



# Serpents

By George H.  
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**S**ERPENTS WERE NOT ABUNDANT IN the ancient Near East; however, the Old and New Testaments mention them frequently. The Hebrew Old Testament has 11 terms for serpents; the Greek New Testament has 4.<sup>1</sup> All of the terms except one, (*qippoz*, Isa. 34:15) describe serpents that were poisonous or were considered to be.<sup>2</sup> “Of the nearly twenty-five species that are certainly known to be found in Syria and Palestine, four are deadly poisonous, five are somewhat poisonous, and the rest are absolutely harmless.”<sup>3</sup> *Qippoz*, rendered in some Bible translations as “dart-snake,” “arrow snake,” or “tree snake” is probably better translated as a bird instead of a snake. The ESV and NIV translate the Hebrew word as “the owl”; the HCSB translates it as “the sand partridge.” The King James Version translates another Hebrew word *tannin* in Deuteronomy 32:33 as “dragon.” Most other translations render the word as “serpent.”

The Hebrew word *nachash*, which occurs 31 times in the Old Testament, is a “generic name for any serpent.”<sup>4</sup> Other Hebrew words for snakes include *saraph*, which comes from a term meaning “to burn” and refers to the fiery sting of a snakebite. And *zachal*, which means

**Right: Limestone kudurru or boundary marker from Susa, biblical Shushan, dated to the 12th cent. B.C. Circling the base is a horned serpent,**

**the emblem of the god Marduk. The top row of figures symbolizes the principal deities of the Kassite pantheon. The second ring**

**has a group of gods, musicians, and animals. The lack of detail in the carving would indicate work on the kudurru is incomplete.**





“crawling things,” refers to the serpent’s means of movement. *Ophis* is a generic Greek term for “serpent.”

### Speaking Literally

The Bible speaks of serpents both literally and figuratively. One of the many references to snakes in the Old Testament comes from Exodus 4 where God instructed Moses to throw his staff to the ground. When Moses obeyed, the staff became a snake. Then God told him to pick it up by its tail. When Moses did so, the snake once again became a staff. This was a real, live snake, not just an imaginary trick or illusion.

Matthew 7:10 makes reference to a literal snake. Jesus was talking about God giving His children good things. He compared God’s giving to man’s: “Or if he [a son] asks for a fish, will [his father] give him a snake?”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, when Paul was putting wood on a fire on the island of Malta, a snake bit him (Acts 28:1-5). These are two of the New Testament’s references to literal snakes.

### Speaking Figuratively

When used figuratively, the word “serpent” or “snake” usually refers to a negative or poisonous quality. Psalm 58:4 says, “They [the wicked] have venom like the venom of a snake, like the deaf cobra that stops up its ears.” Genesis 49:16-17 says, “Dan will judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. He will be a snake by the road, a viper beside the path, that bites the horses’ heels so that its rider falls backward.” Jeremiah 8:17 says, “Indeed, I am about to send snakes among you, poisonous vipers that cannot be charmed. They will bite you. This is the LORD’s declaration.”

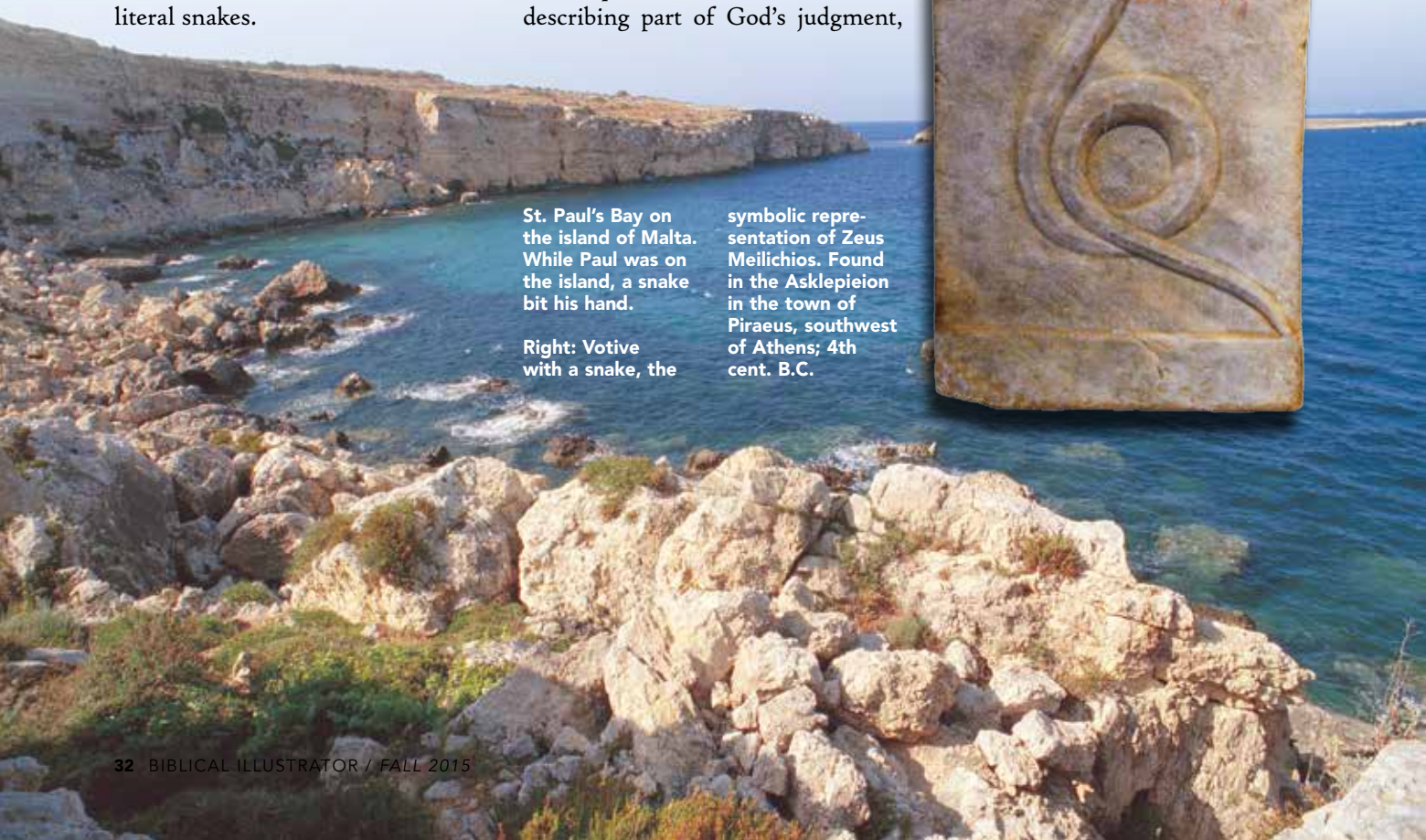
Figuratively, Scripture uses serpent imagery to describe violent men: “They make their tongues as sharp as a snake’s bite; viper’s venom is under their lips” (Ps. 140:3). The Book of Proverbs warns, “Those who linger over wine.... it gleams in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a snake and stings like a viper” (Prov. 23:30a,31b-32). And describing part of God’s judgment,

Jeremiah said, “Egypt will hiss like a slithering snake” (Jer. 46:22a).

The New Testament also contains figurative references to snakes. For instance, Jesus used a snake analogy when rebuking the scribes and Pharisees: “Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matt. 23:33).

### Charming Snakes

The Bible speaks of persons charming snakes. In describing the wicked, David said, “They have venom like the venom of a snake, like the deaf cobra that stops up its ears, that does not listen to the sound of the charmers who skillfully weave spells” (Ps. 58:4-6). Warning of the folly of ignoring wisdom, Ecclesiastes uses similar imagery:



St. Paul’s Bay on the island of Malta. While Paul was on the island, a snake bit his hand.

Right: Votive with a snake, the

symbolic representation of Zeus Meilichios. Found in the Asklepieion in the town of Piraeus, southwest of Athens; 4th cent. B.C.







**Left: Marble relief depicting Asclepius, the Greek god of healing and his daughter Hygieia, the goddess of health. Artists typically show Asclepius with his staff and a snake. Dated to the 5th cent. B.C.**

**Below: Depiction of a battle between a panther and snake. Inscription on the inside stems from King Rimusch of Kisch and Akkad (about 2280 B.C.) who brought this vessel as booty from the land of Barachschi (northwestern Persia).**



“If the snake bites before it is charmed, then there is no advantage for the charmer” (Eccl. 10:11). Jeremiah spoke of God judging His people because of their unrepentant attitude: “Indeed, I am about to send snakes among you, poisonous vipers that cannot be charmed. They will bite you. This is the LORD’s declaration” (Jer. 8:17).

The New Testament perhaps refers to taming or charming snakes. James 3:7-8 uses “reptile” in its translation: “Every sea creature, reptile, bird, or animal is tamed and has been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

### Harmless Snakes

While many snakes are poisonous and dangerous, Scripture points to a time when they will be harmless. Isaiah said this would occur during the reign of the Davidic King (Jesus): “An infant will play beside the cobra’s pit, and a toddler will put his hand into a snake’s den” (Isa. 11:8). Psalm 91:13 speaks of God protecting His children: “You

will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the young lion and the serpent.”

Ancient peoples also used serpents in painting and decorating. A pottery stand decorated with a snake was “found in a Canaanite temple at Beth Shan.”<sup>6</sup> In a wall painting, “a cat representing the god Re destroys the evil serpent Apophis and puts a curse on him.”<sup>7</sup> This illustration, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, is from the spell for getting rid of enemies.<sup>8</sup>

Second Kings 18:4 tells of Hezekiah destroying the items that had or could lead to idolatrous worship. One item he destroyed was the bronze snake Moses made in the wilderness centuries earlier. Rather than harm, this snake image had brought healing to those who had been bitten by poisonous snakes—which the Lord had

sent as a judgment because of the people’s impatience and complaining (Num. 21:4-9).

### Genesis to Revelation

Perhaps the most important reference to a serpent in Scripture is in Genesis. One day Satan came in the form of a serpent to tempt Eve in the garden of Eden. The serpent, “the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made,” asked Eve, “Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). The serpent convinced Eve that the tree was good for food. She ate the fruit and then gave some to Adam, who also ate. In their action, sin entered the world.

This serpent, though, was not to get the final word. God said to Satan, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (v. 15). Ever true to His word, “when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman” (Gal. 4:4, KJV). And in the end, Satan, that old serpent, ultimately will be “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). 🔥

1. Alfred Ely Day, “Serpent” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, gen. ed. James Orr, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 2736.

2. *Ibid.*, 2737.

3. Alfred Ely Day and Gregory D. Jordan, “Serpent” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 417.

4. “Serpent” in *Smith’s Bible Dictionary* [online; accessed 15 January 2015]. Available from the Internet: [www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/](http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/).

5. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

6. “Animals: Snake” in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, rev. ed. J. D. Douglas, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenny (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 61.

7. Day and Jordan, “Serpent,” 418.

8. *Ibid.*

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