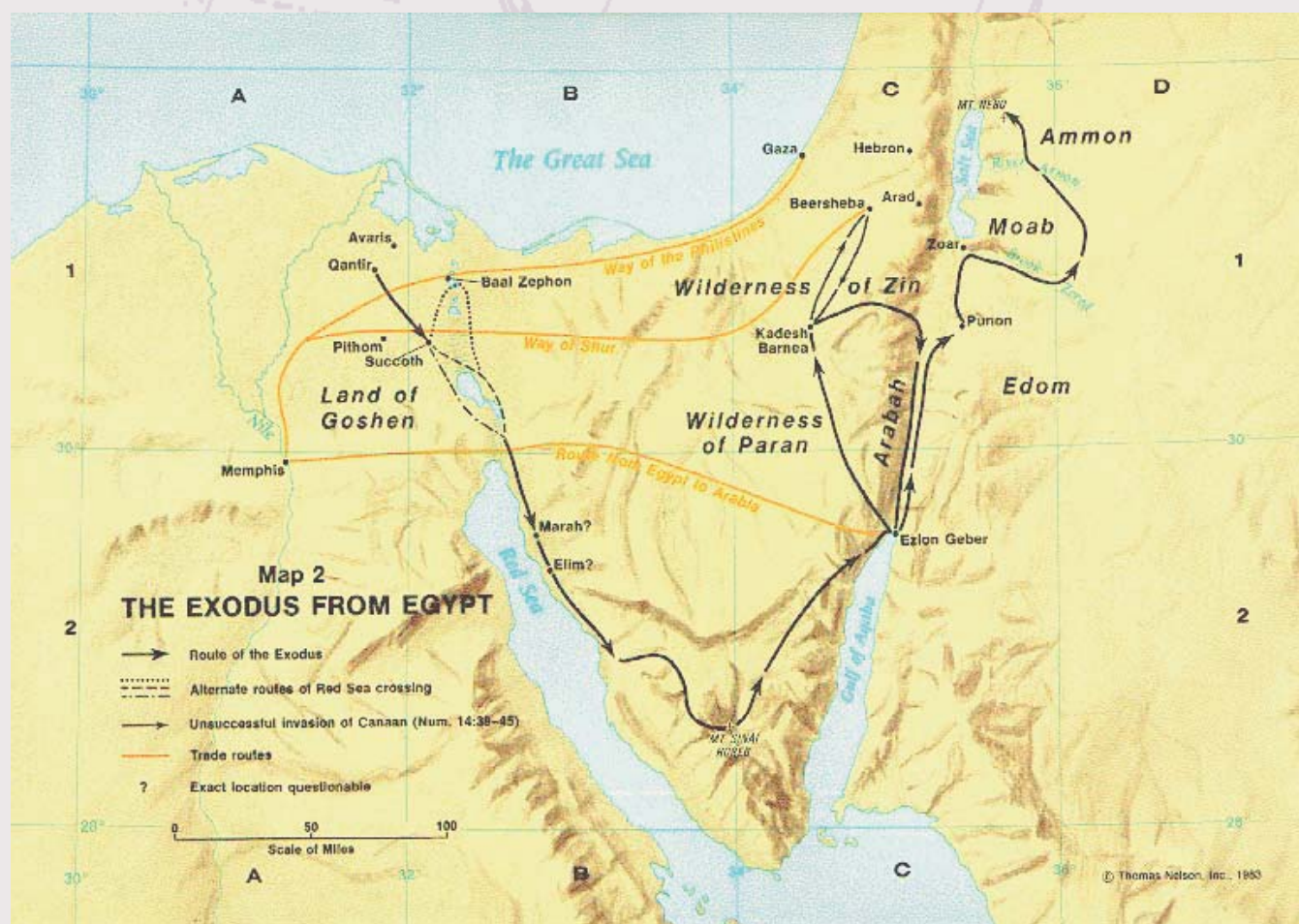


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This lesson continues the study of Numbers begun three lessons ago. Because of this, the contextual issues largely remain the same as has been treated in the previous two lessons, and will not be repeated here. For a reference, go to the previous lesson on [Numbers 14](#).

## I Context

Contextual issues for the passage have changed somewhat since the previous lesson, since the narrative in 21:1-9 plugs into the exodus journey at a different point.



### a. Historical

In chapter fourteen they had arrived at Kadesh-barnea when the twelve spies gave their report of the land of promise. After the disastrous rejected of the Lord's directive through Caleb to enter the prom-

ised land immediately, they made an abortive attempt to do so after God's judgment had fallen on them that they were to die in the wilderness without seeing the land (Num. 14:39-45). This resulted in a horrible defeat in battle for the Israelites. While still at Kadesh, a major revolt against Moses' leadership took place, led by three Levites: Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:1-40). Some 250 individuals lost their lives in this episode, which was followed by another revolt causing the loss of 14,700 individuals (Num. 16:41-50). While at Kadesh Miriam died (20:1), and the Israelites complain about the lack of water which Moses remedied by striking a rock (20:2-13). Because of not following the Lord's instructions and acting largely out of frustration with the people, Moses lost the privilege of entering the promised land over this. When the Israelites broke camp at Kadesh, they first requested permission to cross over the country of Edom to the east of Kadesh but their request was refused forcing them to turn south back toward to Red Sea (20:14-21). At Mt. Hor (modern name: Jebel Harun), Aaron died (20:22-29).

Hor. One of the mountains of the chain of Seir or Edom, on the confines of Idumea (Numbers 20:22-29; 33:37). It was one of the stations of the Israelites in the wilderness (33:37), which they reached in the circuitous route they were obliged to take because the Edomites refused them a passage through their territory. It was during the encampment here that Aaron died (Numbers 33:37-41). (See AARON.) The Israelites passed this mountain several times in their wanderings. It bears the modern name of Jebel Harun, and is the highest and most conspicuous of the whole range. It stands about midway between the Dead Sea and the Elanitic gulf. It has two summits, in the hollow between which it is supposed that Aaron died. Others, however, suppose that this mountain is the modern Jebel Madurah, on the opposite, i.e., the western, side of the Arabah. [*Eaton's Bible Dictionary* online, svg. Hor]  
This brings us to the passage for our study, 21:1-9.

## b. Literary

In our understanding (cf. [lesson](#) on Num. 14) of a basic twofold division of Numbers (first census, chaps. 1-25; second census, chaps 26-36), our passage, 21:1-9, is a continuation of the story of the first generation of immigrants from Egypt who did not live to see the promised land. In the cycle of Israelite rebellion and God's punishment the first generation gradually passes from the scene. Contextually, the passage serves to vindicate God's harsh punishment of not allowing this generation to see the land of promise. Num. 21:1-3 and 4-9 relate more precisely to the section in 20:1-21:35 containing narratives situated in three locations: Kadesh, Hor, and the transjordan region. Kadesh is the setting for Miriam's death, challenge of Moses' leadership again, conflict with king of Edom. Mt. Hor is the setting for Aaron's death, the defeat of the Canaanite King Arad, and the fiery snake episode.

Internally, the passage divides itself into two natural units of expression (pericopes): vv. 1-3, vv. 4-9. The first segment is situated at Mt. Hor, and the second segment after they left Hor headed southward around Edom.

## II. Message

### a. Battle at Hormah (vv. 1-3).

#### NASB

**1** When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. **2** Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." **3** The Lord listened to the voice of Israel,

#### NRSV

**1** When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. **2** Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." **3** The Lord listened to the voice of Israel,

#### NLT

**1** The Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that the Israelites were approaching on the road to Atharim. So he attacked the Israelites and took some of them as prisoners. **2** Then the people of Israel made this vow to the LORD: "If you will help us conquer these people, we will completely destroy<sup>F71</sup> all their towns." **3** The LORD heard their



and handed over the Canaanites;  
and they utterly destroyed them  
and their towns; so the place was  
called Hormah.<sup>F58</sup>

Footnotes:

F58: Heb *Destruction*

and handed over the Canaanites;  
and they utterly destroyed them  
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called Hormah.<sup>F58</sup>

Footnotes:

F58: Heb *Destruction*

request and gave them victory  
over the Canaanites. The  
Israelites completely destroyed  
them and their towns, and the  
place has been called Hormah<sup>F72</sup>  
ever since.

Footnotes:

F71: The Hebrew term used here re-  
fers to the complete consecration of  
things or people to the LORD, either  
by destroying them or by giving them  
as an offering; also in 21:3.

F72: Hormah means "destruction."

### Comments:

In the later summation of the stages of the exodus in Num. 33:1-49, verse one of our text is basically repeated (33:40): "The Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb in the land of Canaan, heard of the coming of the Israelites." Joshua 12:14 will mention a later conquering of the king of Arad by Joshua in the invasion of the promised land under his leadership. Judges 1:16-17 has a slightly different interpretation than the one in Num. 21:1-3 on the naming of the place (NLT): "**16** When the tribe of Judah left Jericho, the Kenites, who were descendants of Moses' father-in-law, traveled with them into the wilderness of Judah. They settled among the people there, near the town of Arad in the Negev. **17** Then Judah joined with Simeon to fight against the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they completely destroyed the town. So the town was named Hormah."

The story provides a link back to the abortive invasion attempt described in Num. 14:39-45 where the Israelites were crushed in battle (NLT):

**39** When Moses reported the LORD's words to the Israelites, there was much sorrow among the people. **40** So they got up early the next morning and set out for the hill country of Canaan. "Let's go," they said. "We realize that we have sinned, but now we are ready to enter the land the LORD has promised us." **41** But Moses said, "Why are you now disobeying the LORD's orders to return to the wilderness? It won't work. **42** Do not go into the land now. You will only be crushed by your enemies because the LORD is not with you. **43** When you face the Amalekites and Canaanites in battle, you will be slaughtered. The LORD will abandon you because you have abandoned the LORD." **44** But the people pushed ahead toward the hill country of Canaan, despite the fact that neither Moses nor the Ark of the LORD's covenant left the camp. **45** Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in those hills came down and attacked them and chased them as far as Hormah.

They suffered an early defeat in battle because of not being willing to follow the Lord's leadership. Now they suffer more defeat at the hands of the Canaanite king and this causes them to turn to the Lord for His leadership. With their vow to carry out holy war, which meant total destruction of conquered peoples and their property, they reengage the Canaanites, this time being successful. No details of the victory are provided in this short narrative.

The point of the story, especially when read with 14:39-45, seems to be on the importance that following God's leadership makes when confronting enemies. Previously when they launched out on their own in disobedience to God's instructions, disaster struck them. Then when seeking God's leadership they experienced victory in battle.

I suspect this is the lesson we can take away from this story also. When we seek God's leadership in facing difficult times, especially in confrontational situations, rather than giving into our human instincts, we will walk away from those situations with real victory. Certainly, God will be glorified by our following His leadership, rather than our own.

## b. Complaining again (vv. 4-9).

### NASB

**4** Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red<sup>F301</sup> Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people<sup>F302</sup> became impatient because of the journey. **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<sup>F303</sup> and no water, and we<sup>F304</sup> loathe this miserable food.” **6** The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. **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. **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.” **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.

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#### Footnotes:

F301: I.e. South country

F302: Or *the spies*

F303: Lit *devote to destruction*

F304: Lit *devoted to destruction*

### NRSV

**4** From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea,<sup>F59</sup> to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. **5** 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 detest this miserable food.” **6** Then the Lord sent poisonous<sup>F60</sup> serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. **7** The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. **8** And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous<sup>F61</sup> serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” **9** So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

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#### Footnotes:

F59: Or *Sea of Reeds*

F60: Or *fiery*; Heb *seraphim*

F61: Or *fiery*; Heb *seraph*

### NLT

**4** Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea <sup>F73</sup> to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient along the way, **5** and they began to murmur against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this wretched manna!” **6** So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among them, and many of them were bitten and died. **7** Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take away the snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people. **8** Then the LORD told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to the top of a pole. Those who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” **9** So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to the top of a pole. Whenever those who were bitten looked at the bronze snake, they recovered!

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#### Footnotes:

F73: Hebrew *sea of reeds*.

### Comments:

After leaving Mt. Hor where Aaron had died, the Israelites traveled southward along the Atharim in order to avoid Edom (see [map on page one](#) for details). As Dennis Olson notes in the *Interpretation Commentary* (Numbers, iPreach online version), “This is the last of the complaint stories in Numbers, and it is one of the worst.” Impatience leads to griping against both Moses and God. Their gripe (v. 5), however, was nothing new. It had been voiced repeatedly through the wilderness journey:

**Num. 11:1, 4-6 (NLT):** **1** The people soon began to complain to the LORD about their hardships; and when the LORD heard them, his anger blazed against them. Fire from the LORD raged among them and destroyed the outskirts of the camp. **2** The people screamed to Moses for help; and when he prayed to the LORD, the fire stopped. **3** After that, the area was known as Taberah – “the place of burning” – because fire from the LORD had burned among them there. **4** Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt, and the people

of Israel also began to complain. “Oh, for some meat!” they exclaimed. **5** “We remember all the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic that we wanted. **6** But now our appetites are gone, and day after day we have nothing to eat but this manna!”

**Num. 14:2-4 (NLT): 2** Their voices rose in a great chorus of complaint against Moses and Aaron. “We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!” they wailed. **3** “Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and little ones will be carried off as slaves! Let’s get out of here and return to Egypt!”

**Num. 16:13-14 (NLT): 12** Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they replied, “We refuse to come! **13** Isn’t it enough that you brought us out of Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us here in this wilderness, and that you now treat us like your subjects? **14** What’s more, you haven’t brought us into the land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Are you trying to fool us? We will not come.”

**Num. 20:3-5 (NLT): 3** The people blamed Moses and said, “We wish we had died in the LORD’s presence with our brothers! **4** Did you bring the LORD’s people into this wilderness to die, along with all our livestock? **5** Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us here to this terrible place? This land has no grain, figs, grapes, or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”

A repetitive pattern of dissatisfaction characterized the Israelites during this journey. And this, in spite of repeated miraculous deliverances by the Lord under Moses’ leadership. Our tendency is to write them off as a bunch of ingrates who deserved to die in the wilderness without seeing the land of promise. Yet, before we readily pick up our stones of castigation, perhaps we should take inventory on the times of our dissatisfaction about circumstances in our lives, and perhaps the subsequent inclination to blame God for them.

This time divine punishment took the form of poisonous snakes whose bite caused the death of substantial numbers of Israelites. Previously divine punishment had taken on a variety of forms, including fire (11:1-3; 16:35), death at hands of enemies (14:42-45), earth swallowing them alive (16:31-34), plague (16:46-50), and captivity by enemies (21:1). The term translated as ‘poisonous snakes’ is the Hebrew word ‘seraph’ or the plural ‘seraphim’ (cf. [footnotes 60 and 61](#) in the NRSV translation above). As Thomas Dozeman in the New Interpreter’s Bible volume on Numbers comments:

“These snakes are not simply a natural disaster. They are divine agents of punishment and potential healing. The seraph is mentioned in Isa 14:29 and 30:6-7 as a flying serpent. The seraphim are also active in the call of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1). They are part of the iconography of the Temple, stationed above Yahweh’s throne. They are winged creatures, associated with the fire of divine holiness. Their fire is life-threatening; yet, they also are able to purify the prophet. Bronze serpents have been found throughout the ancient Near East, providing ample parallels for interpreting vv. 4-9.<sup>145</sup> Yet the association of the seraphim with Yahweh’s throne most likely derives from Egyptian religion, where the raised and swollen head of the cobra is often depicted on the pharaoh’s headdress as a protective goddess, Wadjyt. Her function was to spit fiery venom onto the enemies of the king.<sup>146</sup> Thus in Egypt the cobra’s function was twofold: to protect and to destroy.” [*New Interpreter’s Bible, Numbers*, iPreach online.]

Once the Israelites cry out to the Lord for mercy, He provides a remedy, but one that necessitates their expression of faith in Him. Moses fashioned a bronze serpent replica of these snakes and placed it on a pole where every person bitten by a snake could look at it and receive healing that delivered him from death. “Confession of sin and forgiveness are thus both a community and an individual responsibility. The plague of the serpents remained an ongoing threat to the community, and the raised bronze serpent remained an ongoing reminder to each individual of the need to turn to the healing power of God. The phrase in 21:9, “a serpent of bronze,” is a wordplay since the words “serpent” and “bronze” are closely related in Hebrew, *nehash nehoshet*. Several hundred years later in Israel’s history, King Hezekiah tore down and destroyed what was alleged to be Moses’ bronze serpent, called “Nehustan.” The bronze serpent had been kept in the Jerusalem temple as a sacred object, but people had begun making offerings to it as if it were an idol or image of God. This clearly violated the first of the Ten Commandments, which prohibits idolatry and making images (Ex. 20:3-4). As part of his attempt to reform Judah’s worship practices, King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent in the temple (2 Kings 18:4). Scholars have debated the nature of the



relationship between the Mosaic bronze serpent and Hezekiah's Nehustan, but the tradition clearly links the two." (Interpretation Commentary, Numbers, iPreach online)

What does this pericope teach us? For one thing, centuries later Jesus would allude to this episode and connect it to his crucifixion (Jhn 3:14-15, NLT): "**14** And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, **15** so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life." The snake became the means of deliverance. In similar fashion, Jesus' death on the cross becomes deliverance for all who would look and believe.

In the early experience of the Israelites a pattern has become established. It would later become the framework for telling the story of the covenant people of Israel in the Deuteronomistic view of ancient Jewish history. The pattern typically contains these elements: (1) people sin; (2) God punishes; (3) people repent; (4) God forgives and restores. To be certain this pattern has some distinctive tones here, especially in the fourth segment. They in looking to the bronze serpent are delivered from physical death, but the poisonous snakes continue in the camp afflicting people for a sustained period of time.

In this pattern we see both positive and negative. Negatively, human nature is such that repeated sinning seems to be par for the course. The work of Jesus on the cross provides spiritual resources to break this cycle that the ancient Israelites never had access to. Yet, even today we all find ourselves falling prey to sinful actions and attitudes. Additionally, sin will be punished, both then and now. The punishment takes on the appropriate form according to God's wisdom, but punishment for sin is just as certain as the rising of the morning sun. Positively, when true repentance comes as a part of our reaching out to God, then divine forgiveness and restoration are possible. God's mercy is absolutely astounding!

In Paul's reference to the Israelite wilderness journey as a teaching reminder (1 Cor. 10:9-11, NLT), we find words of instruction: "**9** Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snake-bites. **10** And don't grumble as some of them did, for that is why God sent his angel of death to destroy them. **11** All these events happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us, who live at the time when this age is drawing to a close." We can do no better than to adhere to these encouragements of the apostle.

