

## NUMBERS 21 A NEW BEGINNING (SORT OF)

### BATTLE AT HORMAH (21:1-3)

Look at the description of the place, can you recall the last time this place was mentioned? (Clue: look at Numbers 14:39-45) How long ago was that?

What happened the last time? Why?

Look closely at verse 2, what difference do you see in this new generation of Israelites?

The vow in verse 2 says "I will utterly destroy their cities." The original Hebraic text translated directly means to "put their city to the ban." To understand this meaning, cross reference to Joshua 6:17, 21. Also examine the following verses and contrast Josh. 6:17, 21; 1 Sam. 15:3 with Deut. 2:34-35; 3:6-7.

One of the things that puzzles modern readers is these utter destruction (or Hormah) in the Israelites' conquests in Canaan. How are we to view them?

For a start, look at verse 1; what do you think prompted the attacks from Israel?

Now take a look at Genesis 15:13-16 and Exodus 12:41. What principles can you gather from these verses? For additional cross references, you can look also at 1 Kings 11:12 and Matthew 23:32.

Finally, take a look at Judges 2:1-4 (if you like you can look at chapter 1 as well). What can these Scripture text add to your understanding of the "utter destruction" of the Canaanites?

How can I apply these historical facts to my Christian life today?

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## NUMBERS 21:4-9 THE BRONZE SERPENT

If you need to, you can refer to the map provided in the last set of notes on this part of the journey for the Israelites. By now the composition of the nation would be predominantly second generation (after the exodus from Egypt). We see that the favorite pass-time for the Israelites continues even with the new generation of people:

What was the reason for their grumblings (verse 4)? Check other Bible translations if you can and find out how the word 'discouraged' is also translated?

Who did the people complaint against?

What is the complaint? Can you list them?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Do you think these complaints are justified? See Moses testimonies in Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:2-4 and review these complaints again. If you want to, dive a little deeper into the motivation for these complaints? Think of Paul's testimony in Philippians 4:11 and the exhortation in Hebrews 13:5; how can I avoid this tendency to grumble?

Turn to 1 Corinthians 10:9; what is the assessment of Paul on the people in Numbers 21:4-9? In what way had they tempted Christ? What is the object lesson from Paul for us?

What is the judgment from God?

Note: It is encouraging to know that in this event, the chastening of the Lord produces sorrow and repentance. Rather than Moses interceding and pleading for God's mercy for them, in verse 7, it is the people that came to Moses to ask him to mediate and plea for God's forgiveness.

What is the solution from God?

In verse 8, "when he looks at it, shall live", the word 'look' has the idea of a willing attentiveness. Consider the discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus in John 3:14, 15. Consider also Isaiah 45:22; now discuss among your group how you would understand "faith" from all these passages?

Another passage that mentioned the bronze serpent is in 2 Kings 18:4. Discuss what would be the wrong way to look at this incident.

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## SPECIAL NOTES ON THE BRONZE SERPENT

Some err in their evaluation of the “salvation” that came from looking at this snake. Some contemporary theologians and Bible teachers debate on how intense one’s gaze at the bronze serpent had to be for one to be “saved.” Discussions rage on the meaning of the verb “to look” (*nāḥaṭ* in the Hiphil). One party says merely a glance was needed; the other says the text demands a constant, groping stare. The one party says the glance is akin to making a commitment of faith in Christ; the other party says that the gaze is akin to making Christ the Lord of one’s life. In this arcane debate these teachers quite miss the point. This text does not speak of eternal salvation or of what a Hebrew person had to do to be saved forever before God. It certainly should not be used as a touch-point for the debate over “lordship salvation.” The passage speaks plainly of physical healing from a critical disease. Health, not heaven, is the issue here. The people were redeemed already by blood and covenant and by Passover deliverance; the issue remained for each of them: How long may they continue to live this life? Those over twenty were already on a death course; those under twenty had an opportunity for a long life in the land. Many would die in the desert of the fiery venom of these snakes, but not all had to die. God would keep many alive if they would only do as he demanded.

What is distinctive in this essentially judgment text is the unusual symbol of God’s grace that reaches all the way to the Savior. In the earlier judgments there was regularly the demonstration of the wrath of God, the prayer of Moses for help, and the repentance of the people. These acts would then usually lead to some lessening of the pain of the plague until the evil ebbed away. In this plague there is something that is truly different: there is a symbol of hope that is disgusting in nature but has healing properties that are most surprising. Here we find an amazing sense of God’s presence in the most unlikely of places, the symbol of evil—a snake.

This was not magic but the dramatic provision of the Lord to demand personal responses from the people. Similar actions demanded of people are found elsewhere in the OT; an example is the story of leprous Naaman who was told to dip seven times in the Jordan to be cleansed (2 Kings 5:10). The healing of the afflicted people of Israel was not in the efficacy of the metal snake any more than the cleansing of Naaman was in the purging waters of the Jordan; the issue was a purposeful and deliberate response of faith in the mercy of the Lord. The improbability of a person being able to survive a deadly snake bite simply by looking at a metal image of a snake held high on a pole is seized on by our Lord to affirm an even greater imponderability: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).

The reader of John 3 is impressed with the interplay of judgment and salvation themes. This creative admixture lends itself splendidly to the interplay of serpents and deliverance. By the initiative of God, the curse becomes the basis for salvation. This is a paradox that spans the testaments.

No one reading this can shirk the sense of foreboding the snake conjures in most people. The snake reaches all the way back to the Garden, the unwelcome and cunning intruder (see the pun on “crafty” on Gen 3:1, compared with “naked” in 2:25). Yet it is principally to the Gospel of John that this text drives us.

The contemptible bread—relates to John 6:48–51.

The contemptible snake—relates to John 3:14.

In both there are portraits of the Savior Jesus. In some circles these days, it has fallen out of style to speak of biblical types. The abuse of typology in former generations, where every spiritual lesson one might derive from a text was declared to be a “type,” has led to a gradual but sure reaction against typology of any kind. Yet the idea of typology is a factor of the text of Scripture, not an innovation of “creative” interpretation (see John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1967], pp. 79–95).

If ever there were a less expected pairing of types, this would be it. The manna was an altogether gracious gift of God, which the people turned against with stomach revulsion. The snakes were an instrument of God’s judgment because of the peoples’ ingratitude and rebellious spirits; yet it was a metal copy of just such a snake that became the means for their deliverance.

The bread is a picture of Jesus; as the Bread of Heaven he is the proper nourisher of his people. The bronze snake is a picture of Jesus, who became sin for us as he hung on that awful tree. The manna had to be eaten. The snake had to be seen. The commands of Scripture are for doing. The manna was no good if left to rot. The metal snake would not avail if none looked at it. The manna and the snake are twin aspects of the grace of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, R. B. (1990). Numbers. In F. E. Gaebelien (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* (Vol. 2, pp. 878–879). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

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## NUMBERS 21:10-20 TRAVEL ITINERARY

After the incident of the serpents, we are given the itinerary of the Israelites as they continue their journey through the Amorite land. There are 2 poetic insertions here of that are of note:

The first poem (14-15) is more like a note to mark where they have been.

The second poem (17-18) is more interesting.

This time instead of water coming out from the rock, Israelites are commanded to dig well for their water. We can ask a few questions on this song:

- What kind of song do you think it is?
- Can you detect the mood in this song?
- What lessons can we learn in this short itinerary and the song of the well?

## NUMBERS 21:21-35 VICTORY OVER KINGS (SIHON AND OG)

Amorites (King Sihon) and Bashan (King Og) lies just north of Edom and Moab and they lie in the path of the route for Israel as they move north to cross the Jordan to enter into the Promise Land.

Compare Numbers 21:21-22 with Deuteronomy 2:24. How would you reconcile the gift with the request to pass through the land unmolested?

What was the result of the battle?

For Sihon and the Amorites, do you think they are weak? (Clue: read the poem/song from verse 27-30; what was the original intention for the song?)

What about the King of Bashan and his people? Are they weak? (For clue, see Joshua 12:4)

What do you think has changed? How would you account for the unbroken victories in chapter 21?

Any application/s that I can gather for myself from this chapter? Discuss and share!

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