WORD STUDY — THE FIERY SERPENT

Numbers 21:6: “And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people; and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died.”

Exodus 12:37 mentions that a mixed multitude, an unspecified number of non-Israelites were tagging along during the Exodus. They caused no end of frustration for Moses and because of their pagan background in Egypt they were not a very good influence upon the Israelites who worshipped Jehovah. Much of the belly aching and complaining originated with these mixed multitudes and influenced the Israelites and got them to complaining as well.

Check out how ridiculous the complaints were in verse 5: “there is no bread nor water and our souls loath this light bread.” They said they had bread, yet daily, every morning they witnessed a miracle of manna from heaven. Never once did God fail to give them bread. They just got tired of eating the same thing day after day. They sound almost as bad as—, well, me. I remember one time confiding to a minister friend of mine: “I’ve given everything to God and what happens, I lose everything and all I got in return was Jesus.” My friend clapped his hands and said: “Praise the Lord.” In the
meantime I turned red and stammered: “I didn’t mean – Uh, what I meant was...that is, well – you know...”

My problem was like that of the Israelites, I was listening to the mixed multitudes and letting their rich, full and prosperous lives influence me. Someone recently reminded me of an old song written by George Beverly Shea, “I’d Rather Have Jesus Than Anything.” Every so often I will pull out a People Magazine and look at the rich and famous and read the stories of the mixed multitudes and begin to envy their wealth and power and then I wonder which would I rather have? Wealth, power and fame, without Jesus or my present existence of wandering in the wilderness with only God’s provision and Jesus at my side.

I suspect some of these mixed multitudes I read about in People Magazine worship the same god as the mixed multitudes that followed the Israelites, the Egyptian god Apophasis. This was the god of death, darkness and an opponent of light. One had to show this god proper respect. They had to bow face down and most importantly they were not to look upon its countenance lest they would, allegedly, not experience its other role which was to be the patron of medicine. To gaze directly upon Apophasis would not only mean you would not get the benefit of a healing from Apophasis but you would also receive a fate worse than death, which was eternal darkness. Apophasis was often pictured as a serpent with a human head who had fire coming out of its mouth. Such images are found throughout the ancient world in many cultures. We even have the Medusa from Greek Mythology which is said to have evolved from the cult of Apophasis. According to the myth of Medusa, who had a human head with hair made of serpents, that if you were to gaze directly upon her you would turn to stone. The hero in The Iliad tells how Perseus chopped her head off and
used it as a weapon. Then he gave it to the goddess Athena to put on her shield. Interesting stuff, but back to our story.

With all this belly aching going on by the children of Israel, God figured it was time for them to decide who they were going to serve. Looking at the syntax of Numbers 21:6, we see that God sent poisonous snakes to bite the people and many Israelites died. The syntax would suggest that God sent the snakes to bite the people of the mixed multitude but there were also many Israelites who fell victim as well. However, when the people repented or “turned” back to God, God gave a provision for recovery. It is interesting that the word for the snake that Moses put on the staff is *nachash* which has a numerical value of 358. The word for *turn* as in repentance *shavano* also has numerical value of 358.

God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and then to instruct the people to, *gaze* upon it. Gasp! To the mixed multitudes and some Israelites to gaze upon a representation of the god Apophasis would not only mean no healing but a fate worse than dying from the snake bite and that would be to be sent to eternal darkness. But there were those who were not overly influenced by the mixed multitude, he would openly declare that the god Apophasis was a fraud and that to prove it they would gaze upon this representation of the god Apophasis and just the opposite would happen, the true God would heal them and lead them into light, not darkness. In verse 7 the Israelites had repented and the serpent they saw was a *nachash*, a symbol of their *repentance*. When they looked at that serpent they defied the Egyptian god Apophasis and looked to the God Jehovah who once again embraced them and healed them. As for the mix multitude and those who were overly influenced by them and feared to look upon the image of Apophasis and desecrate its image with their gaze for fear of
the consequences of looking upon this god who would condemn them to eternal darkness, well they suffered the consequences for their continued belief in a false god.

There one other thing. God told Moses to mount a seraph on the pole. The next verse says he mounted a nachash on the pole. Why two different words for the same thing? Both words can be rendered as a fiery serpent, so Moses did obey God, but note that the numerical value of nachash is the same as that for turn or repentance, the numerical value for seraph (fiery serpent) is 580 which is the same numerical value for tanasali, which means deliverer.

As I boldly gaze at the People Magazine and see the wealth and fame of the worshippers of Apophasis, I declare, that I will not bow down to that god, as such wealth and fame are only an illusion that last for a short time. My gaze goes beyond that to a reality, to my deliverer, my tanasali, Jesus Christ. I may lose everything related to Apophasis but in return I will get my deliverer – Jesus Christ.