are almost exclusively Egyptian associations, and rarely if ever would a sympathetic magic symbol be enshrined in a single, central monument. The Assyrian pressure in Hezekiah's day leads us away from Egypt, a weak sister at the time. If Hezekiah was in fact relying on Egypt (2 Kings 18:21), the total disparagement of an Egyptian symbol would have hardly been timely. The theories that Nehushtan was a totem symbol of David's house or a symbol of the southern kingdom are too speculative to be given much weight. The themes of destruction, wisdom, and healing had too minor a place in Canaanite theology to be serious candidates.

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[8]Meshel, "Consort," pp. 24-35.

The only logical second choice for a Nehushtan theme is protection, an emphasis seen in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. The exact location of Nehushtan is crucial to this choice. If Nehushtan was placed at a gate of Jerusalem or the door leading into the sanctuary, then the protection theme would be a very good choice.

Epilog: Continuing Serpent Worship in Canaan

The review of the serpent symbol in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other areas showed how serpent symbolism continued around the world after the close of the Old Testament period, and Canaan was no different; the serpent did not disappear with the destruction of Nehushtan.

Hand-sized clay tablets became popular,[9] and these tablets decorated with serpents show how the serpent symbol retained an underground appeal. After the exile, the serpent's popularity continued in cultic centers like Tell en-Nasbeth (Mizpeh).[10] One interesting piece was found at the Galileean site, Kefar Baram, dated in the third or fourth century B.C. It is a stone pillar approximately one foot square and two foot high, which has single serpents on opposite sides. The one serpent has a navel which A. S. Hiram believes to be a female characteristic, and the other serpent, having no features, is presumably a male. The male-female symbolism suggests that the serpent symbol continued to have fertility associations.[11]

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[9] Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):255.

[10] Karen R. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 98.

[11] A. S. Hiram, "A Votive Altar from Upper Galilee," (Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 167 (1962):18-20.

There is no indication that Nehushtan represented a primordial dragon, but Jewish apocalyptic appears to have picked up on this theme by increasingly representing Satan as a serpent. From the Christian sect of the Ophites onward, the serpent symbol has never died.

CONCLUSION

In the days of Samuel the Israelites insisted that they wanted a king like all the other nations had. Despite Samuel's pleas, God gave the people what they wanted, and soon they were paying the price for their insistence in the person of Saul. The Bronze Serpent obviously symbolized the healing power of Yahweh, but one cannot help but think that it also carried an import similar to the king figure. The Golden Calf story was an early signal that Israel would not be satisfied to worship Yahweh alone. In the wilderness Israel again displayed impatience at the prospect of having Yahweh alone to see them through, and the Bronze Serpent would have never been constructed if it had not been for this impatience. In this light the Bronze Serpent was another example of God giving the people what they wanted, and the perversion of Nehushtan was the price Israel paid for it.

The examination of the archaeological sites has taught this author that due discretion is required in assigning a religious import to any given symbol. For example, the Village Lutheran Church of Ladue, Missouri contains a large, well defined eagle which forms the base of its lecturn. One can almost anticipate the utter glee of a future archaeologist, who uncovers the evidence of a local shrine devoted to the Eagle-god, perhaps the patron god of the primitive Kingdom of Missouri. As a balance to this, the ancient symbols were accompanied

by much literature, and the whole religious atmosphere was far different from what it is today.

The serpent symbol has been seen to be easily adaptable to a host of themes and mythological roles, a fact that has led us to conclude that a cult of the serpent per se was a relative rarity in Palestine. Yet, the polytheistic thinking of the age cannot be minimized: the ancient pantheons did include many individual personalities. Nehushtan probably did not represent an individual deity, but as a symbol of divine powers, it was still a witness to the inroads of polytheism.

Our modern age employs more covert ways of expressing polytheism, but it is equally guilty and continues to serve "the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." (Rom. 1:25). We need to remember the plural designation for God, Elohim. It testifies that Yahweh alone is our "pantheon" from start to finish, the only hope for Israel, and the sole source of all that is good today. A Chinese proverb states: "The best prophet of the future is the past." Our prayer is that only God's actions in history would be seen as prophetic, and that the sinful actions of man, revealed by an omniscient God, would be our teacher.

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