

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 78 (77); Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

## For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son

John 3:13 [Jesus said to Nicodemus:] No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) This is a great feast, offering a rare opportunity outside of Lent and Holy Week to reflect on “the great events that gave us new life in Christ.” In particular, John’s Gospel presents us with an alternative to the standard western doctrine of redemption, “penal substitution.”

(ii) We need an alternative or alternatives because the traditional narrative no longer works, as history or as theology or as spirituality. Science has moved on and we think differently of human origins. Theology has moved on and we think differently of God. Spirituality has moved on and we are no longer content to work on the basis of guilt and punishment.

Although the Anselmian doctrine is embedded in our western tradition, art and prayer books (and probably also in our subconscious), it is worth remembering two things.

(a) As Anselm candidly admits, it is not based on Scripture—and he is right! Scripture does not teach penal substitution and the historical Jesus did not understand his own death as a punishment.

(b) The *mode* of redemption was never a



matter of church dispute and hence never defined by a church council.

(iii) Every New Testament text reflects an understanding of Jesus’s death and resurrection. However, three documents are outstanding in this regard: the Letter to the Hebrews, the Gospel of John and the Pauline corpus (i.e. the seven undisputed letters). The Fourth Gospel alone offers a rich palette of understandings: *healing and lifting up* (our reading), *glorification* (throughout, in the sense of the revelation of the “heart” of God), *Passover* (John 6 and 19), *new creation* (John 1, 19 and 20). Our reading establishes the important theme of the lifting up, an image taken from Moses, showing the radical *unity of cross and resurrection*. Within John 1-4, the core teaching of 3:16 is found within a reflection on new birth and baptism, that is, on “access” to salvation, mediated by the Nicodemus episode. The wider context for understanding this reading will be pursued below under NT Foreground.

(iv) Finally, a different set of notes on this reading was circulated for Trinity Sunday last and you may like to consult those notes as well.

### Thought for the day

People undergoing counselling and therapy sometimes have a block or memory, which is holding them back, often an earlier difficult experience of some kind. Something like that is happening in the Old Testament folk tale of the bronze serpents: the power of the serpents to cause harm is taken away once they are confronted straight in the eye, through the symbol of the bronze serpent. We may say the same of Jesus as he faced death for us. Being lifted up for our sake, he looked death in the eye and took away its power over us.

### Prayer

Loving God, in your beloved Son, lifted up for our sakes, you took away the power of sin and death. Help us to continue to live as people set free, so that we may come to the eternal life you hold out to us.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

#### *Abraham and his son*

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Genesis 22:15–18; cf. John 8:33, 37, 39–40, 52–53, 56–58)

#### *Jacob and the ladder*

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. (Genesis 28:10–

12; cf. direct citation [John 4:5, 12]; allusion [2:51; 3:13])

*Moses and the bronze serpent*

And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Numbers 21:8–9; cf. John 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19, 22–23; 8:5; 9:28–29)

**KIND OF WRITING**

A few things need to be said.

(i) The episode with Nicodemus, of which our reading is a part, is a quest story with a difference. Unlike the other quest stories typical of this Gospel, this is a failed or fractured quest.

(ii) The whole of chapter is a diptych or two-panel scene. The other half of the panel is made up of Baptist traditions. These two panels do parallel each other in a subtle manner.

<b>Introduction:</b> Jesus’ knowledge of the human heart (2:23-25)	
<b>Scene 1</b> Coming of Nicodemus	<b>Scene 2</b> Witness of John the Baptist
Setting (1-2)	Setting (23-25)
First major Amen saying: birth from above (3-10)	Dispute over Baptism (25-26)
Second major Amen Saying: Faith in the Son of Man (11-15) choice of light / darkness (16-21)	John the Baptist’s witness of the superiority of Jesus (27-30)
<b>Conclusion:</b> Faith in Jesus as the one from above (31-36)	

In both panels, the other character (Nicodemus / John) sort of vanishes and a monologue *about* Jesus *by* Jesus continues, reflecting Johannine tradition and vocabulary.

**NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND**

Chapter 3 (with Jesus at the centre of each panel) forms an important thematic bridge between John 1-2 and John 4 as follows:

*Theme:* rebirth (John the Baptist, Jesus’ own “baptism”), linked to the Samaritan

Woman by Jn 4:1-3

*Theme:* water (baptism, Cana, Jacob’s well)

*Theme:* Holy Spirit (baptism, woman at the well)

*Theme:* Bridegroom (Cana, woman at the well)

Thus, John 3 is a highly significant transition, making sure we remember earlier material when we hear the story of the woman at the well. Jesus surpasses the Baptist, as Messiah / bridegroom of the Jewish people, he takes God’s marriage covenant to a new spiritual level. As a result, he offers new birth form above, through water and the Holy Spirit. All of this is based on the great events of salvation, heralded by clear (!) allusion in our reading.

*Lifting up*

So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. (John 8:28)

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” (John 12:32–34)

*Saved*

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for *salvation* is from the Jews. (John 4:22) They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the *Saviour* of the world.” (John 4:42) I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be *saved*, and will come in and go out and find pasture. (John 10:9) I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to *save* the world. (John 12:47)

**ST PAUL**

Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God’s glory. Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And

hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1–5 NET)

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 13** The link is with Jacob’s ladder and portrays Jesus a mediator between God and humanity. Son of Man hints at the cross (John 1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31).

**Verses 14-15** A clear link with Moses, portraying the death of Jesus as healing us from death itself. Thus a therapeutic model of salvation is used. *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* (John 17:3)

**Verse 16** Unlike Isaac, the Son of God did actually die, not as a test or punishment but as a measure of God’s love.

**Verse 17** This gospel *does* speak of judgement but not on the basis of behaviour but on the basis of accepting or rejecting Jesus. This is salvation.

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

1. In John’s Gospel the *lifting up of Jesus* on the cross is the climax of the revelation of God’s love for us. How has the cross spoken to you of the love we have been shown in Jesus?

2. Jesus says the purpose of his life is that *everyone who believes in him may have eternal life*. In what ways has faith given you life and vitality?

3. Jesus said that he was sent to save and not to condemn. Remember what has helped you to see God as one who is fundamentally on your side in life, a God to be trusted and relied on rather than feared..

4. In presenting the purpose of his life as salvation rather than condemnation, Jesus tells us something about the purpose of every human life. It is to be life-giving, rather than destructive of life. Recall times your life was enriched by the words or actions of another. Remember also when you were able to do the same for another person.

**PRAYER**

Lifted up among us, O God, is Jesus the crucified: sign of your steadfast love and pledge of your will to save.

To those who look upon the cross with faith, grant healing of soul and life eternal. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole

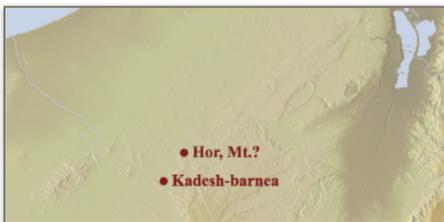
Num 21:4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This story—so important for understanding the Fourth Gospel—is read only on this feast and for Tuesday of Lent 5. It is a strange story and yet it has potential, identified and exploited by the fourth evangelist.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Within the book of Numbers, chapters 20 and 21 are made up a loose collections stories, centred around three general locations: Kadesh, Mount Hor and the Transjordan. It is not so clear what this cluster of stories is doing here. It might be good to compare these stories with Deut 1:46-3:17 and notice the different tone. Modern critics associate the story with the Yahwist (J) source.



## KIND OF WRITING

In these chapters, there is a series of “murmuring” stories such as Num 11:1-3 (fire; see below) and Num 20:2-13 (water). Not many details are provided and the stories is briskly told. There is a pattern in these stories of complaint followed by successful intercession by Moses.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the

people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned against them. (Numbers 11:1-3)

In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Abi daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. *He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made*, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. (2Kings 18:1-4)

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland *with poisonous snakes and scorpions*. (Deuteronomy 8:12-15)

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 78 (77) is a long and complex reflection on the wilderness experience. As such, it does portray the people as full of both rebellion and repentance, while God is likewise full of both anger and compassion.

## THE GOSPEL LINK

The fourth evangelist saw the potential of the story. The Israelites had to look death in the face in order to disarm it; in



a similar way, Jesus has faced death for us, looking it in the face, and has taken away its power. In the end the Gospel use of the serpent is therapeutic and even pharmaceutical (!).

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 4** For these directions, see the map. Impatience is not without foundation at this point!

**Verse 5** This time, the people complain again both God and Moses. It is characteristic of the murmuring stories that the time in Egypt is idealised and looked back to with nostalgia. They do have food (manna) but don’t like it anymore .

**Verse 6** Punishment is meted out by means of “burning” serpents. Notice this this word is translated above as “poisonous.” The root meaning of the Hebrew has something to do with fire or to burn. Curiously, the same word means a kind of serpent, one glowing or burning and can also mean seraph or the mythical winged beast at the heavenly court. The LXX translates as “serpents bringing death”; the Vulgate has *fiery serpents*; the Peshitta goes for *dangerous* and the Targum goes back to *burning*. Of course, bites do burn!

The serpent is symbolic of death (poison) and new life (shedding its skin; cf. Shakespeare’s “shuffle off this mortal coil”). The image is cross-cultural and found in the Middle East, ancient Egypt and even in Delphi. Both characteristics are evident in our episode. Snakes fit the wilderness setting. See Deuteronomy above.

**Verse 7** The moment of repentance comes with acknowledgement of sin. The intercession of Moses is invoked.

**Verse 8** Moses is instructed to make a bronze copy of a fiery serpent. The act of looking may have roots in the (later) Temple cult. The Temple contained a serpent called *Nehushtan*, destroyed by King Hezekiah (see above). There is some evidence that *Nehushtan* was originally a Jebusite fetish, thus of late Canaanite origin and indigenous, so to speak. The Yahwist is probably evoking familiar images and even cult objects which would have resonated with the first hearers.

**Verse 9** The effectiveness of the cure is demonstrated. For a further exploration, see *Thought for the Day* above.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The journey from complaint and rebellion to repentance can be replicated in our lives, of course.
2. Perhaps you have had the experience of having to face your “demons” in order to be set free from them? Often this is achieved in a safe context of accompaniment; but the hard task of looking can be done by you alone.

#### PRAYER

God of all healing, help us to know and to acknowledge whatever it is within that harms us. Help us to embrace your gift of wholeness that we may be set free and know life in abundance.

#### SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

##### First reading

*Numbers 21:4-9*

This strange, magical story has several layers. One layer is symbolic: snakes stand for life and death; another layer is therapeutic: when we face what harms us we diminish its hold over us. The imagery is taken up explicitly in the Gospel for the feast.

##### Second reading

*Philippians 2:6-11*

You may have wondered where did Paul get all his knowledge and understanding. Partly from already existing traditions. In our reading, he quotes at length an early Christian hymn celebrating Jesus' death and resurrection, the “great events that gave us new life in Christ.”

##### Gospel

*John 3:13-17*

In our reading, the notion of “lifting up” looks backwards and forwards. Backwards: to the story we had in the first

reading. Forwards, to Jesus' own lifting up in death and into resurrection, so that we might have life in him. By his facing death, we are healed of its power and even of the fear of death itself.

#### WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

##### Mon 15 Sep *Our Lady of Sorrows*

*1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33*

To understand this reading, it must be remembered that the Lord's Supper was still part of an ordinary meal. The problem in Corinth was that social habits separating the rich and the poor “kicked in.” Paul is horrified, because such distinctions empty the sacrament of its meaning.

##### Tue 16 Sep *Sts Cornelius and Cyprian 1*

*Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31*

Divisions and factions are “normal” in the Christian community; this does not mean we should accept them as normative! St Paul use the image of the body to illustrate the need for all the gifts, to make the community a whole.

##### Wed 17 Sep *St Robert Bellarmine*

*1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13*

How can we hear this great hymn to love in fresh way? Perhaps in reflecting afterward, you could put your own name in the list instead of “love” and see what happens. E.g Anne is always patient and kind; Joe is never jealous; Tim is never boastful or conceited and so on!

##### Thursday 18 September

*1 Corinthians 15:1-11*

Every Christian in Corinth believed Jesus was raised from the dead. Some of them, however, did not believe the dead would rise in Christ. Paul sets about persuading them, by first reminding them of the tradition they received, in which they stand.

##### Friday 19 September *St Januarius*

*1 Corinthians 15:12-20*

Paul's argument calls for careful listening. In effect he is saying, if you say there is not resurrection at all, be careful because that will include Jesus! The arguments here are all logical and powerful.

##### Saturday 20 September *Sts Andrew*

*Kim Tagegon, Paul Chong Hasang and their companions martyrs*

*1 Corinthians 15:12-20*

The reading is appropriate for the feast of martyrs. Paul affirms that Jesus is risen—so there has been at least one

resurrection. He goes on to tackle the block experienced by some Corinthians who cannot picture the transformed and resurrected body. By series of images, he shows that “body” can mean a wide variety of things. By a comparison with Adam, he shows how Jesus' resurrection is God's future for us all. Amen.

#### ART OF THE REDEMPTION

##### *The Mosaic of San Clemente*

One of the best-known representations of the Cross as the “Tree of Life” is the 12th century mosaic in the Basilica of San Clemente, Rome. Where the Cross penetrates the earth a luxuriant tree bursts forth and sends its branches far and wide, covering the entire expanse of the apse. In doing so it reaches and enfolds all categories of people: teachers and preachers, chaplains and farmers, ladies and hunters, nobles and shepherds. All of human life is brought into contact with the life that flows from the Cross (John 12:32).

And not only human life, for the Cross's work has a cosmic dimension and so it includes fish, birds and animals, fills the earth and the heavens, and reaches up to touch the “empyrean”, the point where, in medieval cosmologies, material and immaterial worlds met. There the Father's hand can be seen, carrying the laurel wreath with which the victor is to be crowned, Christ, our champion, who has been slain. Christ himself is a thin, desiccated, champion, his body squeezed dry, since “having loved to the end” (John 13:1), there is nothing left for him to give.

The cross is decorated with white doves, taken to represent the Apostles who will soon fly to all corners of the world carrying the message of Christ's victory (Psalm 19:4; Acts 1:8).

At the foot of the Cross four rivers flow out (cf Genesis 2:10) and a little deer drinks safely, seemingly unaware of the dead serpent lying nearby. The larger deer below is one of the most cherished details of this mosaic, the human being given access to the river of the water of life (Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 22:1-2), the deer that yearns for running streams (Psalm 42:1-3) quenches its thirst at the fountain of living water that is Christ (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1; John 4:10; 7:37-39; 19:33-37).

Taken from <http://godzdogz.op.org>.