

THE GOD OF MEDICINE

Among the many deities the "Phoenicians" worshipped we encounter one called "Eshmun". The ancient Greek writers are unanimous in affirming that Eshmun and the Greek deity Asklepios are the same.¹ As we know Asklepios was the Greek god of Medicine and many Temples were erected to him. The ruins of many of those still exist in Thessaly, Epidaurus, Cos etc. This god is commonly represented with a club-like votive staff with a serpent coiled around it or in the form of a snake. In the Temples to this god snakes were cultivated for the ritual.² Why should a serpent symbolise this god of medicine? What connection is there between the snake and Medicine? In Greek mythology we do not find any explanation for this. But it is known that the Greeks adopted this god from the Phoenicians. In the light of what we have shown to prove that "Phoenicians" was the name given to the Israelites, let us therefore search for an explanation in the Israelite tradition.

The Bible tells us³ that when the Israelites were in the desert a plague broke out of fiery serpents which bit the people many of whom died, "And Moses made a serpent of brass and set it upon the standard: and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived". In the book of Kings we read about King Hezekiah, one of the last Judean kings, as follows: "...and he brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan"⁴ Therefore, over a very long period, from that of Moses till nearly that of the captivity, the Israelites burned incense to the serpent of brass, i. e. they worshipped it as a god. This brazen serpent, as we are told, was formed to heal those who were bitten by the snakes, therefore if the Israelites continue to worship it, it must be supposed that in their consciousness it was a healing deity – a deity of medicine, similar to the snake on a club like staff which later on represented the god of Medicine – Asklepios. Here archaeology comes to our aid. In 1901 Macridy bey excavated in Sidon and unearthed a temple to the god Eshmun,⁵ In this temple an inscription was discovered dedicating the construction to the god

1 Contenau, *ibid.* p. 92.

2 Untill today a serpent coiled around a votive staff symbolises medical associations and world wide medicine.

3 Nu. 21: 6–10.

4 2Kn., 18: 4

5 Contenau, *ibid.* p. 142.

Eshmun who was in this inscription named "God Eshmun sar Kadesh (ruler of Kadesh – N. G.).⁶

Reading about the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert, we find that they arrived "in the wilderness of Zin, which is Kadesh" ⁷. From Kadesh they move to Mount Hor,⁸ and on their leaving Mount Hor they come across the snakes, i. e. the brazen serpent is formed when they left the site of Kadesh but were still in the desert of Kadesh.

The Israelites worship the brazen – snake which represents a healing – god. The Greek god Asklepios is identical to the "Phoenician" god Eshmun called also "Eshmun Sar Kadesh" – Eshmun ruler of Kadesh. It was seen that the Israelites were called Phoenicians by the Greeks, therefore it might be assumed that "Eshmun Sar Kadesh" is the representation of the brazen-serpent that Moses created in the desert of Kadesh, and hence its appellation "Sar Kadesh". It is probable that the name Eshmun is a distortion of the Hebrew name "Yeshimon" (= wilderness) and we might see this as a reference to its creation in the wilderness. Virrolleaud remarks that the name Eshmun is met also in the form "Yashimunu" in the seventh century B. C. in a treaty between Esarhadon and the king of Tyre.⁹

According to Contenau,¹⁰ Damascius (sixth century A. D.) identifies Adonis with the gods Asklepios and Eshmun and cites him saying that this god is "neither Egyptian nor Greek, but Phoenician".

Adonis is generally accepted as a Greek transcription for the Semitic name Adon. and according to Damascius, Adonis and Asklepios are the same, it might therefore be assumed that the brazen – serpent created by Moses was originally formed only to symbolise the god Adon, and that Moses did not intend giving the Israelites a new god which they created out of the brazen serpent.

6 Slouschz, *Otzar Haketovot Hafenikiot*, p. 23, 28, 30. (Hebrew) see also: Contenau, *ibid.* p. 143. *Deuxième Mission Archéologique A' Sidon*, SY. 1924, p. 16.

7 Nu. 33: 36 ; 20: 1 ; 27: 14.

8 Nu. 20: 22.

9 Virrolleaud, *Six Texts De Ras Shamra Provenant De La XIV Campagne (1950)*, SY., 28, 1951, p. 164. see also: Dussaud, *Melqart*, SY., 25; 1946, (48), p. 209.

10 Contenau, *La Civilisation Phénicienne*, p. 94–95.