

Numbers – YHWH – The God of Judgment and Faithfulness

Numbers 20:12 – But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Outline

Numbers 1-10 – Camped at Sinai

Numbers 10b-12 – Travel to Paran

Numbers 13-19 – In the Wilderness of Paran

Numbers 20-21 – Travel to Moab

Numbers 22-36 – In the Plains of Moab

Numbers 1-10 – Preparation of the Old Generation

Numbers 11-25 – In the Wilderness

Numbers 26-36 – Preparation of the New Generation

Agenda

1. Complaining Along the Way (11-12)
2. The Rebellion at Kadesh Barnea (13-14)
3. The rebellion of Korah and the Nation (16-17)
4. Death of Miriam and Rebellion of Moses and Death of Aaron (20)
5. The Bronze Serpent (21)
6. Balaam (22-25)
7. Israel: The Next Generation (26-36)

The Bronze Serpent (21)

Chapter 21 is about the travel around Edom more than it is about the bronze serpent, but the most intriguing part of Chapter 21 is the four verses that deal with this memorable event that is also used in other sections of Scripture.

But let us first review this chapter then we will return to the account of the bronze serpent to finish up.

The Narrative of Numbers 21

Let's use a map to understand where Israel is and what they are facing. Chapter 20 and 21 is at the end of the generational judgment against Israel. Chapter 20 encapsulates the changing of the guard: Miriam dies, Moses will die, and Aaron dies. In the midst of this chapter, we have Moses requesting passage from Edom to progress through their land. But they are denied. After their denial, Israel sets out and camps at Mount Hor.

It is at Mount Hor that Aaron dies (Numbers 20:23-29) and Aaron's son Eleazar is made High Priest.

Numbers 21:1-3 – While at Mount Hor, Canaanites, under the king of Arad, heard about their plans to go by the way of Atharim. This was an ancient trade route that would have brought them into the Negev. The implication here seems to be that Israel had a scouting party that was venturing north from Mount Hor and they were intercepted by the king of Arad.

Numbers – YHWH – The God of Judgment and Faithfulness

The scouting party was captured, and Israel petitioned the Lord. Vows are often made in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly with God. These accounts underscore the Law system as a way to demonstrate that God, indeed, blesses those who fear Him, and He utterly destroys those who violate their vows with Him (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). Vows become even more interesting in Judges 11 and have to deal with Jephthah.

The vow that Israel, as a people, entreated was that if victory was granted then Israel would utterly destroy their cities. The word for *utterly destroy* is “הֵרַם” (*hērem*). The BDB has this as “a ban, devote, or exterminate.” The use of this word has become a great theological debate of our time.

This word is used 50 times in the Hebrew Scripture with nearly all of the uses in the NASB translated into *utterly destroy*. This is based upon the traditional translations. However, Hebrew Lexicons have updated their understanding of this word. The primary meaning is “the exclusion of an object from the use or abuse of man and the objects irrevocable surrender to God.” So, what does this mean? What does it mean to “*hērem*” a city? Why is this question of theological importance? The word is used of a city, land, or a people. In the book of Joshua, did God call for all inhabitants to be killed and the cities put to ruin? Or did God call for the inhabitants to be captured and the city devoted to God?

I have no objection to God exercising judgment and having every person killed by Israel as a judgment against a city, kingdom, or society. Those who are making this observation try to diminish this point.

There is another option. This was to indicate that the people and the wealth of that city were under a ban. This word, based upon the context, indicates that Israel would not take slaves and not take their wealth for their own. This may have been a self-imposed ban so they would not go north or so that they would not remain in those cities.

As the history account progresses, we see Israel contrasted with itself. For the first three verses, Israel is dedicated to the Lord and victory is granted. In verses 4-5, the people again complain. As we have noticed before, the complaint is not new nor is it, humanly speaking, without cause. They have become tired of the journey, and they wanted to settle in their land. The decision to go around Edom seems to be the stressor.

Why go around Edom? Why go to the west of the Dead Sea and Jordan? The reason is more historical than practical.

1. Edom was their brother; at this time, God does not condone warring against the descendants of Esau. Later, Edom becomes a powerful ally until they betray Israel by fighting with the Assyrians.
2. There is no reason why they do not go north into Israel.
 - a. Some have suspected that it is because of the Philistines (Exodus 13:17)
 - b. Some have suggested that they were barred from going in through the Negev because of their fathers’ rebellion at Kadesh
 - c. Some have opined that it was more difficult terrain.

Regardless, the track south and west back through the mountainous and untamed wilderness with little water was wearing on the Israelites and they complain.

Numbers 21:6-9 – In response to the open rebellion against Moses, YHWH sends fiery serpents as a judgment. The people immediately respond with regret and request that Moses intercedes. The Lord does not remove the serpents but rather gives a way for them to live.

Numbers – YHWH – The God of Judgment and Faithfulness

Why not simply remove the serpents? I am convinced that this is a greater lesson for these Israelites and for the reader because God miraculously saves them and gives a great object lesson of the Messiah.

What I find amazing is that God always changes how He deals with the people. This way it always is known that the judgment is from the Lord and the resolution is from the Lord.

Verses 10-15 provide detail of how they travel and how they get to the plains of Moab. This detail gives the history of why a well-known phrase is understood in the Book of Wars of the Lord. We have mentioned the Book of Wars before. This is a lost historical book that was well known to Israel. It was a historical account and is never referred to as Scripture.

Verses 16-18 – Let us make a simple observation. The people did not complain, and God gave them water. Israel has learned not to complain against the Lord and their God-appointed leaders.

Verses 19-20 – They arrive at the plains of Moab.

Verses 21-26 – Israel sends messengers to the king of the Amorites to ask permission to pass through the land. But the Amorites are not brothers to Israel. The Amorites go to war against Israel and Israel won the war. Compare the vow in 21:1-3 and the lack of a vow in 21:21-24. At the end of the war, Israel took possession of the land and lived in the cities and the villages.

Verses 27-30 – This is a poetic proverb concerning these events.

Numbers 21:31-35 – This chapter finishes with other victories for Israel and them occupying the land of their enemies.

Genesis 15:16 – The sin of the Amorites and judgment from the Lord by means of Israel. This was not the end of the Amorites; they were a larger nation (Joshua 5:1).

This is, in part, written for Israel's history, but the event also would have been a signal to the surrounding nations as well. It is this observation that Balak, king of Moab, makes and he knows the only way to defeat this nation is through supernatural means (curses), and, out of fear, he summons Balaam, the son of Beor.

The Biblical Lesson of the Fiery Serpents

The simple reading of the account of the serpents is not difficult and the understanding from this text alone does not lead one to seek a Messianic reference, but that is how Jesus uses this passage.

There are a few observations that must be made. The word for *serpent* in the Hebrew is “נָחָשׁ” (*nahash*). This is the same word for the serpent in Genesis 3:1 and is the word for snake or serpent throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The LXX does not add any differing ideas to this word.

The word for *fiery* is “שָׂרָפִים” (*saraph*) or “שָׂרָפִים” (*saraphim*) (Numbers 21:6; Isaiah 6:1-6). Some have made a distinction in the text of Numbers 21:8, where it says to make a “*saraph*.” The word for snake is not present and the conclusion that some have stated is that Moses made a burning angel not a snake.

The problem is that in verse 9 Moses made a bronze serpent. Therefore, what Moses fashioned is not an angel but a bronze snake in the same manner as the fiery serpents.

Deuteronomy 8:15 – Moses recounts the wondrous works of God and refers to Numbers 21 directly.

Numbers – YHWH – The God of Judgment and Faithfulness

In 2nd Kings, this pole and the bronze serpent become an object of worship (2nd Kings 18:1-6). This indicates that it was not the object that was of importance, but the promise of God that protected the Israelites from the bites of the serpents.

1st Corinthians 10:1-6, 9 – Being under grace and not under law, the principle of the sin of Israel is supposed to admonish us not to do the same thing, but those under law had punishment and judgment. We are to take the lesson, not in fear of judgment but understanding the discipline of the Lord.

John 3:14-15 (John 12:31-33) – The use of Moses lifting up the serpent is figurative in the sense of what kind of death Jesus was to experience and the fact that being lifted up, a person or sign and the accomplishment were easy to see. Those who looked at the bronze serpent believed YHWH would save them from physical death. Those who “look” to Jesus are believing that He would save them from the second death.