

The Bronze Serpent According to Philo of Alexandria in *Legum allegoriae* 2, 79-81

1. Introduction. The serpent of Num 21, 4-9 as an ethical mirror.

Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread". So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us". So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live". So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Num 21, 4-9¹.

The bronze serpent of Num 21, 4-9, as a mirror, allows the Israelites to look at their own guilt and be redeemed from their sin. Χαλκός in Greek means copper but, when alloyed with tin (ὁ κασσίτερος), also indicates bronze. The shine of this material and its reflective properties, characterizes many bronze objects, including κάτοπτρον ('mirror')². In fact the

¹ T. NELSON (ed.), *The Holy Bible. The new King James Version*, Swindon 1991.

² The word κάτοπτρον comes from the verb καθοράω (from the root ὀπ- of ὀράω), which means 'to look down' (in fact the first types of mirror were bodies of water). Moreover, καθοράω also means 'to see

first mirrors consisted of a highly-polished bronze disc, with decorations on the back or on the box in which it was contained. Through κάτοπτρον, it was possible to have a vision of self, of the divine and of an ethos (ἦθος) to imitate: when you were looking at yourself in the mirror, you could see/know yourself, the divine and the moral model which should be followed. In fact, κάτοπτρον was connected to the sun's symbolism, of which it reproduces a circular shape. In pagan cults it was designed for ritual ends and for the body's embellishment. Furthermore, mirrors were frequently used as offerings or as a funeral equipment to ensure communication with the transcendent. Often κάτοπτρον was decorated with representations of girls, who were dressed with the χιτών ('chiton') or the πέπλος ('peplum'). Therefore, women, when they used their mirrors, saw themselves and a model of beauty, which was commonly shared.

Reflected in the bronze serpent, as a mirror, the Israelites of Num, 21, 4-9 see their sin. Through repentance for lack of trust in God and through a new faith, they will come back under the protective gaze of God. The bite of venomous snakes represents pain as penance and piety. The snakes of Num 21, 6 show God's punishment as a moment of reconciliation. Merciful God counterpoises the good snake against the bad snakes for the Israelites' salvation. Looking at themselves and at their own sin in the snake-χαλκός, the Israelites are cured from the deadly poison of intemperance³.

The beneficial action of the bronze snake works thanks to its homeopathic essence. The bite of the poisonous snakes is cured by the healing action of another serpent, which has similar characters but opposite symbolic meaning. In Moses' snake, as a mirror, the characteristics of bad snakes are converted into good. In fact, κάτοπτρον does not duplicate what it has in

distinctly/ behold/perceive/explore' and refers to duplicity of view namely knowledge. For the mirror in antiquity, see: S. MLCHIOR-BONNET, *Storia dello specchio*, Bari 2002, 11-24; 121-129.

³ Cf. Ex 38, 8. Women donate their bronze mirrors for the construction of washing place that was built by Bezalel, in accordance with God's directions. Bezalel is the artisan who "was filled with the spirit of God" (Ex 35, 31): the Lord had infused in him intelligence and wisdom, so that he could do all that was necessary for Jewish cult worship (the tabernacle and its components). Women sacrifice their mirrors for the construction of the λουτήριον ('place of ablutions'), where purification took place. In *Exodus*, the bronze-mirror is linked to catharsis. For κάτοπτρον in *Exodus* see: A. TAGLIAPIETRA, *La metafora dello specchio. Lineamenti per una storia simbolica*, Torino 2008, 196-202.

front of it exactly. In mirrors, the reflected image is inverted with respect to the subject and there is always a margin of difference between the original and its reflection. Contemplating the serpent-temperance is an attempt to conform to an ethical model: if you mirror yourself in κάτοπτρον, you will regain access to virtue⁴.

2. The Philonian interpretation of Leg. 2, 79-81: the ποικιλία and the pharmacological nature of snakes

In *Legum allegoriae* 2, 79-81 Philo says:

79) How, then, comes into being a cure for passion? When another snake was fabricated, opposite to that of Eve, namely the character of temperance: to pleasure an opposite thing is temperance; to multiform passion, multiform virtue⁵ which keeps off the enemy pleasure. Therefore, in accordance with temperance, God orders Moses that a snake be fabricated and says: “Make for yourself a serpent and put it on a standard” (Num 21, 8). See that not for another person does Moses construct this serpent, but for himself. In fact God prescribes “make for yourself”, so it is known that temperance is not the possession of everybody, but only of he who is dear to God⁶. 80) But it must be considered for which reason Moses fabricated the serpent of bronze, its quality not having been prescribed to him. Maybe therefore for these reasons. In the first place, God’s gifts [these ideas]⁷ are immaterial and without a determinate quality, but mortals’ gifts are considered as linked to matter. In the second place, Moses loves disembodied virtues, but our souls, which cannot strip themselves

⁴ For κάτοπτρον in Philo of Alexandria, see: *Abr.* 153; *Contempl.* 78; *Decal.* 105; *Fug.* 13; *Ios.* 87; *Migr.* 98; 190; *Mos.* 2, 137; 139; *Opif.* 76; *Somn.* 2, 206; *Spec.* 1, 26; 219. Philo often interprets the mirror allegorically as truth’s image and confers ethical characteristics to it: κάτοπτρον faithfully reproduces reality and shows the inevitability of truth, because it cannot lie.

⁵ In the *editio mangeiana* (1972) by T. Mangey we find the word ἀποκίλη (‘not multiform’/‘simple’). I prefer the version ποικίλη ἀρετή because the dual attribution of the adjective ποικίλος to passion and to virtue shows how Eve’s snake of pleasure mirrors Moses’ snake of temperance. In fact in Num 21, 6 the venomous bite of the fiery serpents could be cured only by the redemptive power of the bronze serpent of Num 21, 8.

⁶ Μόνου τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς (μόνου = adjective).

⁷ The gloss ἰδέαι αὐται, inserted later into the text and omitted in the ancient *armenian versio*, shows the bronze serpent, being a divine gift, as an idea.

of their bodies, tend towards bodily virtue. 81) To the strong and solid substance of bronze is likened a character in accordance to temperance: it is well tempered and unbreakable. In the same way, and in so far as temperance in a man who is dear to God, is most honorable and like gold, it (temperance) holds second place in those who have received wisdom in accordance with a gradual progress. Then if everyone whom «a serpent shall have bitten, when he looked upon it (*sc.* the bronze serpent), shall live» (*ibid.*)⁸: absolutely true. In fact if the intellect when bitten by pleasure, namely the serpent of Eve, shall have the strength to see spiritually the beauty of temperance, namely the serpent of Moses, and thereby God himself, shall live: only see and understand⁹.

The snake is greatly used by Philo as a metaphorical image and often has conflicting meanings. Philo refers to the taxonomical family of serpents using several words. In his texts, he use ὄφις ('snake'), a noun of uncertain origin. This word, perhaps, derives from the root ὀπ- of verb ὀράω, which concern the domain of 'to see' and 'to understand'. Then Philo uses the word δράκων ('snake'), which originates from the verb δέρομαι ('to see clearly/look on/look at'), and the word ἑρπετόν ('reptile'), which derives from the verb ἑρπω ('to slither')¹⁰. In *Leg. 2, 79-81* against ὄφις Εὐάς ('Eve's serpent'), which represents

⁸ Short quote from the second part of Num 21, 8, where it says: «καὶ ἔσται ἐὰν δάκη ὄφις ἄνθρωπον, πᾶς ὁ δεδηγμένος ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ζήσεται ("and [*sc.* the bronze serpent] there shall be, if a serpent shall have bitten a human being. Everyone, who has been bitten, when he shall look upon it, shall live")».

⁹ The translation from Greek is mine. For the Greek text, I have followed the edition: L. COHN – P. WENDLAND (eds.), *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt* (vol. 1), Berlin 1896-1930, 106. I have compared my translation with: R. ARNALDEZ, *Les oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie* (vol. 1), Paris 1967, 146-149; F. H. COLSON - G. H. WHITAKER, *Philo in Ten Volumes (and Two Supplementary Volumes)* (vol. 1), London 1929-1962, 274-277; R. RADICE, *Tutti i trattati del commentario allegorico alla Bibbia*, Milano 2005, 182-183.

¹⁰ Philo never uses the word σήψ, which indicates the 'snake' whose bite causes rot and corruption. In fact, σήψ is originated from the verb σήπω ('to make rotten/putrid/corrupt'). Moreover Philo never uses the words ἔχις or ἔχιδνα ('viper'). In *Leg. 2, 79-81* Philo uses the noun ὄφις both for the evil snake and for the good one. For occurrences of ὄφις in Philo's works, see: *Agr.* 94-95; 97; 99; 101; 107; *Conf.* 7; *Det.* 177; *Leg.* 2, 53; 71; 73-74; 76-81; 84; 87; 90; 92-94; 97-98; 106; 3, 59; 61; 65-66; 68; 74-76; 92; 107; 188; 246; *Migr.* 66; *Mos.* 1, 192; *Opif.* 156-157; 159; 160; 163; *Praem.* 90; *QG* 1, 31-32. For δράκων: *Aet.* 128-129; *Agr.* 95-96; *Heb.* 222; *Migr.* 83; *Mos.* 1, 77; 91-92; *Praem.* 8; *Somn.* 2, 191. For ἑρπετόν: *Decal.* 78; *Deus* 51; *Conf.* 7; 24; *Her.* 238-239; *Leg.* 2, 11; 105; *Legat.* 48; *Migr.* 64-65; 69; *Mos.* 1, 192; *Opif.* 64; 156; 163; *Praem.* 90; *Prov.* 2, 59; *Spec.* 1, 62; 4, 113-114. According to F. Calabi, Philo's use of the words ὄφις, δράκων and ἑρπετόν may not be random and may have a specific meaning: F. CALABI, *The Snake and the Horseman. Pleasure and Sophrosyne in Philo of Alexandria*, in *God's Acting, Man's Acting. Tradition and Philosophy in Philo of Alexandria* (SPA 4), Leiden 2008, 127; 147-148.

vice, is offset ὄφρις Μωυσέως ('Moses' serpent'), an image of virtue. In Philo's interpretation the bronze snake indicates λόγος σωφροσύνης ('character of temperance') and it is made by Moses to counteract ὄφεις θανατοῦντες ('the snakes that kill') of Num 21, 6. Moses' snake, as ἴασις τοῦ πάθους ('cure for passion'), is the antidote to unbridled pleasure¹¹.

Eve's serpent and Moses's serpent are specular, because both are snakes and have opposite symbolic meanings¹². In fact, in *Legum allegoriae* the serpent symbol is described with ποικιλία ('multiplicity of forms'). Ποικίλος means not only 'multiform', but also 'changeable'. The symbolic meanings of the snake, which are polarized in good and evil, are constantly interchangeable and coexisting¹³. In *Leg. 2, 79* (lines 5-6) Philo attributes the adjective ποικίλος both to πάθος ('passion') and to ἀρετή ('virtue'). Thereby, he shows that the beneficial power of ὄφρις Μωυσέως is founded in its pharmacological nature. The ποικιλία of snakes becomes clear in a convergence of good and evil. The bronze serpent can counter dissolute pleasure because it has the same shape as the poisonous snakes which bit the Israelites in the desert. Philo in *Agr. 98* (lines 10-11) says about the snake of Num 21, 4-9: «ἀντιπαθὲς δ'ἀκολασίας φάρμακον ἢ ἀλεξίκακος σωφροσύνη ("the remedy for intemperance [is] its opposite: temperance, that which keeps away evils")». Moses' serpent is the φάρμακον ('remedy') which allows the Israelites to escape death. It is the good poison which cures thanks to its analogy with evil¹⁴.

¹¹ See *Leg. 2, 79-81* in relation to *Leg. 2, 89-106*, where Philo also interprets the bronze snake as opposed to pleasure. In *Leg. 2, 89-106* Philo links the serpent of Num 21, 4-9 with the stick-serpent of Ex 4, 1-4 (*Leg. 2, 89-93*) and with Dan's serpent of Gen 49, 17 (*Leg. 2, 94-106*). Compare also *Leg. 2, 79-81* with *Opif. 163-164*, where Philo speaks about ὀφιομάχης (literally 'he who fights with snakes'), and with *Agr. 94-107*, where he compares *Numbers'* snake with the two snakes of *Genesis* (Eva's serpent and Dan's serpent). CALABI, *The Snake*, Op. cit., 144-150.

¹² In *Leg. 2, 79* (line 4) Philo defines the bronze serpent using the adjective ἐναντίος (literally 'face to face'). The opposition between the two snakes is based on their similarity.

¹³ Ποικίλος also means 'artful', 'intricate', 'many colored' and 'wrought in various colors (as of embroidery or painted artefacts)'. This adjective describes the different symbolic aspects of the snakes.

¹⁴ The φάρμακον indicates remedy as 'medicinal substance healing or noxious'. In fact it was both poison and antidote.

3. Eve's serpent as unbridled pleasure

In *Leg. 2*, 79 (line 5) Philo defines, in relation to the paragraphs which immediately precede it, Eve's snake as ἡδονή ('pleasure') and πάθος ('passion')¹⁵. The serpent of Eve is considered as πολέμιος ('the enemy'), which is beaten by the power of temperance. The poisonous snakes of Num 21, 6, in the Philonian exegesis, represent a multiplication of the snake in *Genesis* which in *Numbers* returns as the plurality of evil. In the preceding paragraphs, Philo interprets the snake as pleasure, distinguishing between pleasure as knowledge (*Leg. 2*, 71-75) and as vice (*Leg. 2*, 76-78)¹⁶. In *Leg. 2*, 74 (lines 30-1) he explains what it is that links snakes to pleasure: «πολύπλοκος γὰρ καὶ ποικίλη ὡσπερ τοῦ ὄφραως ἡ κίνησις, οὕτως καὶ ἡδονῆς ("in fact, as the movement of a snake [is] writhing and multiform, so [is] also [the movement] of pleasure")». Both voluptuousness and snakes are characterized by the adjectives ποικίλος ('multiform') and πολύπλοκος ('writhing'). As snakes have many symbolic aspects and many convolutions, so pleasure is ποικίλη and πολύπλοκος. It can take many forms, because it is perceived through the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Also every individual pleasure of the senses is multiform¹⁷.

In *Leg. 2*, 71-75 the snake-pleasure is defined as συναγωγός ('unifying'). It mediates between Adam, the symbol of intellect, and Eve, the symbol of sensation: making knowledge possible. Before original sin, Adam and Eve were naked and shameless (*Gen 2*, 25), but the snake opens their eyes to their nudity and modesty, bringing a new cognitive gaze¹⁸.

¹⁵ In *Leg. 2*, 79-81 Philo uses the words ἡδονή and πάθος interchangeably.

¹⁶ R. Radice distinguishes between three hermeneutic types of snake-pleasure in Philo's work. In *Leg. 2*, 71-73 the serpent is considered on a psychological level, in *Leg. 2*, 74-76 on an allegorical level and in *Leg. 2*, 77-78 on an ethical level. R. RADICE, *Allegoria e paradigmi etici in Filone di Alessandria. Commentario al «Legum allegoriae»*, Milano 2000, 240-242. For a Philonian interpretation of the snake as pleasure, see also *Opif.* 5 and *Agr.* 12. I refer also to CALABI, *The snake*, Op. cit., 128-142; R. PIAZZA, *Adamo, Eva e il serpente*, Palermo 1988, 27-31.

¹⁷ In *Leg. 2*, 75 (line 7) Philo specifies that pleasure is ποικίλη not only because it wraps its coils around the senses, but also because «περὶ ἕκαστον μέρος πολύπλοκός ἐστιν (literally "it writhes around each part")».

¹⁸ In *Septuagint*, in *Gen 3*, 7, regarding the fall of Adam and Eve, we read: «καὶ διηνοίχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν δύο ("and their eyes were opened")». The knowledge which the serpent of *Genesis* introduces is brought about through vision. Compare snake-pleasure as cognition with the Tiresias myth, where the fortune-teller knows ἡδονή and receives the gift of prophecy thanks to the symbol of a snake (Ovidius, *Metamorphoses* III, 316-338; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 75).

Philo in *Leg. 2*, 76-78 interprets snakes of Num 21, 6 as a metaphor for immoderate pleasure. In fact, the serpent, after having provoked original sin, is condemned by God to 'crawl' on its belly and to eat dust (Gen 3, 14). It becomes ἐρπετόν and looks like those who, prone on the ground, 'have been bitten' by pleasure: the voluptuous, dragged downwards, is at the mercy of ἡδοναὶ γαστρούς ('pleasures of the belly')¹⁹. The poisonous snakes of Num 21, 6, in Philo's interpretation of *Leg. 2*, 76-78, are metaphors for φθορὰ ψυχῆς ('soul's corruption') and therefore lead to death²⁰. Pleasure in fact, if it is lived as ἀμετρία ('disproportion'), represents evil because knowledge can only exist as temperance²¹.

4. The bronze serpent as intelligible virtue

In 2 Kings 18, 4 it is said that the bronze serpent, made by Moses, was destroyed by King Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, the king of Judah. In fact, at the time, it was idolized with the name of Necustàn and Israelites adored him, burning incense²². The serpent of *Numbers*, as σύμβολον ('symbol'), was an artifact which had concrete existence²³. Philo also considers

¹⁹ See *Leg. 2*, 76-78. Philo in *Leg. 2*, 84 (lines 11-12), in relation to Deut 18, 15-16, says: «οἰκειότατον δὲ ὄνομα εἴληχε τὸ ἡδονῆς ἔργον, δηγμὸς γὰρ καλεῖται ("the most suitable name has been chosen for pleasure's action, so 'bite' it is called")». Also, note that in *Leg. 2*, 81 (line 21) the verb δάκνω ('bite') is used in relation to ἡδονή.
²⁰ See *Leg. 2*, 77 (line 21). Philo in *Leg. 1*, 105 distinguishes between man's death and soul's death. The first kind consists in the soul's separation from the body, whereas the second consists in virtue's dissolution when faced with vice. According to Philo's interpretation, the poisonous snakes of *Numbers* lead to the soul's death as φθορὰ ψυχῆς.

²¹ *Leg. 2*, 77. Note that ἀμετρία, -ας (< μέτρον) means 'lack of measure' e.g. excess and intemperance.

²² The etymology of word Nechushtan recalls a play on two Jewish words: *nachash* ('serpent') and *nechoshet* ('bronze'). The cult, developed around the bronze snake, is testified to by archaeological discoveries of numerous small copper snakes in Meneijeh (southern Israel), today Timna. These serpents could be considered as reproductions of Moses'snake. In fact, in the Araba region there were many copper mines, where this metal had already been used since the thirteenth century BCE. For anti-idolatry and religious images in Judaism, see: F. BASSAN, *Iconografia ebraica*, in D. DI CESARE - M. MORSELLI, *Torah e filosofia. Percorsi del pensiero ebraico*, Firenze 1993, 121-127; F. CALABI, *Simbolo dell'assenza: le immagini nel giudaismo*, QS 41 (1995) 5-32; F. CALABI, *Rappresentazione come evocazione: immagini e aniconismo nella tradizione ebraica*, in «Filosofia dell'arte» 1 (2001) 43- 52; R. DI CASTRO, *Il divieto di idolatria tra universale e particolare*, in RMI 71/1 (2005) 91-125; M. BETTETTINI, *Contro le immagini. Le radici dell'iconoclastia*, Roma - Bari 2006.

²³ In Wis 16, 6 Moses' snake is defined as σύμβολον σωτηρίας (symbol of safety), although in many manuscripts we find the word σύμβουλον ('counsellor'). The noun σύμβολον was derived from the verb συμβάλλω ('to throw together/join'). Σύμβολον was originally a sign of recognition which denoted a bond of hospitality between family and family, or city and city. This was an object which was broken into two parts that were taken by both parties. Σύμβολον was also the card that was given at Athens to judges, when they

the bronze serpent as a handcrafted product, but he does not define it σύμβολον, as he does for Eve's serpent (*Agr.* 108, lines 25 -26; *Leg.* 2, 89, line 16; *Opif.* 157, lines 2-3) or for Dan's serpent (*Agr.* 109, line 1)²⁴.

Philo considers Eve's serpent, as dissolute pleasure, only from a moral standpoint. Whereas Moses' snake, as λόγος σωφροσύνης, is interpreted in accordance with ethical and intelligible meanings. In fact, on the one hand, the bronze snake is ιδέα ('idea'): it is a divine gift and in *Leg.* 2, 80 (lines 12-13) it is defined as ἄυλος ('immaterial') and ἄποιος ('without a determinate quality')²⁵. On the other hand, it is an ethical model to be imitated because by contemplating temperance you can become temperate. In Philonian exegesis, ὄφις Μωυσέως seems to be τύπος ('a blow/an imprint') impressed from a matrix of σωφροσύνη²⁶. Contemplating the snake-temperance, the Israelites will acquire virtue which will allow them to be reconciled with God.

Why does Philo speak about λόγος σωφροσύνης and not simply about σωφροσύνη? The noun λόγος has several meanings: 'word/speech', 'object of discourse', 'account/reckoning', 'reasoning/thinking', 'project/design'²⁷. As the 'character' of temperance, λόγος indicates the ethical-noetical paradigm that shows the connection between the moral quality of

came to court. Presenting it, they obtained a corresponding sum of money. The symbol therefore was an object, which demonstrated the link between two entities and their mutual correspondence.

²⁴ For the bronze serpent as handmade product, see Philo's use of the adjective ποικίλος in *Leg.* 2, 79. Ποικίλος, in its meanings of 'many colored' and 'wrought in various colors (as of embroidery or painted artefacts)', refers to a bronze artefact.

²⁵ See the adjective ἄποιος of *Leg.* 2, 80 (line 14) in relation to the expression περὶ ποιότητος (line 12). God's gifts are not characterized by physical qualities that determine reality. Instead, they are distinguished by intelligible connotations. The definition of the bronze serpent as ιδέα must be considered in connection with the gloss ιδέαι αὐταί of line 13.

²⁶ In *Legum allegoriae*, Philo never defines Moses' snake as τύπος. But we can consider it in relationship with the verb τυπώω ('to impress/model'). In fact, the bronze serpent was made according to a paradigm of temperance which is ethical and noetic. It represents an example for the Israelites. It is no coincidence, that both Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185 - ca. 254) and Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330 - 379) speak about Moses' serpent as τύπος. They use this word, according to its meaning of 'prefiguration', in relation to Jn 3, 14-15. But τύπος derived from verb τύπτω ('to beat/strike'). It is the blow which has been struck or the stamp which has been imprinted and must be considered in relation to the shaping force of an artisan. See τύπος in G. KITTEL - G. FRIEDRICH, *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento* (vol. 13), Brescia 1981, 1466-1504. Origenes, *Scholia in Cantica canticorum* VI; *De Pascha* I, 14-15; Basilius, *De Spiritu Sancto* XIV, 31.

²⁷ In accordance with Kraus Reggiani, I translate λόγος (lines 4; 17) with 'character', referring to the Greek word χαρακτήρ ('trademark engraved or imprinted'/'coin type'/'distinctive mark'/'character'). Arnaldez translates with the French 'principe' and Colson with the English 'principle'.

σωφροσύνη and the bronze artefact. In *Leg. 2*, 81 (line 17) Philo defines Moses' snake as ὁ κατὰ σωφροσύνην λόγος, namely as the character (imprinted) in accordance with temperance. As λόγος, the bronze serpent represents the imprint of the noetic idea of σωφροσύνη. According to Philo, snake-temperance is an idea that displays intelligible virtue, to which you must turn your eyes in order to obtain sensitive virtue. Moses' snake cannot simply be seen, but must also be understood. In *Leg. 2*, 81 (line 23) Philo says μόνον ἰδὲτω καὶ κατανοησάτω. He uses the verb εἶδον (< ὀράω), which means 'to look with the mind's eyes', and κατανοέω, which means 'to understand'. All *Leg. 2*, 79-81 is based on the duplicity of seeing as knowledge: to obtain redemption, you must travel the path of knowledge and wisdom. Only in this way, you will be able to 'see' temperance²⁸. The double gaze which ends *Leg. 2*, 81, and which exhorts vision as knowledge, confirms Moses' snake as an ethical and noetic paradigm. In fact, on the one hand, it should be seen by the Jewish people as a moral model, but on the other, it should be understood philosophically according to its intelligible character within the Philonian philosophy. Philo's exegesis of the bronze serpent is original compared with the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Bible, on which Philo bases his interpretation. In the *Septuagint* the moral level prevails and we do not find any of the noetic character of Moses' snake.

5. *Leg. 2*, 79-81 a comparison with the *Septuagint*

The ethical dimension of the Philonian interpretation of Num 21, 4-9 is inspired by the same *Septuagint*, where some expressions emphasize the moral imperfection of the Israelites²⁹. In Num 21, 4, to describe the discouragement of the Jewish people on their journey, is used the verb ὀλιγοψυχέω which means 'to be faint/become discouraged'. ὀλιγοψυχέω consists of

²⁸ According to Radice, the expression μόνον ἰδὲτω καὶ κατανοήσετε of *Leg. 2*, 81 (line 23) is a stereotyped formula that emphasizes the noetic meaning of the act of seeing. Arnaldez comments «tout ce qui concerne la vision de Dieu chez Philon est difficile à préciser: la terminologie ne semble ni constant ni cohérente». R. RADICE, *La filosofia mosaica. La creazione del mondo secondo Mosè; Le allegorie delle leggi*, Milano 1987, 423; ARNALDEZ, *Oeuvres* (vol. 1), Op. cit., 148.

²⁹ For *Septuagint*, see: A. RAHLFS (ed.), *Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum Graece iuxta 70 interpretes*, Stuttgart 1982. Cf. G. DORIVAL (ed.), *La Bible d'Alexandrie* (vol. 4), Paris 1994.

the words ὀλίγος ('little') and ψυχή ('soul') and indicates the double fatigue, physical and moral, of the Israelites. The διάκενος ('light') food and lack of water in Num 21, 5 are perceived by the Jewish people as signs of God's absence and as a justification for sin. The ὄφεις θανατοῦντες of Num 21, 6 in the *Septuagint* show the moral failing of the Israelites as a loss of confidence in God. In Philo's exegesis, the ethical imperfection of the people is not represented by a 'lack' but by an excess, namely by unbridled pleasure. In both cases, however, the poisonous snakes of Num 21, 6 symbolize evil, as that which needs to be eliminated by measure. In the *Septuagint*, Moses' snake brings a strengthening of confidence in God after the loss of faith; however in the Philonian interpretation it, as λόγος σωφροσύνης, brings a moderation of libido. The bronze snake, according to Philo, maintains the character of the *Septuagint* as measure.

Σωφροσύνη means, not only 'sanity' and 'soundness of mind', but also 'prudence' and 'temperance', which are the two main qualities possessed by the wise. In the *Septuagint*, in Gen 3, 1 the snake of sin is defined as φρονημώτατος (sup. adj. from φρόνιμος, 'prudent/showing presence of mind/possessing sagacity or discernment')³⁰. Philo in *Opif.* 154 (line 3) interprets the tree of knowledge of good and evil in *Genesis* as φρόνησις μέση ('intermediate prudence or wisdom'), with which you can identify τὰναντία φύσει ('opposites according to their nature'). *Genesis'* snake opens the doors to wisdom as a mediation of opposites³¹. Despite the differences and opposition between the snakes of *Numbers* and *Genesis*, both are characterized by their possession of φρήν ('heart/mind'). According to Philo's exegesis, the bronze snake as λόγος σωφροσύνης implies the ὄφεις φρονημώτατος of Gen 3, 1, which is before the original fall³².

³⁰ For the serpent's original wisdom, see also Job 12, 7-8. Compare ὄφεις φρονημώτατος of Gen 3,1 to Plato, *Timaeus* 91 e – 92 a, where the family of reptiles is defined as ἀφρονέστατος ('the most unintelligent'). According to post-biblical Jewish literature, God condemned the snake of *Genesis* because of its immense knowledge (*Bereshit Rabbah* XIX, 1-2; *Esther Rabbah* VI, 3-4).

³¹ Cf. M. HARL, *Adam et les deux arbres du Paradis chez Philon d'Alexandrie*, RSR 50 (1962) 321-388.

³² See in relation to *Leg.* 2, 106-107, where the ὄφεις φρονημώτατος of Gen 3, 1, as an image of pleasure, is defined in relationship with the noun πανουργία ('ability to act/skill/knavery/cheating'). The πανουργία refers to the 'bad wisdom' (the cunning) of the serpent. Also, compare with QG 1, 31-34, where Philo describes the snake as ἡδονή with the verb πανουργέω ('to play the knave'). See CALABI, *The Snake*, Op. cit., 128; 134; RADICE, *Allegoria*, Op. cit., 240.

In *Leg. 2, 79-81* Philo focuses on the curative aspect of the bronze snake, which is only implicitly present in the *Septuagint*. In Num 21, 8 it is said: «πᾶς ὁ δεδηγμένος ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ζήσεται (“everyone, who has been bitten, having contemplated it [*sc.* the bronze serpent], shall live”»). Then, in Num 21, 9: «καὶ ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὸν ὄφιν τὸν χαλκοῦν καὶ ἔζη (“and [*sc.* the man who was bitten] looked upon the bronze serpent and lived”»). In the *Septuagint*, Moses’ snake is above all related to life rather than to healing. Its beneficial power is described with the verb ζάω (“to live”): notwithstanding the poisonous snakes’ bite and sin, you can continue to live thanks to prayers addressed to God and thanks to a renewed faith. The bronze snake, as opposed to punitive snakes, cancels the negative character of pain and introduces a new dimension. In the *Septuagint*, the physical healing of disease is not mentioned: rather a renewal of self.

The Philonian interpretation is based on the *Septuagint*. The snake-temperance of *Leg. 2, 79-81* is interpreted as a ‘cure for passion’ because, as an image of measure, it involves a correction and an improvement of the *status quo*. In the *Septuagint*, the snake is a symbol of rupture and of radical change. Whereas, in the Philonian interpretation, the double snake is both negative and positive and is an image of moral progress. Thanks to a mediation of λόγος σωφροσύνης it is possible to choose the path of conversion from vice to virtue. Moses’ snake has the same characteristics of Eve’s snake because temperance comes from the control of excess as the correction of vice. Philo interprets σεαυτῶ (“for yourself”) in Num 21, 8 as a sign that Moses made the bronze serpent only for himself, because he is θεοφιλής (“loved by God”)³³. In *Leg. 2, 80* it is written that temperance is not for everybody, but only for those who live according to divine love. It is an innate quality in perfect man, like Moses, but it is only acquirable in others through the following of a moral path³⁴. The distinction between the perfect and those who must make progress is not explicit in *Leg. 2, 79-81*. It

³³ *Leg. 2, 81* (line 18). In the *Septuagint*, however, σεαυτῶ cannot only be translated as ‘for yourself’, but also as ‘by yourself’. It may allude to Moses’ craftsmanship.

³⁴ Philo in *Leg. 2, 79* (line 10), in relation to temperance, uses the noun κτήμα, which means ‘anything gotten/possession’. It comes from the verb κτάομαι (‘to get/procure for oneself/win’). Temperance in Philo’s exegesis, like the bronze serpent, is not an innate quality. Its acquisition implies redemption’s path. The Israelites of *Numbers* could gain temperance only after repentance.

becomes clearer thanks to a comparison with *Leg.* 1, 79, where Philo differentiates between ὁ φρόνιμος, namely the wise man who remains firmly in wisdom, and ὁ φρονῶν, namely the level-headed man who exercises wisdom on a practical level³⁵. In *Leg.* 2, 81 the association of gold with perfect man and bronze with those who have received wisdom in accordance with a gradual progress, refers to the hierarchy of metals in *Prob.* 65 (lines 17-19), where gold is followed by silver, bronze and iron respectively³⁶.

Λόγος σωφροσύνης cannot represent the sinful Israelites. In Num 21, 4-9 God says nothing about how the savior snake should be made, about the material with which it has to be fabricated. According to Philo, Moses decided to make it in bronze because of the similarity between χαλκός and λόγος σωφροσύνης³⁷. In fact, both are characterized by their resistance. Philo in *Leg.* 2, 81 (lines 16-17) describes both bronze and temperance with the adjectives δυνατός ('strong'), στερεός ('solid'), εὖτονος ('well tempered') and ἀδιάκοπος ('unbreakable'). The solidity of χαλκός and of λόγος σωφροσύνης is opposed to the snake-pleasure which is characterized by fluidity of movement, with which it coils around each sense. In bronze-temperance, Eve's snake is immobilized. It loses that mobility which qualified it. Χαλκός and λόγος σωφροσύνης indicate moral stability that is gotten through a particular path. In fact bronze takes on new forms and consistency when it is worked by a craftsman and temperance is achieved thanks to moral progress (only for Moses it is like

³⁵ According to Radice, in *Leg.* 1, 79 Philo, with ὁ φρόνιμος, alludes to perfect man (Moses), while with the expression ὁ φρονῶν to man who has received wisdom in accordance with a gradual progress. The first kind corresponds to ὁ ἄνθρωπος ('ruby'); the second kind to ὁ λίθος πράσινος ('green stone'). See types of perfect men and of those who receive wisdom in accordance with a gradual progress in relation to Stoics concepts of 'duty' and 'perfect action' in *SVF* III, 498. RADICE, *Allegoria*, Op. cit., 169-170.

³⁶ See. Job 28, 1-2. For an allegorical interpretation of gold and bronze, see also *Mos.* 2, 82. RADICE, *Allegoria*, Op. cit., 423.

³⁷ It is very interesting that Philo's interpretation of the material chosen by Moses to make the savior snake, was not influenced by the Midrashic tradition. In fact, Philo's background originates in Greek and Jewish cultures. In *Bereshit Rabbah* XXXI, 8, the Midrash on *Genesis* which was written in the sixth century CE, but which contains the oldest material of oral tradition, it is stated that Moses chose specifically to make the serpent in bronze. If he had made it in gold or silver, there would have been no correspondence between the Jewish words *nachash* and *nechoshet*. According to the Midrashic tradition, this correspondence shows that the Torah was written in Hebrew just as the world was created in this holy language. The same interpretation is also mentioned by Rashi (1040 - 1105), one of the most renowned medieval Bible commentators, in his commentary on Num 21, 9.

gold)³⁸. Bronze and temperance are symbols of stability and balance, but also express transformation as progress.

In the *Septuagint* in Gen 1, 25 it is written: «καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς (...) πάντα τὰ ἑρπετὰ τῆς γῆς κατὰ γένος αὐτῶν (“and God made all reptiles of the Earth according to their kind”))». In Gen 3, 1: «ὁ δὲ ὄφις ἦν φρονιμώτατος πάντων τῶν θηρίων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ὧν ἐποίησεν κύριος ὁ θεός (“the snake was the wisest³⁹ of animals on Earth, which the Lord God made”))». In these two verses of the *Septuagint*, serpents and reptiles are associated with the verb ποιέω (‘make’) as is the bronze snake of *Numbers*. In Num 21, 8 God says to Moses «ποιήσον σεαυτῷ ὄφιν (“make for yourself/by yourself a snake”))». Then, in Num 21, 9 we find Moses’ snake again as the object of the verb ποιέω: «καὶ ἐποίησε Μωυσῆς ὄφιν χαλκοῦν (“and Moses made a bronze snake”))». Moses has to ‘make’ the bronze serpent just as God ‘made’ the snake and reptiles of *Genesis*. In the Philonian exegesis, however, the verb ποιέω is replaced by κατασκευάζω (see lines 4; 7-9; 12). This verb, used by Philo, derives from the noun κατασκευή, (‘preparation/construction/elaboration’). It is composed of the preposition κατά (‘in accordance with/in relation to’) and the noun σκεῦος (‘vessel/implement of any kind/thing’). Κατασκευή refers to the crafting of Moses’ snake and its artificiality⁴⁰.

The verb ποιέω implies the presence of ‘an agent’ and describes the creative power of God. In Num 21, 8-9 the use of ποιέω in relation to the bronze snake shows how the plasmatic power of God is ‘transferred’ to Moses, who, on this occasion, becomes a divine craftsman⁴¹. Moses is God’s intermediary: he makes the savior snake not by his will, but following God’s orders. The healing power of the bronze snake exists only thanks to a divine presence. Moses

³⁸ Compare with *Cher.* 81; *Post.* 116-119 (where bronze is associated to the passivity of the soul).

³⁹ Note that, the superlative adjective used, is φρονιμώτατος.

⁴⁰ For use of the verb κατασκευάζω in relation to the bronze snake, see also *Leg.* 2, 93 (line 13). Cf. *Agr.* 97 (line 6); 99 (line 14).

⁴¹ Also in *De Opificio mundi* Philo gives heavenly attributes to Moses. Philo considers him as the ‘writer’ who writes the story of world’s creation (see the use of verb ἀναγράφω, ‘engrave publicly/describe’ in *Opif.* 6; 12; 25; 206). God created the universe through an artistic action, Moses describes God’s creation and Philo interprets it: the Creator, Moses the writer and Philo the exegete match on three distinct levels, where the lower is a reflection of the superior.

carries out God's order and chooses nothing but the material to be used to make the snake. God created the world and all living beings, while Moses can only give birth to artificial creations according to divine will⁴². Philo, interpreting the verb ποιέω of Num 21, 8-9 with the other verb κατασκευάζω, accentuates the synthetic character of Moses' production and its dependence on God⁴³. The making of the bronze snake, as κατασκευή, shows the crafting of the serpent-temperance, which is produced by Moses but willed by God, in which the Israelites' salvation is already foretold.

6. The Philonian exegesis between the Jewish tradition, Greek-Roman culture and early Christianity

The pharmacological nature and ethical dimension of Moses' snake can also be found in post-biblical Jewish tradition. This interprets the symbol of the bronze serpent as sin, punishment and redemption: God punishes and redeems through the symbol of the snake which is the same snake as that of original sin⁴⁴. According to post-biblical Judaism, Moses' serpent has therapeutic force not in itself, but in bringing salvation to the Israelites thanks to the faith with which it is contemplated⁴⁵. Repentance annuls the snakes' poison and 'activates' the healing effect of the bronze serpent. In *Numbers*, the snake gives death or life not thanks to itself, but according to divine order (in this consists its non-idolatrous nature).

⁴² God seems to share his crafting power with Moses, who, like Bezalel, shapes and constructs according to divine will (Ex 31-38). According to Philo, however, Moses makes archetypes, while Bezalel only copies: Moses has God as a guide, while Bezalel has, as a guide, Moses (*Leg.* 3, 100-102). For a comparison between Moses and Bezalel, see also *Gig.* 23-24; *Plant.* 26-27; *Somn.* 1, 206.

⁴³ The same use of the verb κατασκευάζω as 'interpretation' of ποιέω is also to be seen in *Leg.* 3, 102 (line 8) in relation to Ex 25, 40 and in *Opif.* 72 (line 18) in relation to Gen 1,26.

⁴⁴ In *Pesikta Rabbati*, collection of homilies, contemporary with the *Talmud* and written between the fourth and ninth centuries, God says: "This is my art, with the same words with which I strike, I also heal! A man wounds with a knife, but cures with a poultice. Not so the art of God. Instead, He wounds with the same word with which He heals, as it is written: "I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds, says the Lord" (Jer 30, 17). Later it is written: "Their poison is like the poison of a serpent; they are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear" (Ps 58, 4). With snakes, they were visited: "For behold, I will send serpents among you, vipers which cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, says the Lord" (Jer 8, 17). With snakes, they will be comforted: "The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den" (Is 11, 8). *Pesikta Rabbati* XXXIII, 10.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Rosh Hashanah* III, 8-9; *TB Rosh Hashanah* 29a; *Bamidbar Rabbah* XIX, 23; *Mekhiltah Amalek* 1, 54a; Rashi on Num, 21, 8.

The pharmacological nature of the bronze snake exists only through divine will and the power of repentance.

The use of snakes in ancient medicine was widespread. In Greek-Roman collections of medical prescriptions, there were several remedies made with snakes or some of its parts⁴⁶. To serpents, in fact, were attributed extraordinary healing powers. In Greek mythology, Asclepius, the god of medical art, had a snake as his emblem. In each temple dedicated to him a snake from Epidaurus, which was the seat of his main sanctuary, was kept. Asclepius worked wonders, appearing in the dreams of the sick, whose healing was a mystical and religious experience⁴⁷. The instrument of the god of medicine was a rod with a coiled serpent, through which the transition from sickness to health could occur⁴⁸. The Philonian interpretation of Num 21, 4-9 maintains the curative character of the serpent symbol in Greek-Roman culture. As we have seen, this instead is not explicit in the *Septuagint*. But, the 'cure' of the bronze snake, according to Philo, is a healing of pleasure in the name of

⁴⁶ See, for example, the 'theriaca', whose name derives from the adjective θηριακός, literally 'of wild animals'. The 'theriaca' is an ancient pharmaceutical preparation against the venomous bite of vipers, which contains viper flesh among its ingredients. It is attributed to the Andromachus (I Cent.). See Galenus, *De theriaca ad Pisonem* II; VX; XIII-XV, XVII.

⁴⁷ Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* II, 26, 3-5; Hyginus, *De astronomia* II, 14, 5; Pindarus, *Pythian* III, 8-67. According to mythology, Asclepius was born of the god Apollo who is linked to snake symbolism (*Hymnus homericus ad Apollinem* III, 182-387; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 140; Euripides, *Iphigenia Taurica* 1234-1282). See the god of medical art in relation to the myth of the gorgon Medusa, whose blood was used by Asclepius to raise the dead (Euripides, *Alceste* 1-76; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* III, 10, 3-4).

⁴⁸ Asclepius' rod is distinguished, despite the similarities, from the κηρύκειον ('caduceus') of Hermes. Hermes' caduceus was a rod around which were wrapped two snakes, representing the polarities of good and evil. But in Asclepius' rod there was only one coiled serpent. Thanks to his caduceus, Hermes, the messenger of the gods, led spirits into the underworld. Hermes' rod, contrary to that of Asclepius, did not lead to life but to the dead (Homerus, *Odyssea* XXIV, 1-18). Note, however, that the noun κηρύκειον could also indicate a 'surgical instrument'. For κηρύκειον in Philo, see *Aet.* 68; *Legat.* 94; 100; 102. In the Greek-Roman world, the association of snake symbolism to the underworld is clearly visible in its function as ψυχοπομπός (literally 'conductor of souls'), which is seen on ancient funeral urns or in burial sites. But although snake symbolism is present in myths about the underworld, it is also related to agricultural prosperity and to life. For example, Triptolemus' chariot is pulled by winged serpents. Riding this chariot, the hero sowed wheat, spreading cultivation among the people (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* I, 5; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* VI, 2; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 147). The snake in the Greek-Roman world, on the one hand, could strike terror in the hair of the Gorgons and of the Erinyes or personified in Python, but on the other hand the snake represented in shields and ancient amulets, had the power to ward off and protect from evil. This duality of life and death, good and evil, unfolds the original sense of ποικιλία which featured the symbol of the serpent in the ancient world.

temperance. It is carried out only on a moral level, from which any magical or miraculous reference is denied.

In *John*, Christ is compared to the serpent of Num 21, 4-9 in that both the crucified Christ and the bronze serpent communicate a message of salvation. In Jn 3, 14-15 it is written: «καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὑψώσε τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται, ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον (“and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”))»⁴⁹. Jesus is the *Christus Medicus* who cures the patient-sinner with a miracle, but who is himself also the *Infirmus* who dies on the cross for humankind⁵⁰. Sacrificing himself like the bronze snake, Jesus redeems sinners from evil. The same duality of meaning is also found in the Christian symbolism of the cross, which is the instrument which kills Jesus but is also the instrument of his resurrection. In the early ages of Christianity the cross as a symbol of Christ, in fact, was accepted with hesitation due its widespread use as method of capital punishment, and only later was uniquely recognized as a symbol of salvation⁵¹.

The bronze serpent of Philo distinguishes itself from the post-biblical Jewish interpretation, from the Classical Greek tradition of Asclepius and the Christ-serpent of Jn 3, 13-14. In post-biblical Judaism, the snake of *Numbers* is seen as a sign of disobedience to God and of the lack of faith which can be remedied through repentance. But, between this interpretation

⁴⁹ See E. NESTLE (eds), *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Stuttgart 2012. Cf. Rom 8: 3; 2 Cor 5, 21; Gal 3, 13.

⁵⁰ In Christian tradition, sin and disease often overlap. The *infirmus*, who is both the patient and sinner, represents the archetype of the ‘needy’. In fact, the *infirmus*, shows the sign of divine punishment, and arouses compassion in those who see it. The *Christus Medicus* also transmits its pharmacological power to the apostles who can also cure disease (Mk 6, 7-13; 16, 17-18; Mt 10, 1-16; Lk 9, 1-8). In particular, Paul of Tarsus, immune to the poisonous bite of snakes, during his stay in Malta tended to the islanders who were suffering from all kinds of infirmities (Acts 28, 1-10). See the entry *Médecin (Le Christ)* in M. VILLER - F. CAVALLERA - J. DE GUIBERT, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité: ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (vol. 10), Paris 1980, 891-901; P. TOURNIER, *Medicina e Bibbia*, Torino 1958, 891-901; J. AGGRUMI - C. CRISCIANI, *Malato, medico e medicina nel Medioevo*, Torino 1980, 9-10; H. C. KEE, *Medicina, miracolo e magia nei tempi del Nuovo Testamento*, Brescia 1993, 110-112; 124-132; 191-192.

⁵¹ For the comparison of the cross with the rod on which the serpent of *Numbers* is lifted up, see: Barnabas Apostolus, *Epistola catholica* XII, 54-61; Iustinus Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judeo* XCIV, 1-2; *Apologia prima pro Christianis* LX, 3.

and Philo's exegesis there is the same difference that distinguishes symbol from allegory. In fact, in post-biblical Judaism, the bronze serpent has a symbolic character and it is considered as a mere instrument of God's will. Philo, however, considers Num 21, 4-9 allegorically, by relating the biblical context with ethics and gives Moses' snake a certain role in his philosophy. In the myth of Asclepius, healing has no moral significance and the snake symbol does not show the ἥθος which should be followed. In *John* the homeopathic character of the snake is absent, because Jesus, as 'crucified snake', can only represent salvation, but not also evil.

7. Leg. 2, 79-81 and the patristic literature

Philo's exegesis of Num 21, 4-9 is present in some ecclesiastical authors who, despite the many elements of analogy with Philo, never recall the noetic dimension of his interpretation, preferring rather its ethical and pharmacological aspects. In Tertullian (II - III Cent.), Origen (II - III Cent.), Gregory Nazianzen (IV Cent.) and Ambrose (IV Cent.) we find the bronze serpent as φάρμακον, just as in the Philonian exegesis. Tertullian defines the bronze serpent as *remedium* ('remedy/medicine'), that, manifested as *pendentis habitu* ('in the figure of one who was hanging'), shows the curative power of Jesus' cross. The bronze snake unmasks the evil serpent and announces healing from sin into salvation⁵². The Philonian opposition of Leg. 2, 79-81 between ὄφις Μωυσέως and ὄφις Εὐας reappears as a struggle between good and evil. Origen on Num 21, 4-9 speaks of a double crucifixion because the bronze serpent, as well as showing the τύπος of the Passion as an image of the crucified Christ, conceals a second crucifixion. According to Origen, it is the devil who was hanged and nailed to the cross of the Lord⁵³. According to Gregory Nazianzen, the bronze serpent is the ἀντίτυπος (literally 'shot rejected/bounced' and therefore 'inverted figure/correspondent

⁵² Tertullianus, *De idolatria* V, 4; *Adversus Marcionem* II, XXII, 1; III, XVIII, 7.

⁵³ See G. COPPA (ed.), *74 Omelie sul Libro dei Salmi*, translation and adaptation of Jerome, Milano 1993, 353-354. Undoubted is the Philo's knowledge of Origen, whose work has many similarities with the Philonian exegesis. See, D. T. RUNIA, *Filone di Alessandria nella prima letteratura cristiana. Uno studio d'insieme*, a cura di R. Radice, Milano 1999, 171-198.

opposite') of Jesus' crucifixion, because it involves the killing of the diabolic snake that was the cause of evil⁵⁴. The snake of Num 21, 8-9 saves, in fact, all those who contemplate it with faith, not because it is alive, but because it is dead (crucified) and, along with it, all evil powers have died⁵⁵.

Ambrose, as Philo, clearly distinguishes between the evil serpent of *Genesis* and the good serpent of *Numbers*⁵⁶. In the symbol of the bronze serpent, according to Ambrose, Christ acquires the aspect of a sinner, but without the reality of sin. In fact, raised on the cross, he assumes the role of the snake only to destroy the snake of *Genesis*⁵⁷. The snake of Moses was made to punish the snake of original sin. Its symbolic meaning in Ambrose extends to represent a medicine for every heresy. The snake, as such, produces poison: its harmful bite corrodes the good nature of man, but in its own poison can be found the antidote to evil. According to Ambrose the snake, in fact, expels its poison before coupling: one must imitate the snake that vomits its poison, abandon all evil thoughts and devote oneself to good works⁵⁸.

The snake, according to Philo's interpretation, as pleasure and anti-pleasure is also found in the IV Cent. exegesis of Gregory of Nyssa, in whose works the influence of Philo is fundamental⁵⁹. According to Gregory of Nyssa, many roads lead to illness, but in particular, the despicable desires represented by the poisonous serpents of *Numbers* unleash it. Moses, as physician, prevents this unhealthy state from taking hold of all of those who have no faith in God and blocks disease so that it does not prevail⁶⁰. The bite of the evil snakes instills a

⁵⁴ Gregorius Nazianzensus, *Orationes* IV, 65. See the item ἀντίτυπος in KITTEL - FRIEDRICH, *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento* (vol. 13), Op. cit., 1470.

⁵⁵ Gregorius Nazianzensus, *Orationes* XLV, 22.

⁵⁶ Ambrose is influenced by Philo's exegesis, from which he often takes material without explicitly mentioning the source and, when necessary, reworks them in order to render them similar to Christian doctrine. For the relationship between Ambrose and Philo, see: Runia, *Filone*, Op. cit., 308-327.

⁵⁷ Ambrosius, *Enarrationes in psalmos duodecim XXXVII*, 8-9.

⁵⁸ Compare with *Physiologus* XI, XXIV, IX. F. SBORDONE (ed.), *Physiologus*, Roma 1936, 40-41; 249-250; 273-274.

⁵⁹ For the influence of Philo in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, see Runia, *Filone*, Op. cit., 257-269.

⁶⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus, *De vita Moysis* I-II, 68; 271-278. See, A. C. GELJON, *Moses as Example. The Philonic Background of Gregory of Nyssa's De vita Mosis*, Ph. D. diss., Leiden 2000.

deadly poison, but Moses, by fabricating the bronze serpent, makes the virulence of desire infertile. There is only one possible cure for the poisonous bite: purification of the soul through the mystery of religion. The antidote against pleasure is to look with faith to the crucifixion of Christ. Turning our gaze to the cross means crucifying one's life to make it immune from all sin. The raising of Moses' serpent, teaching respect for the law, cures those who have disobeyed God. But it cannot completely eradicate desire, which may also have affected the faithful, because the legislator-physician, cures at the same time as evil advances.

8. *Ἡ ὄφις Μωυσέως of Philo in relation to the fantastical imagery of the Physiologus*

The *Physiologus*, a zoological comment on the Old and New Testaments, composed in the Judeo-Christian milieu of Alexandria between the second and third centuries and the matrix of all medieval bestiaries, describes the moralized natures ('φύσεις') of animals⁶¹. The anonymous author of the text, known as φυσιολόγος ('scholar of nature'), considers pleasure as a dress worn out by time which needs to be renewed. Regarding the first of the four natures of snakes to be found in the *Physiologus*, the 'scholar of nature' states that, in order to stay young, the serpent fasts until its skin becomes limp. By rubbing against a narrow gap in a rock, the snake could shed its old skin to become νέος ('young/new') again⁶². Γῆρας means both 'old age' and 'slough of a serpent'. Like the snake which regularly changes its skin, in order not to be blinded by vice, it is necessary to renew oneself and become young again.

Regarding the third nature of snakes in the *Physiologus*, the 'scholar of nature' writes: «ὅταν ἴδῃ ὁ ὄφις ἄνθρωπον γυμνόν, φοβεῖται καὶ ἀποστρέφεται · ἐπὶ δὲ ἡμφιεσμένον αὐτὸν ἴδῃ, ἀλλεται ἔπ'αὐτόν» ("when the snake sees a naked man, it is frightened and escapes: but

⁶¹ Sbordone, in the edition of 1936, considers the text of *Physiologus* according to the three main editions (Greek, Byzantine and pseudo-Basilian). F. SBORDONE, *Ricerche sulle fonti e sulla composizione del Physiologus greco*, Napoli 1936, 154-200.

⁶² *Physiologus* XI, 37-38; XXIV, 248; IX, 273. See, A. ZUCKER (ed.), *Physiologos. Le bestiaire des bestiaires*, Grenoble 2004.

if it sees him dressed, it leaps on him”»⁶³. The serpent in the *Physiologus* represents the punishment of dissolute pleasure and attacks those who wear τὰ σκίνα τῆς ἡδονῆς (‘the fig leaves of pleasure’)⁶⁴. As the serpent of *Numbers* according to the Philonian exegesis, the serpent of φυσιολόγος shows its alliance with good in its opposition to vice. By punishing those who wear the clothes of desire, the snake keeps check on the moral nudity of man.

9. Conclusions

According to Philo, the snake on the one hand, as ὄφις Εὐάα, represents vice, but on the other, as ὄφις Μωυσέως, it represents virtue. Philo interprets the bronze serpent on both an ethical and noetic level. As λόγος σωφροσύνης it represents intelligible virtue. Moses’ snake is the ἰδέα that must be contemplated as a moral model to imitate, in order to eliminate every vice.

The bronze serpent, as ethical and noetic mirror, represents a new opportunity for the Israelites to embrace faith in the name of temperance. Philo’s exegesis of Num 21, 4-9, imbued with elements of the Greek-Roman world and Jewish tradition, returns in the interpretations of some early Christian writers. They interpret the snake of *Numbers* in relation to Jn 3, 14-15 and are especially influenced by the ethical and pharmacological aspects of Philo’s exegesis. The Philonian interpretation of Num 21, 4-9 can also be considered in relation to the fantastical imagery of medieval bestiaries, where animals become moral models.

⁶³ *Physiologus* XXVI, 41-42; XXIV, 250; IX, 274. In the Latin *versio bis* of *Physiologus* (XII Cent.) snakes are not found in a description dedicated to them alone which instead we find in the Greek *Physiologus*. However references to snakes are present in the descriptions of other animals (see for example chapter XIX *De ydro*). A description dedicated to ‘the snake’ returns in the *Bestiary* of Gervaise 501-620 (XIII Cent.), in the bestiary of Tuscany *The Nature of Animals* XXVII; XLVIII (XIII Cent.), in the *Moralized Bestiary* LXI-LXIII (XIII-XIV Cent.) and in the *Acerba* of Cecco d’Ascoli XXXI-XXXIII (XIII sec.). The nature of snakes is similar to that which is described in the Greek *Physiologus* and is enriched with further details. Over time the figures of serpent, dragon and viper, are differentiated and are characterized by often conflicting connotations. See, L. MORINI (ed.), *Bestiari medievali*, Torino 1996, 44-47; 317-323; 453-454; 464-465; 523-524; 600-602.

⁶⁴ *Physiologus* XI, 42. See. Gen 3, 7. Adam and Eve, after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge and disobeying God, realized they were naked and, weaving φύλλα σκίης (‘fig leaves’), made belts to hide their nakedness.

During the centuries, the intelligible (or Platonic) character of Philonian exegesis regarding the snake of *Numbers* is not explored: this is an innovative and isolated element of his interpretation. Philo has made an essential contribution to the development of the pharmacological and ethical characters of Moses' serpent. In addition, he has contributed to the affirmation of a positive image of the snake which, divided between good and evil, represents temperance. Contemplating the σωφροσύνη means conquering vice and embracing virtue.