

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 11

Chapters 21:5 – 21:35

Soon after the beginning of the fortieth year after leaving Egypt, the Nation of Israel had left Mount Sinai, traveled to Kadesh, buried Mariam when she died there, attempted to cross through the Edomite land but was denied, retreated back to Mount Hor where Aaron died and then fought against the king of the Canaanites from the village of Arad and totally destroyed them. After a month of mourning and victory in the war, Moses led the nation around to the east of Edom's territory to blaze its own trail to the north in extremely difficult and rugged conditions. With the taste of victory on their lips with the help of the LORD, no doubt the Israelites did not understand why Moses did not lead them up the well-traveled King's Highway right through the middle of Edom and let the LORD deal with the cousins if they attacked. But that was not the LORD's plan or Moses'. On that rough and rugged trail, the people became impatient with God and Moses.

Impatience with God and Moses

Num 21:5 The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

We would expect that after forty years Egypt would have been the last place in the world that this group would have wanted to return to. Most of them had no real knowledge of Egypt save the oldest ones in the nation, 45 – 59 years old. Evidently, back at Mount Sinai, the nation was able to gather other sources of food from that area during their extended stay. Our best guess might be the herbs used for seasonings. Those were not to be found on the rugged road and that is understandable. Water was an issue. Once the people begin to parallel the Dead Sea, streams that fed into that sea would be prevalent every few miles. Soon water would not be an issue. However, the comment that "they loathe this miserable food" was a slap at the *manna* they had eaten for forty years. For the majority, it had been their staple for three meals a day for the entire forty years. It truly was all they needed for bodily sustenance, just the right amount of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. Never has a dietary plan of ready-to-eat meals been so perfectly created for the human body. It was the perfect food of foods! But like all humans, they became unhappy with the *perfect* food and want something else. That did not make the Master Chef happy at all.

Fiery Serpents

Num 21:6 The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

Snakes! Snakes whose bites caused flaming hot sores. Snakes whose bites brought death to everyone bitten. Almost everyone who had complained was bitten. Knowing the Nation of

Israel as we know it from the book of Exodus and the first half of this book, we can be sure, very few Israelites were not bitten by a venomous snake.

Repentance of Israelites

Num 21:7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

Hmm! Let us follow this cycle just to make sure we understand it and never repeat it in our own lives. The people became angry with God and their leader. The people blamed God and their leader for their circumstances. The people sinned by not trusting in God and their leader and complained about the biggest blessing that had been a part of their lives for all their lives. God sent a punishment to correct their ways, a kind of consequence for the true intent of their hearts in the matter. All of a sudden, the people realized that they had sinned against God and their leader. To whom did they run? God and their leader! Now, where did they get off track in the first place? Everything was fine until they hit a bumpy patch in the road. "God is for us!" they must have screamed at the victory over the king of the Arabs just a few days before. Then, uh-oh, pot-hole in the road, "Where are God and Moses when you need Them? Why aren't they doing something about this path we are on? Help! Moses, help! Please talk to God about this and get something done." All of a sudden, they returned to religion! All of a sudden, they turned to God! All of a sudden, they thought logically about their circumstances and made a good choice.

Bronze Serpent for Remembrance

Num 21:8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."
21:9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Here we come to a difficult instruction to swallow from our point of view. Didn't the LORD instruct them that no graven image of anything was to be made for the purpose of worship! Yes! So how does this standard with a carving of a serpent on it fit within the theology of God? Here is the answer. The standard with the serpent was to remind them of their sin and Who was able to heal them. It was not a standard to be worshiped. We said this before in this commentary, but it bears repeating because it is so important. Humans need reminders! The 170-foot cross that stands on the campus of Sagemont Church is nothing more than a reminder. It is not a graven image as some Jehovah's Witnesses have protested to this congregation. It does not have a carving of the LORD attached to it as the Catholics present it on most of their campuses. Neither is it a holy relic to be worshiped and adored. It is a reminder to all of what the LORD Jesus did for us on the Cross when He died as the final sacrifice for the remission and atonement for our sins. Why did Sagemont Church build it? Because in this godless world humans need a reminder of Him. Millions of people drive by the cross every day. Some are drawn to it, not because it has special powers, but because they are at the end of their ropes in terrible situations, hopeless at every corner and turn, yet, they have heard the old, old story of Jesus and his love and what He did for them on the cross and they want to get near Him. Is He at the cross? Yes! Is He on the

Cross? No. When they draw near to Him, He is there. When they run from Him, He is there. No one can escape the presence of the LORD at any time in any way. But He will not lord it over anyone at any time! The symbol of the cross is the reminder. When people see it, they think of Him. When people see it, they want what He has to offer. When people step under the cross, alone and small in comparison, it is a tremendous example of how big He is and what He is capable of doing for anyone who will trust in Him, lay their burdens at His feet and follow Him.

The people of Israel needed a reminder about their sin and their Savior. He was not Moses, He was the LORD God Almighty. The reminder is about their specific sin and their specific healing. Jesus will remind His Apostle of the time in Moses life's when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. So too, He will be lifted up for their sin. To the LORD's death on the cross we must look, or, we must die spiritually.

Camp at Oboth

Num 21:10 Now the sons of Israel moved out and camped in Oboth.

This camp location is unknown. Surely it is on the east side of the Edomite territory but from there we have no further information except that the name *Oboth* means *bottles*.

Camp at Iye-abarim

Num 21:11 They journeyed from Oboth and camped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness which is opposite Moab, to the east.

As with Oboth, we do not know the exact location of this campsite. It was east of Moab. This means that the nation was still on the trail they were creating and not the well-traveled King's Highway which divided Moab from north to south. We do know that the word "Iye" means *heap*. We also know that "Abarim" is a mountain range east and southeast of the Dead Sea which extends from Mount Nebo to the Arabian desert.

Camp at Wadi Zered

Num 21:12 From there they set out and camped in Wadi Zered.

Finally, we can identify the general location of the nation when they arrived at the Wadi Zered. This river is 50 miles long and it runs west with a turn to the north-west on the east side of the Dead Sea. The last 32 miles of this river provide a constant heavy flow of water which empties into the south end of the Dead Sea. It is also the dividing line between the land of Edom and Moab. We do not know exactly where the camp was on that river except that it was outside the boundaries of Edom.

Camp at Arnon

Num 21:13 From there they journeyed and camped on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness that comes out of the border of the Amorites, for the Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.

As with the Wadi Zered, the nation crossed the Wadi Arnon, a river that flowed from the east to the west into the Dead Sea. This marks a joyous occasion for Israel as it marks the first official entrance into the territory of their Promised Land. The nation of Israel did not bother the Moabites but stayed to the east on their rough road. The nation did not camp on the Moabite side but crossed the Wadi Arnon and entered into the land of the Amorites to camp. They would have camped on the north side of the Arnon at the river in order to have the water resource. The river was the boundary for most of the border between Moab and the Amorites but not all as we will see. (At this time, Israel had moved into what was Moab's land; however, Sihon, the king of the Amorites had recently taken it away from the Moabites all the way to the Arnon River. See 21:26)

Book of Wars

Num 21:14 Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD, "Waheb in Suphah, And the wadis of the Arnon, ^{21:15} And the slope of the wadis that extends to the site of Ar, And leans to the border of Moab."

We know nothing of this "Book of the Wars of the Lord." The Holy Spirit did not see fit to include it in His Holy Scriptures. We can surmise that "Waheb" was a village in the district of "Suphah" but the whereabouts is unknown. We know the location of the Wadi Arnon but it has so many steep and rugged banks that any of them could have been the site of Ar which "leans to the border of Moab" indicating it was on the Arnon river to the east but outside the boarder of Moab.

This whole passage is a detailed description of the first campsite in the Promised Land mentioned in 21:13. It also may well have been the first entry in the lost "Book of Wars," but that is speculation.

To Beer – New Well and On to Pisgah

Num 21:16 From there *they continued* to Beer, that is the well where the LORD said to Moses, "Assemble the people, that I may give them water." ^{21:17} Then Israel sang this song: "Spring up, O well! Sing to it! ^{21:18a} "The well, which the leaders sank, Which the nobles of the people dug, With the scepter *and* with their staffs." ^{18b} And from the wilderness *they continued* to Mattanah, and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the land of Moab, at the top of Pisgah which overlooks the wasteland.

From the first camp inside the Promised Land on the north side of the Arnon River, the nation traveled to Beer where it dug a well to gather water, then they made their way to Mattanah, Nathalie, Bamoth and on to a valley in the land of Moab next to Pisgah. We do not know where these places were located. However, it seems that this path was virtually westbound along the Arnon River until it turned to enter Moab and flow into the Dead Sea. Thus, the nation was once again in the northern section of Moab and in a valley at the foot of Pisgah very near the Dead Sea. (This section had not been captured by the Amorites or taken from the Moabites.)

“Pisgah” is *pisgah* in Hebrew. It means *cleft or summit*. It is not the name of the mountain, it is the *peak, apex, crown, cap or top*. Deuteronomy 34:1 says, “Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah.” In other words, Pisgah is the peak of Mount Nebo. From that peak, the Israelites could see “the wasteland.” That is a poor translation. The Hebrew word is *Jeshimon* and it means *toward the waste*. It is a reference to the *waste* of the Dead Sea which was formed when the waters of the Jordan River (and smaller tributaries) rushed into the hole to cover the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that were destroyed by the LORD because of their great sin of sodomy/homosexuality. There on the peak of Mount Nebo, the nation could catch their first glimpse of the consequences dispensed by the LORD on those cities in the days of Abraham and Lot, stories they had only heard about in the record Moses had already completed called *Book of Beginnings*, or as we know it, *Genesis*.

Message to Sihon, King of Amorites

Num 21:21 Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, saying, **21:22** "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn off into field or vineyard; we will not drink water from wells. We will go by the king's highway until we have passed through your border."

Moses made the same offer to king Sihon that he made to his cousin king in Edom. The King's Highway split the Amorite land just as it split Moab and Edom. For reference, Israel had already crossed the highway from east to west to camp in the valley at Mount Nebo. They would need to turn back east to pick up the highway and turn to the north to go through the Amorite land.

Sihon Rejects Request

Num 21:23 But Sihon would not permit Israel to pass through his border. So Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness, and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

Sihon responded exactly as the Edomite king did and marched out to make war with Israel. Moses was not in the passive mood that he was in with his Edomite cousins and neither were Israel or the LORD.

Israel takes Land of Sihon – Arnon to Jabbok

Num 21:24 Then Israel struck him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the sons of Ammon; for the border of the sons of Ammon *was* Jazer. **21:25** Israel took all these cities and Israel lived in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all her villages. **21:26** For Heshbon was the city of Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Arnon.

Moses had not attacked the Moabites. Moab was the son of Lot born nine months after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah which formed the Dead Sea. Ammon was Moab's brother, son of Lot, born about the same time as Moab under the same circumstances as Moab. When the battle with Sihon and his Amorite army occurred, the LORD delivered Israel with a resounding victory and captured its first plot of land in the Promised Land. It did not take the

land of Ammon or Moab. In fact, it will return to Moab the land taken by Sihon and established as the capital of the Amorites. Although this was a total destruction of Sihon and his clan of Amorites that bordered Moab and Ammon, it was not the total destruction of the Amorites.

The Proverbs Concerning Sihon

Num 21:27 Therefore those who use proverbs say, "Come to Heshbon! Let it be built! So let the city of Sihon be established. **21:28** "For a fire went forth from Heshbon, A flame from the town of Sihon; It devoured Ar of Moab, The dominant heights of the Arnon. **21:29** "Woe to you, O Moab! You are ruined, O people of Chemosh! He has given his sons as fugitives, And his daughters into captivity, To an Amorite king, Sihon. **21:30** "But we have cast them down, Heshbon is ruined as far as Dibon, Then we have laid waste even to Nophah, Which *reaches* to Medeba." **21:31** Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites.

This proverb traces Moab's loss of her land and the city of Heshbon to Sihon. It also names Moab's god, Chemosh. The proverb then records Sihon's defeat and Israel's possession of this portion of Amorite land.

Spies to Jazer

Num 21:32 Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who *were* there.

But there was more Amorite land to take. The district of Jazer was named after one of Ammon's sons. It had been captured by the Amorites and had many villages. The Israelites attacked it and gathered more of the Promised Land for its inheritance.

Camp at Bashan, Og the King

Num 21:33 Then they turned and went up by the way of Bashan, and Og the king of Bashan went out with all his people, for battle at Edrei. **21:34** But the LORD said to Moses, "Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon." **21:35** So they killed him and his sons and all his people, until there was no remnant left him; and they possessed his land.

The next stop for Israel was near Bashan. This, too, was Amorite controlled land. Og, the Amorite king of Bashan, set his mind to fight Moses and the Nation of Israel. This, too, was a mistake. Just as with Sihon, the LORD delivered Bashan into the hands of Israel.

Of Israel's three battles thus far, this was most likely the one the Israelites feared the most. Og led a large and powerful army trained in warfare. Notice that the LORD spoke to Israel to calm its fear of Og. When it was all said and done, the place where the battle occurred was called "Edrei" which translates as *a great mass*. It was there that Israel killed a great mass of Amorites and captured more of their blessed and anticipated Promised Land.