

## Views from the Pews: Medical symbolism

In the ancient world, snakes had been associated with medicine since at least since 3000 BC. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.2000 BC), a snake steals the secret of eternal life, sheds its skin and rejuvenates. The implication, that snakes could live forever, made them a symbol of life, rebirth and renewal, and fertility. The cult of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, spread throughout Greece in the 5th century BC. He carried the first real medical symbol, a heavy staff with a single snake coiled around it, known as the 'Rod of Asclepius'.

By contrast, Hermes (called Mercury by the Romans), the messenger of the gods, carried a *caduceus*, two snakes winding up the length of a central staff, often surmounted by wings. It became a symbol for resolving disputes peacefully, and, in time, also a mark of commerce. The two are often confused with each other, and with a third story recounted in the Book of Numbers.

The Hebrews released from slavery in Egypt were apparently not grateful to be free to escape their cruel masters. Once past the immediate dangers posed by Pharaoh's army and the Sea of Reeds, the marching Hebrews found something else to complain about. Why, they demanded of the long-suffering Moses, ...' 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.' (Numbers 21:5-9).

Was the risk of being bitten by fiery [Heb. seraphim] serpents a divine judgement, or just a simple consequence of travelling on foot through snake-infested desert land? Whichever, the people quickly changed their attitude. They asked Moses to pray to the Lord to 'take away the serpents from us.'

Fortunately for them, and for us, God was merciful. He did not remove the serpents, but proposed a way to live with them. He instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze, and put it up a pole, so that whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (A footnote in the Oxford Study Bible, comments that this story 'echoes serpent magic as practised in ancient Egypt').

Ever since, the image of a snake (or two) curling around a pole has become a widely recognised logo for medical facilities. We might also think of it as a symbol of the mercy and forbearance of God.

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