

Jesus, the Bronze Serpent, and the Healing of Humanity

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Introduction

In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus compares his coming crucifixion to the incident of the bronze serpent (Jn.3:14 – 15). I wish to explore Jesus' citation further. I believe that the bronze serpent was far from a mere physical parallel to Jesus being affixed to the wooden pole of the Roman cross. The incident has deep literary-theological resonance that illuminates both the entirety of the Pentateuch and the Gospel of John.

John's Linkage of the Bronze Serpent with Isaiah

Jesus suggested in his interview with Nicodemus that his death would accomplish the reversal of a poisoning. He said:

καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὑψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου
And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, thus to be lifted up it is necessary for the Son of Man
(Jn.3:14)

The term ὑψωσεν, the active, third person, singular, future tense ('lifted up') of ὑψόω ('I lift/raise'), and ὑψωθῆναι, the passive, infinitive, aorist tense ('to be lifted up'), has fascinating positive associations. NASB translates the word: exalt (2), exalted (9), exalts (3), lift (1), lifted (4), made...great (1). The vertical movement is rendered as having a positive increase in honor and stature (Lk.1:52; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 13:17; 2 Cor.11:7; Jas.4:10; 1 Pet.5:6), even when that movement is presumptuous on the part of the subject (Mt.11:23; 23:12; Lk.10:15; 14:11; 18:14).

Curiously, the text of Numbers 21:4 – 9 does not use the phrase 'lifted up' or any verb indicating vertical movement. Even the vertical movement of Moses lifting his staff is only implied. In the MT, God simply tells Moses 'to set' (סָׁׁׁׁ) the serpent on the pole (Num.21:8). So Moses 'put it' (שָׁׁׁׁ) on a pole (Num.21:9). In the LXX, God says:

ποίησον σεαυτῷ ὄφιν καὶ θέξ αὐτὸν ἐπὶ σημεῖου
Make thee a serpent, and put it on a signal-[staff] (Num.21:8)

Moreover, there is no association or connotation whatsoever with 'exalting' or 'honoring' the bronze serpent. John's combination of using the past tense verb 'lifted up' with the direct object noun 'the serpent' appears to be original to Jesus, or John, as the case may be.

John, however, achieves an association of rich and evocative intertextual connections. One such intertextual connection is associating Numbers 21:4 – 9 with Isaiah, not least the Song of the Suffering Servant (Isa.52:13 – 53:12). In the Song, LXX Isaiah uses the verb ὑψόω:

Ἴδου συνήσει ὁ παῖς μου καὶ ὑψωθήσεται καὶ δοξασθήσεται καὶ μετεωρισθήσεται σφόδρα
Behold, my servant shall understand, and be exalted, and glorified exceedingly (Isa.52:13)

In the context of Isaiah's prophecy, the phrase 'high and exalted' occurs with reference to God (2:17; 6:1; 33:5, 10; 57:15) and here uniquely with the Servant (52:13). Negatively, God accuses human beings of pride and idolatry using the phrase 'proud and lofty...lifted up' (2:12, 13, 14; 10:33). So the phrase is a significant indication of the thematic unity of Isaiah's prophecy. Also, the phrase strikingly joins God and the Servant in terms of stature, position, and perhaps even identity. God guards that exaltation jealously. He says, 'the LORD alone will be exalted in that day' (Isa.2:17). Given Isaiah's use of terms, it must have surprised Jesus' contemporaries that he used this phrase for himself, and also that he would combine it with the image of the bronze serpent.

That John intends to sustain an engagement and connection between Isaiah, the bronze serpent, and Jesus' death is seen in the two other occasions where ὑψόω is used.

Ὅταν ὑψώσητε τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τότε γνώσεσθε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι
When you shall have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am (Jn.8:28)

Several things are noteworthy about this occasion. First, Jesus calls himself ‘the Son of Man’ here as in Jn.3:14. The semantic connection to the earlier Johannine text, therefore, is strong and it will continue in John 12:32 – 34, the third and final occasion where ὑψώω is used. Second, Jesus indicates that when he is crucified by his opponents, they will ‘know’ – or at least, more knowledge will be available to them – something more about Jesus himself. Third, Jesus uses both the Isaianic marker ὑψώσητε in conjunction with the covenantal name of God, ἐγώ εἰμι. That is, he happily jumbles the role of the Suffering Servant with the identity of the God of Israel, using both the key Isaianic term (‘lifted up/exalted’) and the larger thematic pattern from Isaiah where the Servant and God share that experience. This, despite God saying in Isaiah that He will share it with no others. Fourth, as in John 3:14 – 15, Jesus indicates that the earthly vertical movement of being raised up on the cross is an exaltation. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he experienced a heavenly vertical movement of exaltation, as in Luke-Acts. That movement corresponds to Jesus’ enthronement to his heavenly throne. But as Richard Bauckham notes, Jesus’ death in John’s Gospel is itself his exaltation and enthronement.¹ It is an exaltation laced with irony but simultaneously transfigured with profound meaning. As we shall see, the cross is where his Adamic humanity, Davidic kingship, and identification with the God of Israel are all manifested. Literarily, this will be a remarkable convergence of themes developed in John’s Gospel.

The third occasion where John uses ὑψώω is in John 12, a chapter thick with discussion about the meaning of Jesus’ death. Mary anoints Jesus for burial (12:1 – 8). Jesus enters Jerusalem. In a statement with more meaning than they know, the Pharisees say, ‘Look, the world has gone after him’ (12:12 – 19). Even ‘some Greeks’ wish to see Jesus, at which Jesus says, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ and that a grain that falls to the earth and dies bears much fruit (12:20 – 26). Jesus is emotionally troubled by his impending death (12:27). He receives a word from his Father, who promises to glorify His name through Jesus’ suffering (12:28). Jesus and the people overhearing the word discuss its meaning, and Jesus uses what would later be called a christus victor motif, saying, ‘Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out’ (12:31).

κἀγὼ ἐὰν ὑψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς, πάντας ἑλκύσω πρὸς ἑμαυτόν.
And I, if lifted up from the earth, all men I will draw to myself. (Jn.12:32)

πῶς λέγεις σὺ ὅτι δεῖ ὑψωθῆναι τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου
How do you say that it is necessary for the Son of man to be lifted up? (Jn.12:34)

In John 12:33, John editorializes Jesus’ comment and usage of ὑψώω. Compared with the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus in John notably never says that he will be ‘killed’ (e.g. Mt.16:21; 17:22 – 23; 21:37 – 39). Rather, Jesus uses this peculiar phrase: he will be ‘lifted up.’ John the narrator, however, explains, ‘But he was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which he was to die’ (Jn.12:33). This is consistent with John’s interpretation of Jesus’ crucifixion as his enthronement and exaltation. The people seem to presume that the phrase ‘lifted up’ means that the ‘Son of Man’ will be exalted to heaven in such a way that he will no longer be on earth (12:34). So they express confusion, and Jesus replies with a time-urgent call to walk in the light while there is still light (12:35 – 36).

John then interprets Jesus’ ministry and miraculous signs with a double quotation from Isaiah. Both quotations involve wonder that so much unbelief and resistance to God occur in Israel. John surfaces Isaiah’s Song of the Suffering Servant by quoting Isaiah 53:1 (12:38). He affirms that Jesus’ identification of himself with the bronze serpent in John 3:14 – 15 was a deliberate association of Numbers 21:4 – 9 with Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. He also affirms for the reader that Jesus’ trial, death, and resurrection is to be read with Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 in mind. Isaiah’s disappointment expressed the query, ‘Who has believed our report?’ is answered *and explained* by John by quoting God’s commissioning of Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 6:10 (12:39 – 41). Isaiah, John says, ‘saw his glory and he spoke of him.’ This refers, remarkably in John’s mind, to Jesus. John interprets Isaiah’s vision as a vision of the pre-incarnate Word of God. The divine figure who was ‘high and exalted,’ whose train of his robe filled the temple (Isa.6:1) is the same Servant who ‘will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted’ (Isa.52:13).

Moreover, John interprets the Song of the Suffering Servant in such a way that the Servant’s exaltation is manifested not *after* his suffering death, but *beginning with* it. Bauckham writes, ‘According to this way of reading the

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2015)

prophecy, it is not only at the end of this sequence that the Servant is exalted and glorified. The whole sequence is his exaltation and glorification.²

If such is the case, then John is inviting us to read the narrative of the cross with special attention to Isaiah’s Song of the Suffering Servant *as well as* the story of the bronze serpent *and* the story of the Passover Lamb-Exodus deliverance. Since the latter two stories are already placed in relation to each other by the Pentateuch itself, this is not unwarranted, nor is it entirely difficult.

The Bronze Serpent in the Pentateuch

I will now examine the incident of Moses holding up the bronze serpent (Num.21:4 – 9) in the book of Numbers and in the Pentateuch as a whole as a motif of atonement. John H. Sailhamer again makes very intriguing observations.³ He argues for a literary symmetry between Exodus 1 and Numbers 22:

- Israel is called a ‘mighty nation’ in Exodus 1:9 and Numbers 22:3 and 6.⁴ This refers to their sheer numbers, and it provoked fear in Pharaoh of Egypt and Balak of Moab, respectively.
- Both Gentile rulers tried to harm Israel in response, preventing Israel from leaving for the Promised Land (Ex.1:10) or finally entering the Promised Land (Num.22:6). So both Pharaoh and Balak/Balaam are powerful Gentile figures that initially oppose Israel and God’s purposes for the people.
- As Sailhamer notes, both Pharaoh and Balak made three attempts to counteract God’s blessing and decrease the population of Israel. Pharaoh appointed slave masters over the Israelites to enslave them (Ex.1:11 – 14); issued a command to all Hebrew midwives to kill all the male children (Ex.1:15 – 21), and then commanded every male child be thrown into the Nile (Ex.1:22). Balak made three attempts to curse Israel through the lips of the enigmatic Gentile prophet Balaam (Num.23:1 – 12; 23:13 -26; 23:27 – 24:9) but each attempt to enlist Balaam to speak a curse was reversed and turned to a blessing (Num.23:11 – 12: 23:25 – 26; 24:10 – 11).
- After Pharaoh’s third attempt, a deliverer (Moses) rose from Israel to deliver them (Ex.2ff.). After Balak/Balaam’s third attempt a prophecy is given of a deliverer (‘the star out of Jacob’) who will rise from Israel to deliver them from their enemies (Num.24:15 – 19), presumably like unto Moses but even greater, for this prophecy uses the same language Jacob did in his prophecy of the king who will come out of the tribe of Judah (Gen.49:8 – 12).
- Pharaoh was ‘hardened’ (Ex.7:14; 8:11, 28; 9:7; 10:1; 14:4) whereas Balak promised to ‘honor’ or ‘reward’ the seer Balaam (22:17, 37; 24:11). The words for ‘hardened’ and ‘honored-rewarded,’ interestingly enough, share the same Hebrew root word.

This literary placement is surely not accidental. There can be little doubt that the selection and arrangement of all this material is part of the author’s conscious intention. Sailhamer suggests that this should draw our attention to the narrative section of Exodus 16 – Numbers 21. That may very well be *part* of the author’s intention. But I believe that a greater case can be made for paralleling the two incidents so that the deliverance of the first generation of Israelites from Egypt in Exodus 1ff. is paralleled to the deliverance of the second generation of Israelites from the wilderness in Numbers 18ff.

There are repeated themes which carry over from Exodus 1 – 18 into Numbers 1 – 36. There is an expansion, or a doubling and sometimes tripling, from the pre-Sinai Exodus account to the post-Sinai Numbers account.

Comparison of Exodus 1 – 18 and Numbers 1 – 36:

Exodus 1 – 18	Numbers 1 – 36
Pharaoh counts Israel and forces them to build cities (Ex.1)	God counts Israel for them to inherit land and cities (Num.1 – 3, 26 – 36)
God appears in a burning bush to Moses (Ex.2)	God appears in the Tabernacle to Israel (Num.4 – 10)
Moses questions his own leadership (Ex.3 – 4)	Others question Moses’ leadership (Num.12, 16 – 17)

² Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, p.54

³ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.41 – 44

⁴ NASB translates this ‘mightier’ in Ex.1:9 and ‘numerous’ in Num.22:3 and ‘mighty’ in Num.22:6.

Pharaoh curses Israel (Ex.5 – 14)	Balaam blesses Israel (Num.22 – 24)
Plagues strike Egypt because of sin (Ex.7 – 14)	Plagues strike Israel because of sin (Num.11, 21, 25)
Miriam leads the congregation in worship (Ex.15)	Miriam sins, becomes leprous, and later dies (Num.12, 20)
Moses calls forth water from a rock (Ex.16)	Moses calls forth water from a rock, sins (Num.20)
God gives manna and quail to Israel (Ex.16)	God gives manna and quail to Israel – curse (Num.11)
Israel defeats Amalekites (Ex.17)	Israel defeats Canaanites, but complain and are struck by serpents and offered healing (Num.21)
Moses is the mediator between God and Israel	The priesthood of Aaron will be the mediators between God and Israel, in the sanctuary (Num.16 – 20)

Furthermore, the book of Numbers in its entirety is organized in a literary chiasm.

Chiastic Structure of Numbers 1 – 36

1. God numbers Israel for the camp and Tabernacle (Num.1 – 10); first generation
2. Plague breaks out due to complaining about not having meat (Num.11)
3. God defends Moses' leadership (Num.12)
 4. Spies see the land of Canaan but people grumble; only two have faith; Moses intercedes for Israel; Temple sacrifices and teaching are given, presumably as part of God's response of cleansing Israel (Num.13 – 15)
 5. Korah leads rebellion against Moses; God punishes it; reaffirms Aaron (Num.16 – 17)
 6. Aaron's sons must 'bear the guilt' for the sanctuary (Num.18)
 - 6'. Red heifer ashes and water to cleanse the people; sanctuary not enough (Num.19)
 - 5'. Miriam dies; Moses rebels against God; God punishes Moses (Moses not enough); Aaron dies (Num.20); this reflects a shift from the persons to the institution of the priesthood, to mediate
 - 4'. Israel defeats Canaanites; people complain; serpents strike Israel; Moses lifts bronze serpent on a pole to enact God's healing; Israel starts to possess land (Num.21)
- 3'. God defends Israel from Balaam's curse; hope for Messiah (Num.22 – 24)
- 2'. Plague breaks out due to worshiping Baal of Peor (Num.25)
- 1'. God numbers Israel for inheriting the land and cities of Canaan (Num.26 – 36); second generation

The symmetry of Numbers is worth a lengthy explanation in itself. I hope that my basic outline will suffice for this purpose. The parallels seem clear: the numbering of the camp at the beginning and the end (1 and 1'); the plagues after the first numbering and before the second (2 and 2'); the leadership questions (3 and 3'); the issue of despair and faithlessness upon seeing the Promised Land remedied by Moses' direct intercession parallels the later despair and faithlessness as they fight some Canaanites in the wilderness remedied by the bronze serpent (4 and 4'); the rebellions and deaths (5 and 5'). The turning point of the narrative of Numbers involves the establishment of priestly continuity through the sons of Aaron, and the unusual ceremony of the red heifer, which purified Israel from its contact with death.

This turning point meant that the role of priestly mediator shifts from the larger-than-life personalities of Moses and Aaron to the institutional priesthood. This is important because immediately afterwards, all of the first generation of Israel's larger-than-life leaders die: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses will soon follow (Num.20). By the end of Numbers, we find an accounting of the second generation of Israelites in the camp, compared to the first generation of Israelites in the camp. Only Caleb and Joshua will remain from the first generation to enter the Promised Land, with Moses' death to come quickly. Thus, I believe that the Passover-Exodus deliverance of the first generation of Israelites from Egypt is to be compared with the cleansing of the second generation of Israelites in the wilderness. In fact, the narrative suggests that in the wilderness, God is delivering the second generation of Israelites out from the sin, faithlessness, complaints, and despair of the first.

The Passover-Exodus and the bronze serpent are already connected via the literary skill and techniques of the Pentateuch. Both the red heifer and the bronze serpent recall the Passover Lamb and Exodus deliverance. God ordered the red heifer procedure to handle the deaths of the first generation of Israelites, given that God's holy presence in the Tabernacle made death a special complication and contaminating factor. The person who touched a dead body or grave or tent where someone died became impure for seven days (Num.19:11 – 16), just as Israel had to cleanse itself from leaven for seven days in Egypt. Hyssop was used in both ceremonies: Eleazar the priest was to burn hyssop with the red heifer to make an ash and water combination (Num.19:1 – 10), and apply the water using hyssop to cleanse a person who has touched a dead body (Num.19:17 – 19), just as the Israelite family was to

use hyssop to apply the blood of the lamb to the doorposts in Passover. One heifer was used for all affected people for simplicity's sake. The color red was probably used because of its connection with blood. Blood was associated with both the death of the uncleanness that was symbolically killed with the animal, and for the life of the animal released by its death, which then was available to cleanse the Israelites.

The bronze serpent also looks backward to the Passover-Exodus narrative by identifying an enemy. On Pharaoh's royal headdress was a serpent, and Moses' first miraculous sign involved the defeat of the Egyptian serpent which symbolically represented the forces preventing Israel from leaving for the Promised Land. This connection was surely meant to be a figurative expression of victory and a sign of God's victory over Pharaoh concerning the fate of Israel (Ex.4:1 – 5; 7:8 – 11). God would swallow up the power of the Pharaoh-serpent – albeit by participating somehow in the very likeness of the serpent, which is certainly curious. So also the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness represented a poison or venom that had infected the first generation of Israelites, despite the fact that God had delivered them from Egypt. The fact that this episode in Numbers comes right before Balaam's oracles of Israel's final deliverer (Num.22 – 24), symmetrically arrayed in my proposed chiasm to parallel Moses as Israel's first deliverer (Num.12), is also very important, as is the fact that it straddles the period when the first generation of Israelites are dying in the wilderness, beginning with Miriam and Aaron and soon, Moses (Num.20); the second generation of Israelites were readying themselves by faith in God to march into the land without their greatest heroes. Israel's hope and faith were being clarified. Israel, in effect, is being cleansed, renewed, and forgiven. Once again, the twin themes at the heart of the atonement – cleansing and forgiveness – are not to be separated, which penal substitution advocates inexplicably do. In fact, ontological priority is given to cleansing, and forgiveness follows.

The healing brought about by the bronze serpent (Num.21:4 – 9) is paralleled to the earlier intercession of Moses (Num.14:13 – 19), who has sinned and will soon no longer be with the people. Thus, both incidents involve atonement in principle, even though the word 'atonement' is not present in the narratives. In both cases, Israel complains and despairs of being in the wilderness. The provocations are similar:

'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?' (Num.14:2 – 3)

'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.' (Num.21:5)

However, the immediate contexts do differ with respect to some elements. In the former incident, the Israelite spies spied out the land and returned with news. The people, lacking the necessary faith, despair. In response, God delayed Israel's entrance into the Promised Land until the first generation of Israelites died in the wilderness. In the latter incident, however, the Israelites won a preliminary battle against the Canaanite king of Arad at Hormah, then complain about having to wander in the wilderness still longer. In response, God sent fiery serpents among the people to bite them; many died. The people confessed their sin to Moses and asked him to 'intercede' for them (Num.21:7). God then gave Moses the instruction to lift a bronze serpent on a pole so that people could look at it with faith in God and be healed. This parallelism is significant. In the earlier incident, Moses' words of intercession were enough to prevent God from wiping out the people of Israel and starting over with him. God accepted Moses' faith as a proxy for the lack of faith by all the rest of the people. But as the narrative looks forward towards the day when Moses will die and no longer be with the people, a different form of intercession appears. Thus in Numbers 21, God did not invite Moses to pray on the people's behalf. Instead, He used a peculiar method that required each individual to look for herself or himself at the bronze serpent. The importance of each person's faith was highlighted in the second episode. God was apparently sensitizing the second generation of Israelites to the importance of each person's personal conviction and faith. Moreover, God was also requiring the first generation of Israelites to have faith again, and cultivate faith in their children. Those who sinned had to undo the damage they had caused others, while living without the rewards of faithfulness but having hope that others would receive God's blessings. This would become a recurring pattern under the Sinai covenant, especially when Israel went into exile in its various forms.

Furthermore, the narrative draws the reader's attention back even further to the 'poison' of the most ancient serpent which tempted Eve and Adam and led them into rebellion against God (Gen.3:1 – 8), who drew the curtain of the original Garden Land against them. The threefold repetition of the literary motif of the serpent all the way back to the fall of Adam and Eve cannot be overlooked, for this reveals to us something about the nature of sin, the

corruption in human nature, and the ontological healing and cleansing – not merely a legal-penal forgiveness as a declaration over their heads – that God would need to bring about on behalf of humanity. The bite of a venomous snake does not kill instantly, but rather slowly, just as corrupting one’s own humanity does; to wit, Jesus identified the spiritual enemies as ‘snakes and scorpions,’ which emphasizes the poisonous, venomous danger these creatures pose (Lk.10:21).

In the Exodus deliverance from Egypt, Israel had been externally freed from the serpentine rule of Pharaoh, who wanted to prevent them from receiving God’s blessing of the Promised Land. But the episode in Numbers suggests that Israel had still not been truly freed from the internal serpentine poison of unbelief and faithlessness and personal resistance to God, which threatened to stop them from receiving God’s blessing of the Promised Land once again. The fact that the motif of the serpent is used in the deliverance of the first generation of Israelites from Egypt and also in the deliverance of the second generation of Israelites from crippling unbelief, is a commentary on something more deeply wrong with human nature, induced by the original serpent of old, who did not want humanity to live in the original Garden Land. That serpent’s power, lurking behind both moments, must be defeated, and, like the bronze serpent hung on a pole by a dying deliverer, must be hung on a pole by another deliverer. The serpent’s poisonous lie, which still dwells in human nature, must be undone and cleansed by that one, the one who will come like a star out of Jacob.

Therefore, the Pentateuch has already given significant meaning to the bronze serpent already, through its narrative placement and literary storytelling. John’s Gospel will evoke that meaning, and develop it further.

Isaiah’s Linkage of the Bronze Serpent and the Passover Lamb in the Suffering Servant

Before returning to John’s Gospel, I explore an intermediate step: how Isaiah is already reading the Pentateuch and making the association between the Passover Lamb and the bronze serpent (as well as the two goats of the Day of Atonement ritual) as he envisions the role of the Suffering Servant. Methodologically, I think it is *possible* to skip over this intermediate step and treat the Pentateuch and Isaiah as two complementary but unrelated sources behind the narrative of John’s Gospel. Possible, but not *desirable*. In fairness to Isaiah as a theologian, I think it is worth offering this suggestion.

Isaiah is informed by the Pentateuch. He knows the sin/guilt offering (Isa.53:10; Lev.4 – 5). He uses the concept of sin-bearing, which is a term used to describe the role of the scapegoat (Isa.53:11; Lev.16:22). According to 2 Kings 23, the Passover had not been celebrated since the times of the judges. This rather glaring oversight extended into the days of the kings, until Josiah’s day (2 Ki.23:22). But I presume that Isaiah was informed not only by the rites of the sacrificial system and any other Jewish practices, but by the text of the Pentateuch as well. Isaiah is not relying on the sacrificial system alone for imagery and meaning, nor is he pulling the sacrificial system apart from the larger narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

Isaiah’s vision of the reign of the messianic Servant from Zion (Isa.2:1 – 4) follows the latent pattern of creation. God created humanity in the Garden of Eden, at the origin point of the four rivers (Gen.2:10 – 14). Eden seems to be a mountain. Since rivers normally converge in nature, and not diverge, the fact that these four rivers diverge indicate either something supernatural, or elevation, or both. Ezekiel, too, confirms that Eden was a mountain (Ezk.28:13 – 14). Hence, Isaiah’s vision of the law going forth from Mount Zion is layered on top of that creational pattern.

The Pentateuch repeats that pattern of life spreading out from a mountain in the story of Noah. Very significantly, LXX Genesis reads:

‘And the water lifted up the ark and raised it up from the earth (ὕψωθη ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς).’ (Gen.7:18)

It seems fair to see the apostle John making a parallel between the ark and Jesus, not least because both the ark and Jesus save humanity and creation, and are described in these terms. However, quotations from prior biblical material like this are often cumulative, as it is in this case. By analogy, in American history, the phrase ‘all men are created equal’ was uttered at very decisive moments by the framers of the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each of those historical moments must be respected and analyzed on their own moments; clearly they cannot simply be collapsed into one another. Yet the phrase itself comes to have powerful significance

and subtle resonance because of the similarities between those historical events, as well as their differences. Something very similar happens in the biblical canon as it unfolds literarily.

Simply put, there is not a singular event of God preserving and renewing life from a focal point or location; there are multiple events, forming patterns. Already with Noah's flood, God forms a pattern corresponding to the original creation.

- God judged the world with flood-water just as God brought the earth out of water in the original creation (Gen.1:9 – 13).
- The wind (*ruach*) blew over the waters, causing them to recede (Gen.8:1) just as the Spirit (*ruach*) hovered over the waters of the original creation (Gen.1:2).
- The man Noah was placed on a mountain as the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat (Gen.8:4), just as first man, Adam, was placed near a mountain, Eden.
- God blessed Noah and his family to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen.9:7), which was the creational blessing He pronounced originally (Gen.1:28).
- Noah had three sons (Gen.6:9ff.), and the narrator of Genesis 2:4 – 4:26 focuses on three sons of Adam, even though there is also an acknowledgement of many other 'sons and daughters' in Genesis 5:4, because the narrator is heightening the similarity between Noah and Adam.
- Noah planted and tended a vineyard-garden (Gen.9:20) just as Adam had a garden to tend (Gen.2:8).

So when we read that the water lifted up the ark and raised it up from the earth (ὕψωθη ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς) (Gen.7:18) after the ark drew life into itself, we can legitimately connect this incident to Jesus interpreting himself being lifted up and raised up from the earth (ὕψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς) to draw all people to himself (Jn.12:32). The ark being lifted up to a mountain foreshadows Jesus being lifted up on the cross. But the ark is not the only such event. There is not simply a one-to-one relationship between the ark and Jesus in that sense.

The Pentateuch's vision of the jubilee year – connected to the Day of Atonement (Lev.25) and all the annual sacrifices (Lev.1 – 10; 16) – is an announcement heralded by trumpets which issues forth from the sanctuary, restoring Israel to the garden land. This is another data point in the pattern. The Pentateuch already provided to Israel an announcement of life that restores God's people to God's good land. Once the sanctuary comes to rest on Mount Zion in the form of Solomon's temple, and becomes associated with the king of Israel (1 Ki.8), the biblical narrative makes the conceptual link from Zion back to Eden. Zion is a partial renewal of, or a limited variation on, Eden. Isaiah's understanding of a proclamation issuing forth from Zion and the reciprocal movement of the nations streaming to Zion (Isa.2:1 – 4; 52:1 – 10; 62:1 – 12; etc.) is informed by this pattern.

I think it is additionally likely that Isaiah already understood the link between the Passover Lamb and the bronze serpent in the Pentateuch, something which John makes explicit. Isaiah 40 – 55 portrays God's restoration of Israel as a 'new Exodus,' out from the authority of foreign powers. It fits the Exodus deliverance pattern to have a Passover Lamb. We find this in the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Mention of 'sheep' and 'a lamb' describing the Suffering Servant cannot be accidental in this context.

Isaiah makes the surprising move of associating the Suffering Servant with iniquity and imperfect in some indirect sense. Whereas the Passover Lamb was to be a lamb without spot or blemish (Ex.12:5), Isaiah says that the Servant 'bore our sicknesses' and 'carried our pains' (Isa.53:4). Matthew associated this Isaianic vision with Jesus' healing of physical diseases, and quotes Isaiah 53:4 in the context of Jesus' healing miracles (Mt.8:17). This was a thematic reference which Matthew would continue to develop. As I show below, John engages with this in a similar fashion through his narration of the cross and burial.

Adding to the significance of this link between the bronze serpent and Isaiah's Song of the Suffering Servant is the fact that the Song is chiasmatic:

Chiastic Outline of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

- A. Reigning: The Servant Reigns and Cleanses Others (52:13 – 15)
- B. Life: The Servant Suffered Without Praise (53:1 – 3)
- C. Purpose: The Servant Suffered to Heal Us (53:4 – 6)
- B'. Death: The Servant Suffered Without Guilt (53:7 – 9)
- A'. Reigning: The Servant Reigns and Gives Life to Others (53:10 – 12)

The main ideas of atonement, restoration, shalom, and salvation occur in the center point, Isaiah 53:4 – 6. The Suffering Servant is able to cleanse others and give life to them because he participated somehow in Israel's 'sickness' and 'pain.' At minimum, this refers to Israel's socio-political conditions of 'exile,' although the New Testament use of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 extends beyond that.

Where did Isaiah get any indication for developing his idea of the role of the Suffering Servant? As far as the Pentateuch is concerned as source material, the bronze serpent is the likely place where Isaiah might have suspected that God would use a figure or instrument which signified 'our sicknesses' and 'our pains.' The venom of the serpent, and its image as both the ancient enemy and the power of Pharaoh, would certainly invite that comparison.

Against my thesis, perhaps Isaiah drew on the sacrificial animals. The sin offerings, in particular, were another way to signify 'our sicknesses' and 'our pains.' Isaiah may have understood the kidney, liver, and intestinal fat as representing the toxins and waste of the sin offering animals. I find it curious that the burning of these organs alone was said to produce a pleasing aroma to God; nowhere is the death of the animals per se said to produce that effect on God, by contrast. My point here is simply to acknowledge that there was some symbolism besides the bronze serpent available to Isaiah by which he could understand how the otherwise covenantally righteous Servant might nevertheless *carry within himself* something that needed to be cut and burned away from him. Still, I think the bronze serpent is more strongly associated with 'sickness' and 'pain' on account of the snake venom which it physically healed, and the resistance towards God which it spiritually healed, in part.

John's Crucifixion Narrative and the Suffering Servant

Given John's interest in helping his readers perceive the Suffering Servant prophecy in the events of Jesus' death, one might be surprised that no explicit quotations from the Song occur in the narrative. John is content to quote Exodus 12:46 as a prophecy (Jn.19:36), although it is a typological connection to the Passover Lamb and not a predictive passage per se – an intertextual question that requires some further explanation. John quotes Psalm 22:16 and Zechariah 12:10 as predictive prophecies, claiming their fulfillment (Jn.19:24, 37 respectively). But if we are hunting for references to Isaiah, one may be tempted to conclude – respectfully or not – that the events of Jesus' death outstripped John's ability as a narrator. Where did Isaiah's prophecy go in John's narrative?

I believe Isaiah's Suffering Servant prophecy is *illustrated* by the literary skill of John. John portrays Jesus leaving a garden at the start of 18:1 – 20:31 as a literary unit. Had he named the garden 'Gethsemane' or the mountain 'the Mount of Olives' as the Synoptics do, we as readers would still be invited to compare it to the Garden of Eden, but omitting the name strengthens the literary comparison. Jesus is recapitulating God leaving the Garden of Eden to sojourn with humanity. He is participating in humanity's exile, wrapped in the 'flesh,' the Adamic humanity in which we were exiled. The physical geography of the 'ravine of the Kidron' (Jn.18:1) is probably significant to John's narration, because only a narrow path snakes its way from the Jerusalem gate to the garden of Gethsemane. For Judas to lead a large group of men – Roman and Jewish – with 'lanterns and torches and weapons' (Jn.18:3) at night means that a fiery serpent snaked its way towards Jesus with Satan at its head (Jn.13:27).

As Jesus goes through with his crucifixion and burial, John weaves the 'sickness' and 'pain' of people Jesus had encountered in his ministry (Jn.1:19 – 11:46) into the experience of Jesus himself. Jesus, throughout his crucifixion and burial narrative, evokes experiences which others have gone through – namely, those others who he healed, quenched, raised, etc.

Jesus' utterance, 'I am thirsty' (Jn.19:28) recalls the physical and spiritual thirst of the Samaritan woman before she encountered Jesus and believed in him (Jn.4:1 – 30). It also describes the implicit thirst (likely also both physical and spiritual) of the Jewish crowd when Jesus cried out, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" (Jn.7:37 – 38) In Jesus' case, however, there is literary and historical irony. Jesus was given, not water, but sour wine on a hyssop branch (Jn.19:29). The hyssop evokes the Passover rite when the Israelites marked the doorway with the blood of the Passover Lamb using a hyssop branch. Jesus' evocation reminds us of his statement, 'I am the door' (Jn.10:7, 9). The door image indicates that Jesus alone is our passageway from the realm of the enemy to the realm of God's garden land, reinforcing the notion that this passageway in human form must have made meaningful contact with both sides of that reality.

Jesus' linen wrappings for his burial (Jn.19:40; 20:5 – 7) recall the wrappings in which Lazarus was buried (Jn.11:43 – 44). The grave clothes, although they serve the helpful purpose of holding fragrances with the body to cover the stench of decay, represent a force that binds the body to death. It was poetically powerful that Jesus said of Lazarus, 'Unbind him, and let him go' (Jn.11:44). But when Jesus rose from the dead, he simply passed through the wrappings, even rolling up the face cloth neatly in a gesture of polite defiance towards death (Jn.20:6 – 7).

In Jesus' experience of cross and tomb, we hear resonances with the conditions other people faced in John's Gospel. The cross itself represented the extremis of Israel's political and military subjugation under Rome. As Jesus confronted this symbol, he demonstrated his identification with Israel's exile in its political dimension. When Jesus was crucified, and especially when he died, he had to depend on others to move him, including taking his body down from the cross (Jn.19:38 – 40). This reminds us not only of Lazarus' dead body, but the body of the invalid man by the pool of Bethesda, who needed the help of others to move (Jn.5:5 – 7). This demonstrated Jesus' identification with the invalid man and Lazarus. In addition, since Jesus was physically dead, his eyes were blind, of course. This reminds us of the blind man at the temple (Jn.9:1). Jesus' death can be said to demonstrate his identification with the man born blind. Also, Jesus' body was placed in the new – and therefore, empty – tomb of stone (Jn.19:41), and the stone reminds us of the stone water jars out of which Jesus called forth new but the best-quality wine (Jn.2:1 – 11), and the stone temple which Jesus replaced with his body, because from his body he manifested the glory of God in a fresh way (Jn.2:19 – 22). When Jesus' body was placed in the darkness of the tomb, near nightfall (Jn.20:1), we are reminded of the darkness of night during which Nicodemus came to Jesus (Jn.3:2). Jesus identified with his people who find themselves in darkness.

In John's Gospel, the conditions of people Jesus encountered serve to illustrate the spiritual condition of humanity in general – in exile from the original garden, wrestling with the flesh and sin, and subject to death. So Jesus' identification with humanity stated in John 1:14 as part of John's theological prologue, is re-emphasized in the cross-resurrection section of John 18:1 – 20:31. Jesus' incarnation into 'flesh' (σὰρξ), where 'flesh' denotes the problematic and tragic mode of human nature affected by the fall, is illustrated by how Jesus shares in 'our sickness' and 'our pain' at the very moment of his exaltation on the cross and at his burial. Jesus emerged from a garden (Jn.19:41; 20:15), which recalled Eden. He breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Jn.20:22), which recalled God breathing life into Adam (Gen.2:7). Themes of new creation and new humanity abound.

This is consistent with Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, especially in Richard Bauckham's reading. Jesus bore our sicknesses and carried our pains (Isa.53:4) not simply by evoking resonances with the plights of people he encountered earlier, but by becoming incarnate in 'flesh.' Moreover, in his resurrection, Jesus bestowed 'peace' on his disciples, as Isaiah spoke of *shalom* (Isa.53:5c), and his wounds were healed, as Isaiah spoke of healing (Isa.53:5d). These features of the story indicate that something remarkable has happened to Jesus' very human nature. On a deeper level, the mysterious quality of Jesus' resurrected humanity suggests that the wound of the fall has been healed, and that human nature is now, in the apostle Paul's terminology, at peace with God, and towards God (Rom.5:10; cf. 8:7).

The bronze serpent – because it is the first of Jesus' three statements about being lifted up, and because it occurs in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel – becomes an interpretive intertextual key to Jesus' crucifixion. The intertextual reference to Numbers 21 complements a literary-thematic approach to integrating John's Gospel itself. The past incident of the snake suggests that there is an internal problem in human beings that must be resolved, not a legal-judicial problem internal to God causing within Him a 'conflict of attributes,' and specifically an opposition between his holiness and his love. It is true, of course, that the poison came about because of snakes sent by God to bite the people for their sin (Num.21:4 – 9), so in that sense God's judgment and wrath against Israel was manifested. However, the snakes' venom merely made evident what Israel was already learning, that there was a deeper poison already in them because they shared in the humanity of a fallen Adam and Eve. Hence, even in the symbolism of the episode of Moses holding up the bronze serpent, we find that God's forgiveness of the people and His cleansing of them are not two separate chronological moments or even separable. They are joined.

Hence Jesus' statement in John 3:18 is fitting, that God's judgment is not only future, but already overlaps with the present: 'He who does not believe has been judged already.' The poison, or corruption, is already present in human beings. Thus, on the cross, Jesus condemned the sinful 'flesh' he had taken on. He killed it in himself so that he could rise as a new human being with a thoroughly God-soaked, God-united human nature, to share his Spirit with us. Jesus seems to parallel his being lifted up to the lifting up of the serpent in this way: Human beings are now the source of the real venom of sin, pictured in the form of the serpent of old. The venom is now part of our very being, though it was not originally. Since human beings are already under judgment, already dying from this poison, Jesus

had to become a source of the venom himself in human flesh, hang in the place of the guilty on the wooden cross, and thereby judge the poison at its source: in the corrupt 'flesh' of the human being.

The multiple levels of parallelism here are instructive. In Numbers, the people were already poisoned and were dying, so this episode from Numbers was not about a punishment looming in the future, but rather a problem that was already unfolding and affecting everyone. What was mounted on a pole was not a bronze image of an Israelite, but a bronze image of the source of the poison. In other words, the bronze serpent did not symbolize God's judgment on the sinful Israelite *per se* who complained and muttered against God and Moses in the wilderness; rather, it symbolized the poison *within* the Israelite. Incidentally, it can be conceptually connected to *circumcision*, the excising away of something unclean within the person, to cleanse the whole person. When Jesus used the bronze serpent as an image for himself on the cross, in one of the clearest statements of atonement in John's Gospel, he seemed to be saying that on the cross, his 'flesh,' the corrupted human nature which he shared with all other human beings, would be judged by God and expunged of its corruption. He was bearing the poison within his own body, then, as Israel's final deliverer.

If we can go a bit further to say that bronze was a metal associated with God's judgment by virtue of being the metal out of which altars were made, and if being hung on a wooden pole was already a symbol of God's judgment as well (which I think is reasonable, even though Dt.21:22 – 23 had not yet been written as such), or became that as a result of this episode, then God arranged for a bronze snake, as the source of venom, to be judged symbolically, and offered to the Israelites to heal them. Jesus carried out the judgment of the Father (Jn.5:22, 27), *with* the Father (16:32), upon the 'flesh' he bore.

Informed by Johannine theology, a theory of atonement and definition of salvation must stress the healing of human nature. It must capture the sense that Jesus is participating personally in the very thing that is causing the problem, to be the resolution to that problem.