

# Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan

## A Case Study for a Correlation between the History of Religion in the Monarchic Period and the History of the Formation of the Hebrew Bible<sup>1</sup>

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The historical evaluation and dating of biblical texts is a difficult business. The direct correlation between the history of the formation of the Hebrew Bible and the history of ancient Israel and its religion is hindered by the complex findings of a tradition of literature developed over centuries by authors largely unknown to us. This problem is especially present for those texts that deal with the early history of Israel. It is widely accepted that these texts were written during a later period, but their exact (historical) placement is difficult to achieve. There is, however, some evidence for the correlation between the history of ancient Israel and the history of literature, and it is one small part of such evidence that I discuss here, namely the evidence supporting the thesis that the tradition of Moses and the exodus first originated in the Northern Kingdom and was incorporated into the traditions cherished in Jerusalem only during the later part of the monarchic period. My test case is the story of Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan, and I will first turn to the story of the “serpent of bronze” in Num 21. This short narrative is one of the most influential texts of the Hebrew Bible. The bronze serpent crafted at the command of Yahweh, its closeness to non-Israelite custom, which was perceived as problematic from early on, and the alleged transgression of the Decalogue’s prohibition of images have always been thought-provoking for the wise and academically trained.<sup>2</sup> We will discover that

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a preliminary presentation in 2008 at the Collège de France, Paris, and in later guest lectures at the Universities of Tübingen and Tel Aviv.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of early Jewish and early Christian reception history, see H. MANESCHG, *Die Erzählung von der ehernen Schlange (Num 21,4–9) in der Auslegung der frühen jüdischen Literatur* (Europäische Hochschulschriften 23/157, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1981); J. FREY, “‘Wie Mose die Schlange in der Wüste erhöht hat . . .’: Zur früh-jüdischen Deutung der ehernen Schlange und ihrer christologischen Rezeption in Johannes 3,14f.,” in *Schriftauslegung im antiken Judentum und im Urchristentum* (ed. M. Hengel and H. Lühr; WUNT 73; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 153–205.

this was already true for the biblical authors themselves, which in turn offers us the rare opportunity to seek the historical reality underlying the text.

## I. Numbers 21:4–9: A Summary of the Previous Murmuring Stories

Numbers 21:4–9 relates how the people of Israel – toward the end of their wanderings in the wilderness – become impatient with the long journey. Weary of the meager food in the wilderness, they complain to God and Moses. In response to this complaint, Yahweh sends poisonous snakes, and their bites kill numerous Israelites. This triggers the remorse of the people, and they confess their sins and ask Moses to intercede on their behalf with Yahweh. As a result of this intercession, Yahweh orders Moses to make a statue of a bronze serpent and place it on a pole, so that everyone who has been bitten may look at it and live.

The passage is marked by a certain narrative skill.<sup>3</sup> The disobedience of the people is governed by the expression מוֹת, “die.” Just as the people complain about the exodus supposedly leading to their death in the wilderness (v. 5a), the result of Yahweh’s punishment is precisely the death of the people due to snakebite (v. 6b). Corresponding antithetically to this is the help Yahweh provides via the key word חִי, “live.” Looking at the snake raised up by Moses for healing will restore to health all those who have suffered a snakebite (v. 8). This is precisely what happens, as the concluding וַחִי, “live” (v. 9), indicates.

From the perspective of literary-critical and traditional-historical considerations, the carefully crafted passage is a unity:<sup>4</sup>

Verse 4a anchors the episode in the itinerary of the journey in the wilderness. More precisely, despite an interruption by Num 21:1–3, the passage is connected to the mention of Mount Hor in the account of the death of Aaron (Num 20:22–29; P) and presupposes the need to go around Edom mentioned just prior (Num 20:14–21; non-P). Edom does not play any role in the narrative, but that is to be expected. The death of Aaron is taken into account to the extent that the extensive murmuring of the Israelites, corresponding to the murmuring in Num

<sup>3</sup> See K. KOENEN, “Eheme Schlange und goldenes Kalb,” *ZAW* 111 (1999), 353–372, here 356–357.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of E. AURELIUS, *Der Fürbitter Israels: Eine Studie zum Mosebild im Alten Testament* (ConBOT 27; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), 146–153, is foundational for what follows. For a multilevel history of the text, see at least S. BEYERLE, “‘Medizin’ – Phänomene im Alten Israel und im antiken Judentum,” in *Gesundheit: Humanwissenschaftliche, historische und theologische Aspekte* (ed. S. Beyerle et al.; Theologie – Kultur – Hermeneutik 10; Leipzig: EVA, 2008), 45–78, who emphasizes, on the basis of textual-linguistic criteria, a more recent discourse of an original *narratio* in Num 21:4, 6, 7a**b**, 9, as well as H. SEEBASS, *Numeri 2. Teilband 10,11–22,1* (BK 4/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 316–317, who sees a later adaptation in Num 21:4a, 5a\*, 6a, 8.

20:5, is directed no longer against Aaron and Moses but against Yahweh and Moses. The following narrative in vv. 4b–9 connects with the itinerary insofar as the impatience of the people “on the way” presupposes everything else. “The way” can only mean “the way to the Red Sea” in v. 4a.<sup>5</sup>

The first actions are reported in 21:4b and are reminiscent of the structure of Num 11:1–3: the disobedience of the people (21:4b–5) is followed by the punishment of Yahweh (v. 6), which leads to the cry for help (v. 7a), the intercession by Moses (v. 7b), and finally Yahweh’s coming to their aid (vv. 8–9). Furthermore, Thomas Römer has shown that “Num 21:4–9 and 11:1–3 can be understood as a frame embracing the cycle of rebellion, with the refusal of conquest as its central point.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite agreement as far as the basic pattern and the structural function are concerned, there are some specifics that distinguish Num 21 from Num 11: Num 11 is a schematic and programmatic text of Deuteronomistic provenance.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Num 21 offers several characteristic narrative traits. First, the issue of murmuring is not only reported but also quoted extensively by stating the addressees. Second, Yahweh’s response to the intercession and his help are quite forcefully described. The end of the punishment is not simply relief from the disaster but also the provision of an antidote.

As such, Num 21 has a narrative interest that moves beyond the pattern in Num 11. Historically, interpreters have always and correctly identified this special interest as the making of the bronze snake.<sup>8</sup> More recently, scholars have

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<sup>5</sup> See AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 149; L. SCHMIDT, *Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri 10, 11–36, 13* (ATD 7/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 102; C. BERNER, “Die eherne Schlange: Zum literarischen Ursprung eines ‘mosaischen’ Artefakts,” *ZAW* 124 (2012), 341–355, here 344. There is no reason for a literary-critical division in v. 4a, as J.S. BADEN, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (FAT 68, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 134, argues. He attributes the beginning of v. 4a to P and the rest (ab\*) to E. The connection to Num 20:21, which according to Baden is the immediately preceding verse in E, is, however, not very convincing.

<sup>6</sup> T. RÖMER, “Egypt Nostalgia in Exodus 14–Numbers 21,” in *Torah and the Book of Numbers* (ed. C. Frevel et al.; FAT 2/62, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 66–86, here 69.

<sup>7</sup> Num 11 gives no reason for the dissatisfaction of the Israelites, which clearly marks this episode off from the other narratives of murmuring. In the foreground is the schema whose structure corresponds to the Deuteronomistic schema of the book of Judges (see Judg 3:7–11). Because Deut 9:22 lists Taberah and Kibroth-hatta'avah among the places where the Israelites angered Yahweh, the Deuteronomistic narrative in Num 11 must be older than the late Deuteronomistic extension in Deut 9. On the Deuteronomistic setting of Num 11:1–3, see AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 144–146. Pace BADEN, *J, E, and the Redaction* (see n. 5), 174, who attributes the episode to the Yahwist.

<sup>8</sup> H. GRESSMANN, *Mose und seine Zeit* (FRLANT 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 289–290; M. NOTH, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948), 133–134; AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 149–151; KOENEN, “Eherne Schlange” (see n. 2), 356; SEEBASS, *Numeri* (see n. 4), 319. BERNER, “Schlange” (see n. 5), 342, has a different

focused on the taxonomy of this object and its classification in the history of religion. According to prevailing opinion, Num 21 provides a “mytho-historical etiology”<sup>9</sup> of an apotropaic symbol in the form of a bronze serpent that was, according to 2 Kgs 18:4, destroyed by Hezekiah, king of Judah (ca. 725–697 BCE).

Before I turn to this thesis, I will look at the immediate context in order to explain briefly why it is too simplistic to reduce the intention of the narrative to the manufacture of a specific ritual object.

In several respects, Num 21:4–9 occupies a prominent position in the larger pentateuchal narrative. The previous chapter contains a murmuring story as well (Num 20:1–13<sup>10</sup>). This results in Yahweh accusing Moses and Aaron of a lack of trust in him, and they are consequently not allowed to enter the promised land (Num 20:12). The story of the bronze snake forms a counterpoint to this episode. Within the larger narrative frame, Num 21 is the next and also the last possibility for such a counterpoint. Based on a comparable case to Num 20,<sup>11</sup> the story of the bronze snake underlines Moses’s extraordinary closeness to God and his precise execution of the divine instructions (cf. 21:8 with 21:9).<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Num 21:4–9 is the last real wilderness narrative before Israel crosses into farming country.<sup>13</sup> The lament about having had to leave Egypt only to die in the desert (21:5a) thus appears to be somewhat out of place. This first impression, however, is mistaken. This is shown by the concretization of the complaint through the triple reproach of “no food” (Num 11:4–6), “no water”

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view: “The literary results unambiguously argue for the idea that the cultic worship of the image of the serpent articulated in II Kings 18,4b was developed only later on the foundation of the text in Numbers.” The main argument for this thesis is the note “Moses had made” in 2 Kgs 18:4b, which Berner classifies as a literal quote from Num 21:4–9. That this note refers to Num 21:4–9 on the level of the present shape of the Enneateuch is beyond dispute. That the note had to have this reference from the beginning is a methodologically problematic limitation of the context and the body of knowledge of the texts and traditions in the Bible in its final canonical shape. Thus, the common formulation in 2 Kgs 18:4b (עשה) certainly does not need any examples. As an allusion to the Mosaic origin (known by the tradents and intended readers) of the artifact destroyed by Hezekiah, it can be understood without this textual reference. According to Berner, 2 Kgs 18:4b derives from a late (post-Chronicles) redactor who retold the story of the bronze snake in Num 21:4–9 on the basis of Exod 32 and Deut 9.

<sup>9</sup> R. SCHMITT, *Magie im Alten Testament* (AOAT 313; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2004), 193.

<sup>10</sup> On Num 20:1–13, see RÖMER, “Egypt Nostalgia in Exodus 14–Numbers 21” (see n. 6), 79–81. He takes the episode to be a post-Priestly narrative.

<sup>11</sup> The complaint directed at Yahweh and Moses in Num 21:5 unmistakably continues the complaint against Moses and Aaron in Num 20:4–5: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water” (Num 21:5); “Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us [. . .] to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt [. . .] and there is no water to drink.” (Num 20:4–5).

<sup>12</sup> See SEEBASS, *Numeri* (see n. 4), 314.

<sup>13</sup> Deut 2:14 marks the end of the wandering in the wilderness with the crossing of the Zered mentioned in the itinerary in Num 21:12.

(Exod 15:24; Num 20:5), and “putrid bread” (Exod 16:3). This tripartite lament is more than a general expression of “the dissatisfaction of the people with their austere life in the wilderness.”<sup>14</sup> It is a summary of the previous murmuring stories, each of which mentions a single plight.<sup>15</sup> It is correct, therefore, to join Erik Aurelius in speaking of a *schriftgelehrtes Murren* (“scribal murmuring”).<sup>16</sup>

This “scribal murmuring” places the narrative of the bronze snake in a nexus of references with the three crucial episodes of the wilderness wanderings: the announcement of the exodus in Exod 3, the beginning of the period in the wilderness in Exod 14, and the departure after the stay at Sinai in Num 11. The first announcement, i.e., that Moses will lead the people of Israel from Egypt to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8), conflicts with the people’s reproach that they have been led into the wilderness to die. This fundamental reproach is expressed at the beginning of the wilderness period and again here (Exod 14:11; Num 21:5a).<sup>17</sup> Since Yahweh responds first to the complaint that there is no food in the wilderness by sending them bread from heaven (Exod 16:4), the people’s complaint now is that there is no bread or water but only this miserable food (Num 21:5b).<sup>18</sup> The complaint that there is nothing to drink

<sup>14</sup> M. NOTH, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1968), 157; German original, *Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri* (ATD 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 137.

<sup>15</sup> See G. W. COATS, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 120; AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 147, and finally RÖMER, “Egypt Nostalgia in Exodus 14–Numbers 21” (see n. 6), 82, who refers to Deut 34:10–12 as an analogy.

<sup>16</sup> AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 147.

<sup>17</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch and very good manuscripts of the LXX read ונתאצור or ἐξήγαγες ἡμᾶς, “What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?” The singular reading, which is possible here because of the defective writing of the consonantal text, is also confirmed by the Peshitta. In this case, the complaint of the people is not directed against God and Moses but only against Moses, as in Exod 14:11. The remote connection to Exod 14:11 (למדת במדבר) and the comparatively mild punishment perhaps actually suggested the singular reading. Perhaps this also explains the choice of the verb ἐξάγω/אצ׳ instead of ἀναβιβάζω/עלה. From v. 7 on, a pluralist reading is suggested. In any case, its affinity with Num 20:5 and the other examples of the sarcastic question about the spirit and purpose of the leading out or coming up of the people of Israel from Egypt is undeniable; cf. Exod 14:11–12; 16:3; 17:3; Num 11:18–20; 14:2–4; 16:13. For the motif of “nostalgia for Egypt,” see RÖMER, “Egypt Nostalgia in Exodus 14–Numbers 21” (see n. 6), 70–72.

<sup>18</sup> The translation of לחם הקלקל is difficult. Generally speaking, the term הקלקל is thought to derive from קל, קלל, or קלה II. In this case, one could translate it as “miserable food.” Connecting קלקל with the Akkadian *qulqullīanu* (HAL II 1034) is also common. In the case of *qulqullīanu*, it concerns a cassia species, more precisely the *cassia alexandrina* (formerly: *cassia senna*) from the subfamily of the *caesalpinioideae* (like the St. John’s bread) (AHw 927a), which has a laxative effect. But this derivation does not actually take us further, and the connection with the manna-tamarisk tree is questionable, especially because it is quite improbable that the people in the wilderness or the biblical authors would have come up with

recalls the first case of murmuring, immediately after the beginning of the actual wandering in the wilderness, following the miracle of the Red Sea (see Exod 15:22–24). Structurally, Num 21:4–9 clearly recalls the murmuring of the people immediately after the departure from Sinai in Num 11:1–3, except that the fundamental aspect of the murmuring is now presented not through a general formulation but through a comprehensive listing of their complaints.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the complaint is directed against Moses and Yahweh. Because this configuration is presented elsewhere only at the end of the story of the miracle at the sea, it is probably a specific cross-reference that demonstrates the frailness of the assertion in Exod 14:31b: “the people [. . .] put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”<sup>20</sup> Since the “success” of the exodus thus threatens to be called fundamentally into question shortly before the end of the wandering in the wilderness, the situation is saved only through the people’s confession of sin (cf. Judg 10:6–16<sup>21</sup>). Because the confession of sin has no parallel in the previous instances of murmuring, its significance for the people’s relationship to God is deliberately emphasized.<sup>22</sup>

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such a protorationalist explanation of the miracle of the manna. Worthy of consideration is the proposal of R. ACHENBACH, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (BZABR 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 348, with n. 50. For קלקל he considers a derivation from קלה I, “to roast,” and refers to the Akkadian *qalū*, “roasted,” and *qalītu*, “roasted grain” (AHW 895b, 894a), and the Hebrew קלי (Lev 23:4, etc.). In connection with the note on the unleavened bread in Josh 5:11, there was a clear connection with the unleavened bread of the exodus. One can perhaps connect deriving the word from קל, קלל, or קלה II on the one hand and the etymological closeness to קלי on the other in such a way that it concerns a disparaging wordplay with the food eaten on the night of the exodus. In the context, mentioning the exodus and the echo of the questions of its spirit and purpose, this is even probable. In any case, the polemical undertone, which is also underlined by the tautological self-contradiction of this complaint, is clear: “Nothing to eat and drink except for this miserable food.” For a different view, see BERNER, “Schlange” (see n. 5), 346–347. He sees in the wording of Num 21:6 a “compressed” reproduction of the complaint about the manna in Num 11:6.

<sup>19</sup> See AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 146–147; ACHENBACH, *Die Vollendung der Tora* (see n. 18), 347.

<sup>20</sup> See NOTH, *Das vierte Buch Mose* (see n. 14), 138; AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 147; E. BLUM, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 124; ROMER, “Egypt Nostalgia in Exodus 14—Numbers 21” (see n. 6), 82.

<sup>21</sup> On the connection between Judg 10:6–16 and Num 21:4–9, see AURELIUS, *Fürbitter* (see n. 4), 148.

<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, we should not go so far as to claim that after the disobedience of the people the bronze snake is used for a test of faith, according to which those who believe the signs Yahweh gives through Moses and listen to him will live. There is nothing here to indicate a test of faith, especially since the alternative – some did not look on the snake and died – is not reported. In any case, one may wonder, in accordance with the complaint directed at Moses (and Yahweh), if this also concerns the question of the accreditation of Moses (cf. Exod 4:1–5 and 7:15) – after all, Moses “made” a snake in both cases.

The narrative of the bronze snake at the end of the wilderness period thus summarizes the fundamental problem of this period. Furthermore, it displays the tension in the figure of Moses as torn between Yahweh's gracious attention and deliverance on the one hand and the disobedience of the people on the other. All this is more than a minor point – regardless of the dominance of the snake motif, to which I will now turn my attention.

## II. The Destruction of the Nehushtan within the Context of Hezekiah's Reform (2 Kgs 18:4)

As mentioned above, the passage in Num 21 is often characterized as an etiology for an apotropaic symbol in the form of a snake that was subsequently destroyed as part of the cultic reforms of Hezekiah. The passage in question states:

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. (2 Kgs 18:4)

The verse follows immediately after the opening note on Hezekiah's reign and justifies the very positive evaluation of his piety. The triad of cultic items removed by Hezekiah – high places, pillars, and sacred pole – belongs to the classic repertoire of Deuteronomistic texts. Only in relation to the bronze snake does the text seem to deviate: the mention of the snake cannot be attributed to Deuteronomistic formulas. Nadav Na'aman, however, has shown that this argument is not without problems, as a look into programmatic texts such as Deut 7:5 shows:<sup>23</sup>

But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire.

If we keep in mind that altars were the central objects of cultic places, Deut 7:5 and 2 Kgs 18:4 correspond to each other regarding the order of the cultic objects perceived as problematic by the Deuteronomists. In 2 Kgs 18:4, then, the bronze snake occupies the position of the idols listed in Deut 7:5. The snake seems to stand *pars pro toto* for the idols. This impression is intensified by the mention of offerings (קטר in 2 Kgs 18:4) made to the bronze snake. In Deuteronomistic literature the term קטר (*piel*) has a predominantly negative connotation, generally referring to the worship of "foreign gods" (cf. 2 Kgs 17:11<sup>24</sup>). The assessment of the dealings with the Nehushtan is clearly pejorative. In this respect, the

<sup>23</sup> N. NA'AMAN, "The Debated Historicity of Hezekiah's Reform," *ZAW* 107 (1995), 179–195, here 181–182.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this example is of particular interest because it concerns the cultic crimes of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom ("Israelites").

episode fits well with the undoubtedly Deuteronomistic context. Additionally, the *wəqatal* forms in 2 Kgs 18:4 deviate from the common narrative mode that uses the consecutive imperfect. According to the commonly held view, these *wəqatal* forms point to the postexilic period.<sup>25</sup> Also, the archaeological debate tends to assume that a major cultic reform by Hezekiah is the product of Deuteronomistic historiography.<sup>26</sup> If one adds the observations on content, philology, and archaeology it is *prima facie* likely that the note on the reform, including the mention of the Nehushtan, stems from a late Deuteronomistic editor.

Despite these observations, scholars – in my opinion correctly – tend to regard the note on the destruction of the Nehushtan as historically reliable. The argument for such an evaluation stems from *Tendenzkritik* (profile-based criticism): because of their reverence for the authority of Moses, the Deuteronomists

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<sup>25</sup> The *wəqatal* forms in 2 Kgs 18:4 (cf. 2 Kgs 23:4–20.) related to a single event in the past are a much-discussed problem with respect to their classification and meaning in terms of linguistic history. They are often viewed as a postexilic Aramaism. See M. WEIPPERT, “Die Petition eines Erntearbeiters aus *Məṣad Ḥāšavyāhū* und die Syntax althebräischer erzählender Prosa,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 449–466, here 453. This explanation, of course, presupposes the adoption of an entire verbal system from another language, which is improbable for that time even for the later writings of the Old Testament. Furthermore, it is hardly to be overlooked, that – in spite of the growing (Imperial) Aramaic influence on Hebrew – *wəqatal* forms are nothing more than exceptions within the (undisputed) later writings of the Old Testament, whereas *wayyiqtol* forms remain the common narrative tense. This state of affairs objects quite clearly to the assumption that later redactors would “accidentally” employ Aramaizing *wəqatal* forms and thus use two different syntactical constructions at the same time (*wayyiqtol* forms beside *wəqatal* forms) to express one and the same affair (narrative continuity in the past). This must be considered particularly when dealing with texts in which both forms exist alongside each other, such as the account of the reform in 2 Kgs 23:4–20. Therefore it becomes necessary to ask for the specific function of the *wəqatal* forms. See W. VON SODEN, “Gab es bereits im vorexilischen Hebräisch Aramaismen in der Bildung und der Verwendung von Verbalformen,” *ZAH* 4 (1991), 36–45; K. KOCH “Gefüge und Herkunft des Berichts über die Kultreformen des Königs Josia,” in *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und Biblische Theologie: Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuß zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. J. Hausmann and H.-J. Zobel; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 80–92; C. HARDMEIER, “König Joschija in der Klimax des DtrG (2Reg 22f.) und das vordtr Dokument einer Kultreform am Residenzort (23,4–15\*): Quellenkritik, Vorstufenrekonstruktion und Geschichtstheologie in 2Reg 22f.,” in *Erzählte Geschichte: Beiträge zur narrativen Kultur im alten Israel* (ed. R. Lux; Biblisch-theologische Studien 40; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 81–145, here 124–125, 138–139; M. PIETSCH, *Die Kultreform Joisias* (FAT 86; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 223–238. At this point it is not necessary to come back to the discussion about the coexistence of *wayyiqtol* forms and *wəqatal* forms in 2 Kgs 23:4–20. Concerning the account of actions in 2 Kgs 18:4, one can say that it simply juxtaposes different reform measures of the king in the form of a list without representing a specific course of events. Being syntactically “compliant to the rules,” this is expressed by the sequence of the perfect forms, which are connected by a *waw* (*perfectum copulativum*).

<sup>26</sup> N. NA'AMAN, “Historicity” (see n. 23), 179–195.

would hardly have attributed an item to him that later needed to be liquidated. Since the destruction of the high places, pillars, and sacred pole would have been enough to portray Hezekiah as a reformer, an additional profile at the expense of Moses appears unlikely in a Deuteronomistic context. In other words, “If the Deuteronomists themselves trace the obsolete idol back to Moses we undoubtedly have an older [. . .] tradition here.”<sup>27</sup> Since the Deuteronomists – in contrast to the Chronicler (2 Chr 31:1) – did not erase the note, one can argue that their criticism refers not to the origin of the idol but to its misuse as an object of veneration.<sup>28</sup>

The origin of the Deuteronomistic note on the reform in 2 Kgs 18:4 can therefore be reconstructed as follows: the memory of the destruction of the Nehushtan offered a welcome opportunity for the Deuteronomistic historiographers to paint Hezekiah as a precursor of Josiah and to construct him as a foil to his successor Manasseh, the archetypal villain (see 2 Kgs 21:3). In doing so, they attributed the triad of high places, pillars, and sacred pole to a single act and transformed it into a general cultic reform of a respectable extent. Most likely, they aligned the verbal forms of the older note to Deuteronomistic formulas, listing several elements of a cultic reform by King Hezekiah (cf. 2 Kgs 23:4–20).

Both older scholarly works and several modern contributions tend to date Num 21:4–9 early, and the text is attributed to an early Yahwist or Elohist. If this is so, the story is fairly simple: toward the end of the eighth century BCE, Hezekiah removed an old cultic object that is now seen as offensive and is traced back to Moses.

Unfortunately, things are no longer that simple or certain when it comes to the literary history of the Hebrew Bible. Since Num 21 alludes to the whole presentation of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness, a simple chronology based on an early date of Num 21 is impossible. Here it does not matter whether the passage, on the basis of the allusions to the context, belongs to a Deuteronomistic editorial layer of the Pentateuch or, more likely, is even more recent. If the note in 2 Kgs 18:4 is pre-Deuteronomistic, the tradition contained in it must be older than its alleged etiology in Num 21. Taking this into account, let me now investigate what associations the snake held for the author of Num 21:4–9.

### III. The Function of the Bronze Serpent according to Numbers 21:4–9

Snakes first appear in v. 6 of Num 21:4–9: as a response to the murmuring of the people, Yahweh sends poisonous snakes (הַנָּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרִפִּים). It is likely that

<sup>27</sup> H. SPIECKERMANN, *Juda und Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (FRLANT 129; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 173.

<sup>28</sup> See also BERNER, “Schlange” (see n. 5), 343, n. 7.

רָרָה is an attribute of נָחֶשׁ here (similarly Deut 8:15) and should be translated as “burning/poisonous.”<sup>29</sup> The snakes are introduced with the definite article, which I understand as the author’s way of referring to the common knowledge that poisonous snakes live in the desert and especially in the region, which is later called Wadi Nehushtan (Nahal Timna). In addition to Num 21, this fact is known to Deut 8:15; Isa 14:29; Isa 30:6; Herodotus, *Hist.* II.75–76; III.107–109; and Esarhaddon (fragment from the annals of a campaign against Magan and Meluha, 671 BCE).<sup>30</sup> A zoological determination based on these descriptions is, of course, impossible. What is important is that the creatures are רָרָה, “burning.”<sup>31</sup> The first mention of the bronze snake figure uses this characteristic term רָרָה.<sup>32</sup> Right from the beginning its function is stated: the figure serves to heal deadly snakebite.

Snake figures are well attested in the eastern Mediterranean throughout antiquity, mostly in the context of preventive measures against snakebite, a plague of snakes, or, less specifically, disaster in general. This use is attested by the various representations of snakes on door handles, vessels, brick capsules beneath door sills, bracelets, *kudurrus* (border stones), and, last but not least, seals. Apart from the rather numerous seal finds, primarily from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, with one or two stylized, upright *uraei* (cobras), the finds for southern

<sup>29</sup> See U. RÜTERSWORDEN, “רָרָה,” *TDOT* 14:218–228, here 223–228; German original, *ThWAT* 7:882–891, here 887–891, who distinguishes between the winged seraphim presented here (which do not necessarily need to be serpent-like) and the adjectival use here and in Deut 8:15, which certainly refers to snakes but not to winged ones. Because the verb רָרָה is transitive, the adjective is to be translated “scorching/burning.”

<sup>30</sup> For Herodotus and Esarhaddon, see R. ROLLINGER, “Herodot (II 75f, III 107–109), Asarhaddon, Jesaja und die fliegenden Schlangen Arabiens,” in *Ad Fontes! Festschrift für Gerhard Dobesch* (ed. H. Heftner and K. Tomaschitz; Vienna: Eigenverlag der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Archäologie, 2004), 927–946. For the reception of this tradition in Hellenistic literature, see R. ROLLINGER and M. LANG, “Die fliegenden Schlangen Arabiens: Transfer und Wandlung eines literarischen Motivs in der antiken Überlieferung – Ein Florilegium,” in *Eine ganz normale Inschrift – und ähnliches zum Geburtstag von Ekkehard Weber: Festschrift zum 30. April 2005* (ed. F. Beutler and W. Hameter; Althistorisch-Epigraphische Studien 5; Vienna: Eigenverlag der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Archäologie, 2005), 101–109. In Isa 14:29 it is somewhat different: from the root of a snake (נָחֶשׁ) springs a viper (צַפֵּעַ) and his/her fruit is a flying seraph (שֶׁרָף מְעוֹפֵף), which can be understood more as a general term.

<sup>31</sup> What comes to mind here are the Palestinian saw-scaled viper (*echis coloratus*), the horned desert viper (*cerastes cerastes*), the Persian horned viper (*pseudocerastes persicus fieldi*), the Egyptian desert cobra (*cerastes candidus*), the Palestinian viper (*vipera palaestinae*), the mole viper (*atractaspis engaddensis*), and the Saharan sand viper (*cerastes vipera*). See P. RIEDE, *Im Netz des Jägers: Studien zur Feindmetaphorik der Individualpsalmen* (WMANT 85; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 231–232.

<sup>32</sup> Here without the article because it has to do with a still-unknown object. רָרָה is probably used elliptically. The division of הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשְּׂרָפִים הַשֶּׁרָפִים in v. 6 into the arrangement in v. 8 (שֶׁרָף) and the explanation in v. 9 (נָחֶשׁ) is felicitous, whereby the indication of the finished product (נָחֶשׁ נָחֶשׁ) is aimed at 2 Kgs 18:4 (נָחֶשׁ הַנְּחָשֶׁת or נָחֶשֶׁת).

Syria in the Iron Age are somewhat scanty. But there are snake jewelry and decorations on vessels. Snake skulls found in homes in Ta'anakh are possibly connected with this goal of prevention as well.<sup>33</sup>

If all that failed and one was nevertheless bitten by a snake, snakes were also used for treatment. This is attested especially by the Egyptian incantation texts relating to snakes.<sup>34</sup> As far as ancient Israel is concerned, we have some indications of similar forms of ritual medicine and their specialists (cf. Ps 58; Isa 3:3; Qoh 10:11; Sir 12:18; and Avigad and Sass, no. 420).<sup>35</sup> In this magic-therapeutic context, the function of the ritual object is best explained as a substitute for the harmful and ominous powers of the snake. This is precisely the reason why Yahweh's naming of the figure in Num 21 refers to the harmful power of the snakes – a figure of the completely harmless Asia Minor dwarf racer, for instance, would never be able to heal the bite of a horned viper. Such ideas are evident in the so-called *namburbi* rituals from Assyria. As part of such a ritual, the harm, announced or already manifested by snakes, would be transferred from the affected person back to the snake. In a similar vein, 1 Sam 6 reports how the Philistines enlist the help of “five golden tumors and five golden mice” to get rid of a plague brought upon them by Yahweh. To understand such practices, it is important to note that, according to the view presented in the entire corpus of ancient Near Eastern apotropaic medicine, they did not have an automatic effect but depended on the will of the gods, given that evil was also brought by the gods. In the area of ritual, only the distinction between the effective powers on the one hand – snake, dog, mouse, etc. – and the corresponding substitutes on the other hand, along with the actual initiator – the personal gods of the people – made it possible to ward off evil.<sup>36</sup> Correspondingly, in Num 21 the magical therapeutic reality of the snake figure set up by Yahweh's command is linked back to Yahweh himself. Thus, it is clear that the snake figure is not a magical object that is healing in itself. Rather, it is Yahweh who is behind the effect, just as he is also behind the plague of snakes.<sup>37</sup>

It is striking that Num 21 reports neither an incantation nor a medical action, such as the application of some ointment or the administration of a potion. It would be conceivable that healing by looking at something is viewed as a posi-

<sup>33</sup> See SCHMITT, *Magie* (see n. 9), 198.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview, see B. SCHIPPER, “Schlangenbeschwörung in Ägypten und im Alten Testament,” in *Israel zwischen den Mächten: Festschrift für Stefan Timm zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. F. Hartenstein and M. Pietsch; AOAT 364; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 265–282.

<sup>35</sup> See BEYERLE, “Medizin” (see n. 4), 71–72; N. AVIGAD and B. SASS, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 177.

<sup>36</sup> See S. MAUL, *Zukunftsbewältigung: Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi)* (BaF 18; Mainz: von Zabern, 1994), 8, 10, 41, and passim.

<sup>37</sup> So also SCHMITT, *Magie* (see n. 9), 197, who rightly emphasizes that the Old Testament understanding of magic is not abstracted from its ancient Near Eastern context.

tive reversal of the “evil eye” or that as an amplification of the healing referred to elsewhere through mere touch<sup>38</sup> it could emphasize the power of Yahweh. But this explanation is not properly convincing because, given the materials for comparison and alleged everyday practice, an incantation would actually be expected. Instead, a simple glance at the apotropaic object appears to be enough. Healing through a gaze is attested for the Greco-Roman world of a later period but not – to my knowledge – for the ancient Near East.

The lack of an incantation or a medicinal act was noted quite early and explained theologically. Thus, the Wisdom of Solomon makes a theological virtue out of the necessity of an explanation and states that it was not looking at the snake that was raised up that brought about healing. Rather, the source of healing was the looking to God that was elicited prior to looking at the snake (Wis 16:5–12; v. 7: “For he who turned toward it was saved, not by what he saw but by you, the Savior of all”). Similarly, the targumim are forced to avoid every appearance of the automatic efficacy of the image and to stress the conversion called for by the direction of one’s gaze (Tg Ps.-J.: everyone remained alive “who looked at the bronze serpent and directed his heart to the name of the Word Yahweh” and who “raised his face to his Father in heaven”).<sup>39</sup>

It was recently proposed that Num 21 lacks an incantation because the text is directed against all forms of magic-therapeutic practice.<sup>40</sup> To bolster this claim of a decidedly antimagic stance in the Hebrew Bible, reference is made to the law regarding prophecy in Deut 18 and to the designation of Yahweh as physician in Exod 15. Such a view is rather problematic. First of all, the שִׁנְיָה in Deut 18:4 is – despite the Ugaritic parallels (see *mlhš* in KTU 1.100; 1.107) – not a snake charmer but simply a person who performs destructive magic, as is clear from the other use of the term in the Hebrew Bible (see שִׁנְיָה in Num 23:23) and from the context, which is focused on some form of mantic activity, most likely witchcraft, and not issues of healing. Second, neither Exod 15:26 nor any other text of the Hebrew Bible appears to contain any form of polemic against the medical profession (cf. 1 Kgs 20).

Thus, Exod 15:26 is “not a [. . .] clear hint of an ‘environment hostile to medicine’ in ancient Israel – roughly in the sense of focusing the medical professions already widely available elsewhere in the ancient Near East on Yahweh.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, the text emphasizes the healing effect of obedience to Yahweh in a specific situation – the exodus from Egypt. This can be seen in the fact that the

<sup>38</sup> For necklets and stones, see A. SCHUSTER-BRANDIS, *Steine als Schutz- und Heilmittel* (AOAT 46; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Note also m. Roš Haš. 3:8, in which Num 21:4–9 is combined with Exod 17:8–13.

<sup>40</sup> B. SCHIPPER, “Die ‘eherne Schlange’: Zur Religionsgeschichte und Theologie von Num 21,4–9,” *ZAW* 121 (2009), 369–387.

<sup>41</sup> BEYERLE, “Medizin” (see n. 4), 51. See also H. NIEHR, “JHWH als Arzt: Herkunft und Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gottesprädikation,” *BZ* 35 (1991), 3–17.

“diseases [. . .] brought upon the Egyptians” do not describe a view of disease typical for this region but are a narrative link to the plague narratives.<sup>42</sup>

Also, the oft-cited exhortation in Sir 38:9, “Pray to God for he is the one who heals,” is not evidence for a mood in ancient Israel opposing the medical profession. The quote is to be read in connection with the high praise of the doctor in Sir 38:1–8, which, in reference to Exod 15:26b, endorses the clarification that God nevertheless is the sole subject who performs the healing, and the doctor, despite the recognition people give him, is in the end nothing more than a tool. Sirach 38:9 emphasizes that God is the sole source and cause of healing, but the skill of the doctor may be given a place in this guiding principle within a creation theology.<sup>43</sup> The counterexample is King Asa in 2 Chr 16:12. But here as well it is merely going to see the doctor instead of trusting in Yahweh that is problematic (like the military alliance prior to that, which likewise does not explicitly prohibit political action).

In addition, we also find some magic-therapeutic texts without explicit recitation of incantations in neighboring cultures.<sup>44</sup> Especially interesting in this context are Egyptian texts from the realm of personal piety. These texts – in close analogy to Exod 15 – praise Amun-Re as physician and seem to neglect magic-therapeutic knowledge. In the same context, however, documents of medical-ritual contents were found – in some cases on the same piece of papyrus.<sup>45</sup> So it becomes clear that the literary intention of the sources has to be evaluated along with their material context.

Keeping this in mind, we must take seriously that we are dealing with a literary text when we try to explain the lack of a ritual in Num 21. The following remarks will help us understand the text’s intention:

1. After Moses’s single misdemeanor, Num 21:4–9 emphasizes his extraordinary closeness to Yahweh, likewise stressing that he follows Yahweh’s command in producing and erecting a snake down to the last detail.

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<sup>42</sup> See N. LOHFINK, “‘Ich bin Jahwe, dein Arzt’ (Ex 15,26): Gott, Gesellschaft und menschliche Gesundheit in der Theologie einer nachexilischen Pentateuchbearbeitung (Ex 15,25b.26),” in *‘Ich will euer Gott werden’: Beispiele biblischen Redens von Gott* (ed. N. Lohfink; SBS 100; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk 1981), 11–73, here 26.

<sup>43</sup> See L. SCHRADER, “Beruf, Arbeit und Muße als Sinnerfüllung bei Jesus Sirach,” in *Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira* (ed. R. Egger-Wenzel and I. Krammer; BZAW 270; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 117–149, here 140.

<sup>44</sup> See N. P. HEESSEL, “Aus einer neuassyrischen Tafel mit Rezepten gegen Schlangenbisse,” *TUAT* 5:153–154.

<sup>45</sup> Leiden I 350 (ll. 1–2): “Who liberates from doom, who chases away disease, a doctor who heals without medicine. Who opens the eyes and drives out blindness”; Chester-Beatty IV (ll. 179–180): “It is a cure for every eye, a true medicine, that works instantly.” See J. ASSMANN, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* (2nd ed.; OBO; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 427, 434.

2. The text identifies the period in the wilderness as an epoch during which Yahweh's devotion to his people is threatened because of the people's disobedience.
3. Within its current context, Num 21:4–9 is the reference text for the statement "the bronze serpent that Moses had made" in 2 Kgs 18:4.

Thus, we have arrived again at the etiology for the Nehushtan that Hezekiah destroyed. But we can state more precisely that the omission of the institution of a ritual and a note on what happened to the item during a later period transforms Num 21:4–9 into an etiology that decidedly wants to account for nothing but rather explains why something happened that should not have. In other words, in Num 21 an incriminating but obviously difficult-to-erase note regarding an idol of a serpent fashioned by Moses is defused. This is done by drawing a distinction between the original function of the Nehushtan during a specific situation and time, i.e., the end of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, and its misuse as an item of cultic devotion during a later period.

#### IV. The Identity of the Nehushtan in 2 Kings 18:4

The bronze snake in Num 21 is the result of scribal activity. But the question of the identity of the Nehushtan in 2 Kgs 18:4 remains. Let me offer some brief and rather speculative remarks. As far as Nehushtan's history-of-religion birth certificate is concerned, Egyptian snake symbolism of the first millennium BCE has currently supplanted the Canaanite-Phoenician symbol. Othmar Keel, in particular, has stressed the significance of Egyptian bronzes depicting erect cobras on papyrus flowers.<sup>46</sup> These bronzes sometimes have brackets for poles, so they can be described as snake standards. The bronzes are only 10–20 centimeters tall, and the snakes are only about 9.5 centimeters.<sup>47</sup> These standards were used in processions.<sup>48</sup> Their motifs are comparable to the Phoenician-Israelite metal bowl from Nimrud (ca. 750–700 BCE). This bowl depicts two winged *uraei* on a papyrus stalk flanking a scarab and surrounded by two sphinxes.<sup>49</sup> Keel assumes that Hezekiah's destruction of the Nehushtan has to be seen as an anti-Egyptian act. Polemicizing against the representation of Yahweh in the form of animals, opposition groups, which had fled from the Northern Kingdom to Jerusalem

<sup>46</sup> O. KEEL, *Die Geschichte Jerusalems und die Entstehung des Monotheismus* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 422–429.

<sup>47</sup> KEEL, *Die Geschichte* (see n. 46), 422, fig. 302–303; IDEM, "Das Land der Kanaanäer mit der Seele suchend," *TZ* 57 (2001), 245–261.

<sup>48</sup> M. PAGE-GASSER, *Götter bewohnten Ägypten: Bronzefiguren der Sammlungen "Bibel + Orient" der Universität Freiburg Schweiz* (OBO S02; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2001) 133–134.

<sup>49</sup> See KEEL, *Die Geschichte* (see n. 46), 427, fig. 300.

after 722 BCE, may have formed the sociopolitical background to this act. If that is so, Hezekiah would have destroyed such an Egyptian cultic item under pressure from prophetic circles and because he was disappointed that he did not receive Egyptian help when besieged by the Assyrians in 701 BCE.<sup>50</sup>

Keel's theory has been widely accepted. A closer look, however, reveals that the theory is more problematic than the iconographic material might suggest. The classification of the Nehushtan as a seraph on a pole rests only on Num 21 in combination with Isa 6, though we can ask if both texts are speaking of the same "thing" when they describe it as שֶׁרָפָד. Second Kings 18:4 neither states that the Nehushtan is a seraph nor says that it was mounted on a banner. Also, if one wants to maintain the Egyptian origin of the Nehushtan, the assumption of iconoclasm by the Jerusalemites disappointed in Egypt reads like a stopgap. After all, it remains ambiguous whether the Nehushtan was part of the old, established inventory of the temple in Jerusalem at all.

If we do not follow Keel's interpretation, the question of the religiohistorical origin of the Nehushtan remains open. Perhaps it is possible to connect it with the figure of Moses or, better, with the Moses tradition and with the exiles from the Northern Kingdom.<sup>51</sup> The reason for doing so may be found in the phrase בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל, who brought offerings to the Nehushtan. In the books of Kings, this term is initially used for the Israelites of the premonarchic period. But unless the term is related to a contemporary group, from 1 Kgs 12 onward it is used only for the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom. Additionally, Hezekiah's anti-Mosaic act would have been difficult to execute had Moses already been part of the salvation-historical inventory of Jerusalem, as is the case three generations later under Josiah. Under Hezekiah, the Moses tradition appears to be a fairly recent addition in Jerusalem and may be connected to refugees from the north. This fits well with the results of studies that locate the origin of the exodus tradition in the north and date its first literary version to the time around the fall of the

<sup>50</sup> See KEEL, *Die Geschichte* (see n. 46), 429.

<sup>51</sup> On the northern origin of the exodus tradition, see Hosea, who is the only eighth-century prophet who mentions it (Hos 11:1; 12:1, 10, 14; 13:4); see also Y. HOFFMAN, "A North Israelite Typological Myth and a Judean Historical Tradition: The Exodus in Hosea and Amos," *VT* 39 (1989), 169–82; R. ALBERTZ, "Exodus: Liberation History against Charter Myth," in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition* (ed. J. W. van Henten and A. Houtepen; STR 3; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 128–143; K. VAN DER TOORN, "The Exodus as Charter Myth," in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition* (ed. J. W. van Henten and A. Houtepen; STR 3; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 113–127; J. J. COLLINS, "The Development of the Exodus Tradition," in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition* (ed. J. W. van Henten and A. Houtepen; STR 3; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 144–155; M. KOCKERT, "YHWH in the Northern and Southern Kingdom," in *One God – One Cult – One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives* (ed. R. G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann; BZAW 405; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 357–94; and E. BLUM, "Der historische Mose und die Frühgeschichte Israels," *HBAI* 1 (2012), 37–63, here 42–46.

Northern Kingdom.<sup>52</sup> Of course, such a Nehushtan could be of Egyptian origin, even in the north. The connections of the Northern Kingdom to Egypt and the Negev are well documented (cf. Kuntillet 'Ajrud). However, it is equally likely that the Nehushtan has indigenous or Phoenician origins and stands in continuity with small snake figurines that were placed on cult podiums in temples from the Late Bronze Age in Hazor (stratum IB), Megiddo (stratum X), and Timna (thirteenth–twelfth c. BCE).

If the theory I have presented is correct, one should connect the Nehushtan and the Moses tradition associated with it to the former inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom. Then we will have uncovered a further indication that the traditions relating to Moses and the exodus originate in the north – and gained thereby a glimpse into the historical reality behind the text.

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<sup>52</sup> See J.C. GERTZ, “Mose und die Anfänge der jüdischen Religion,” *ZTK* 99 (2002), 3–20.