

Numbers 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 21. When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atherim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.

And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And the Lord heeded the voice of Israel, and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction.

So the name of the place was called Hormer. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient 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 we loathe this worthless food. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

And 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.

[1 : 07] And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole.

And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. And the people of Israel set out and camped in Oboth. And they set out from Oboth and camped to Ia Abarim, in the wilderness that is opposite Moab, toward the sunrise.

From there they set out and camped in the valley of Zered. From there they set out and camped on the other side of the Anon, which is in the wilderness that extends from the border of the Amorites. For the Anon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.

Therefore it is said in the book of the wars of the Lord, Weheb and Suphah, and the valleys of the Anon, and the slope of the valleys that extends to the seat of Ar, and leans to the border of Moab. And from there they continued to bea, that is, the well of which the Lord said to Moses, Gather the people together, so that I may give them water. Then Israel sang this song, Spring up, O well, sing to it, the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter and with their staffs.

[2 : 19] And from the wilderness they went on to Matanah, and from Matanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab, by the top of Pisgah, that looked down on the desert.

Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, saying, Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into field or vineyard. We will not drink the water of a well.

We will go up by the king's highway until we have passed through your territory. But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. He gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel to the wilderness, and came to Jehaz and fought against Israel.

And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Anon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon and in all its villages.

For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab, and taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Anon. Therefore the ballad singers say, Come to Heshbon, let it be built, let the city of Sihon be established.

[3 : 32] For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon. It devoured Ar of Moab, and swallowed the heights of the Anon. Woe to you, O Moab!

You are undone, O people of Chemosh! He has made his sons fugitives, and his daughters captives, to an Amorite king, Sihon. So we overthrew them. Heshbon as far as Dibon perished, and we laid waste as far as Nofar.

Fire spread as far as Medeba. Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites, and Moses sent to spy out Jezer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who were there.

Then they turned and went up by the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. 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. So they defeated him, and his sons, and all his people, until he had no survivor left, and they possessed his land.

[4 : 38] Numbers chapter 21 begins with Israel being attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad. Arad is a large town in the Negev, about 17 miles south of Hebron.

And here we see something important. Israel deals directly with the Lord. They vowed to the Lord that they will dedicate these cities to him. The name of the place is called Horma.

And this is somewhere that we've encountered about 40 years previously, in Numbers chapter 14, verses 44 to 45. But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp.

Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and defeated them, and pursued them, even to Horma. This location was the site where they had tried to go up and take the land after they had been told that they could not go into it because of the rebellion. And now, at that site of former defeat, they are dedicating the land to the Lord. Israel vows to dedicate the cities of the Canaanite king of Arad to destruction, and the place is named Horma, destruction for this fact.

[5 : 46] But now the Israelites complain again. They hate the food, and they lack water. They complain against Moses and against the Lord. This is the very last complaint of the Israelites along such lines, but it's important to see how things play out.

The Lord lets loose fiery serpents among them. In Deuteronomy chapter 8, verses 14 to 16, we read of serpents in the wilderness. The Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions, a thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.

Numbers 21 is the only reference to encounter with such snakes in the wilderness. Daniel Lowenstein observes that the significance of the Lord releasing the snakes is that he is removing his protection.

To this point, he's been holding the snakes back. He's had a hedge around Israel, protecting them from encounter with these fiery serpents. These serpents rule in the wilderness and God has protected them to this point.

And in removing his protection for a short period of time, the people recognize their dependence upon him. The people are complaining because the blessings of settled life are in sight.

[7 : 10] They're on the borders of Edom and they start to feel their deprivation in the wilderness keenly. They've realized they're not eating the food of settled people. They're suffering the difficulties and the hardships of the wilderness.

And just over the border there in Edom, people are living the life of settled people in a land and they realize what they've lost, what they could have gone back to in Egypt, for instance.

The Lord, in removing his protection for that short period of time, helps them to realize how he has assisted them. The serpents are fiery serpents. Maybe we're supposed to see them as connected with the fire of the Lord, the consuming fire of God as his anger against sin.

So fire in the form of serpents. Others have suggested an association with seraphs as celestial dragon-like creatures and these somehow represent or are associated with them.

The people confess their sin and repent, asking Moses to intercede for them. Once again, we're seeing failure and rebellion here, but there is a change that they are far more tractable.

[8 : 16] They are far more prepared to repent and to turn to the Lord. Moses is required by the Lord to make a copper serpent and place it upon a standard. Why copper?

Well, partly because it plays upon the word for serpent. Also because of its fiery red colour. The copper serpent is a Nahash-Nehoshet. We could perhaps call it a copper cobra to try and capture something of the play upon words here.

And later on in 2 Kings chapter 18, there is a reference to this serpent called Nahushetan at that point, again playing upon those particular words. Copper snakes, dating from the same sort of period, have been found in the region as well, which suggests further connections.

When people were bitten, they were supposed to look to the serpent on the standard. Contact with the serpent was required, but it was a contact through sight and faith, a sort of turning to it in an act of appeal, in trust and dependence.

Once again, we might see something new here. Israel are supposed to look to the serpent standard that the Lord has provided and find deliverance through that. This is an act that they have to perform as they look towards something that God has given to them.

[9 : 31] It's not a matter of telling Moses to pray for them. They have to look themselves. They have to exercise faith themselves in this particular act. Maybe God is training them as this second generation to act in a different way than the previous generation, not just to depend upon Moses to intercede for them, but to be people who look to God's provision themselves.

The copper serpent appears once more in Israel's history in 2 Kings chapter 18, verses 1 to 4. In the third year of Hoshea, son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign.

He was 25 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 29 years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi, the daughter of Zechariah, and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David, his father, had done.

He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days, the people of Israel had made offerings to it.

It was called Nehushtan. The danger there is treating the serpent as a magical talisman, rather than the provision of the Lord. They're supposed to look to the serpent, but in looking to the serpent, what they're really looking to is the provision of God for them.

[10 : 51] The serpent is not some magical idol. The serpent, rather, is the standard given by the God who heals them. And in looking to the serpent, what they are really looking to is the provision of God, the fact that God can deliver them from the lethal creatures of the wilderness.

After many years of wandering in the wilderness, they are now swiftly moving towards their goal. There are nine different camps in succession mentioned here, interspersed with bits of old poetry. The description of the defeat of Sihon, king of the Amorites, after this, is probably something that occurred during this period. This same period of journeying is also narrated in Deuteronomy chapters 2 and 3.

They are travelling around Moab to the east of the Dead Sea, and this is something we can gather from the reference to the Zered and the Anon. These are rivers that flow into the Dead Sea from that direction.

There are references to the book of the Wars of the Lord, and this is the only reference we have to this particular book in scripture. The poem that follows is difficult and obscure, extremely difficult and obscure.

[11 : 55] Perhaps one of the more interesting suggestions is that of D.L. Christensen, who interprets the consonantal text as follows. The Lord came in a whirlwind. He came to the branch wadis of the Anon.

He marched through the wadis. He marched. He turned aside to the seat of Ar. He leaned toward the border of Moab. However, to arrive at this reading, Christensen has to tweak the text itself, not just its vowel pointing.

The point of this extract may simply be that of identifying an extra-biblical witness to the details of the travelogue, without the excerpt needing to be such a statement in itself.

The presence of excerpts from other bodies of material from the period in this chapter is an interesting feature of the text. Beyond the entrance into the land itself, there's perhaps a sense of an entrance into a broader network of cultural voices and literatures.

They're becoming part of a world of other peoples at this point, and the references and snatches of songs and epic poetry helps to give a sense that this is a larger world that they're entering into, and they're dealing with a number of different peoples as part of that.

[13:06] This is followed by the Lord's provision of water for the people at a place called Beer, meaning well. A number of the places are named after significant events or objects there, Horma after the destruction, Meribah after the quarrelling, and here Beer after the well.

The Israelites sing to the well, seemingly a song called Spring Up, O Well. This reminds us of Israel singing at the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 15. It's also similar to Isaiah chapter 27 verses 2 and 3. In that day, a pleasant vineyard sing of it. I, the Lord, am its keeper. Every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day. In Isaiah chapter 27, Israel is seemingly instructed to sing a known song to the land, and here they sing another song to the well which provides them with water.

The song refers to the chieftains of the tribes and their ceremonial staffs. The political leaders of Israel are relating to the land. In the previous chapter, Moses was instructed to speak to the rock and it would yield its water.

Here the whole company of Israel speaks to the well from which the Lord is providing water for them. There is a beautiful progression to be observed here. There is a musical relationship between Israel and the land.

[14:26] They sing to it and it willingly delivers up its gifts to them. And the implicit personification of the land is important in Leviticus and here thinking of the land as personified might also help us to see what's taking place.

Israel is supposed to relate to the land in the way described here to as it were sing to it and it will deliver the gifts of the Lord to them. They are supposed to treat the land well to give it its rest and as they do so it will deliver the Lord's gifts to them.

Once again, Israel requests rite of passage through a land as they did with Edom. However, as in the case of Edom, Sihon the king of the Amorites refuses and not only does he refuse, he also goes out to fight against Israel.

Israel defeated him and dispossessed him. Finally, we are told that they are settling in cities, the cities of the Amorites in Heshbon and its villages, although this likely is referring to a later settling in that territory.

There's an old poem about Sihon's victory over the Moabites at Heshbon quoted here at length. Sihon had taken this territory from Moab but Israel dispossessed the dispossessor.

[15:37] While the defeat of Sihon probably enabled the Moabites to repossess much of their original territory, Heshbon now belonged to Israel and did not revert to its former owners who had proved unable to hold it and had lost title to it as the Lord gave it into the hands of Israel rather than back into their hands.

Judges 11 verses 12 to 24 mentions this territory and the disputes about the possession of it later on in history. Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, What do you have against me that you have come to me to fight against my land?

And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. Now therefore restore it peaceably.

Jephthah again sent messengers! to the king of the Ammonites and said to him, Thus says Jephthah, Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites but when they came up from Egypt Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom saying, Please let us pass through your land but the king of Edom would not listen and they sent also to the king of Moab but he would not consent so Israel remained at Kadesh.

[16:51] Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon but they did not enter the territory of Moab for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab.

Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites king of Heshbon and Israel said to him Please let us pass through your land to our country but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory so Sihon gathered all his people together and camped at Jehaz and fought with Israel and the Lord the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel and they defeated

them so Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites who inhabited that country and they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan so then the Lord the God of Israel dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel and are you to take possession of them?

Will you not possess what Chemosh your God gives you to possess? and all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us we will possess Israel now is living in the land of the Amorites in settlements on the east side of the Jordan this is their first possession in the land and after defeating Sihon the king of the Amorites they also defeat Og king of Bashan finally after all this period in the wilderness they are starting to receive the promises a question to consider in John chapter 3 verses 14 to 15 Jesus says and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life how does the copper serpent help us to understand the meaning of the cross