

The Bronze Serpent (Numbers 20:14-21:9)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. Due to the rebellion of the people when the 12 spies were sent out to explore Canaan for 40 days, the nation has been sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. In the last lesson we discussed how Moses was told to speak to the rock to produce water for the people. Instead, he struck the rock. For that reason, the Lord was angry with Moses and Aaron. As a result, they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land.
 - i. In the prior lesson we discussed how Paul said in **1 Corinthians 10** that the special rock from which water came, which they drank from, “was Christ”.
 - ii. It seems that since this rock represented Christ, striking it the second time was a particularly grievous offense.
 - iii. Just as Christ was foreshadowed by the Passover Lamb, He also was foreshadowed by that rock from which water came. In this lesson, we will see yet another foreshadowing of Christ during the time in the Wilderness.
- c. In the current lesson we will be discussing three things:
 - i. The interaction of the Israelites with the Edomites;
 - ii. The death of Aaron; and
 - iii. The incident involving the bronze serpent.
- d. In this chapter and those that follow, the Israelites will encounter four nations as they pass northward in their journey through the Wilderness toward Canaan, the Promised Land. Those four nations of people are:
 - i. the Edomites (which we will encounter in this message),
 - ii. the Moabites,
 - iii. the Ammonites, and
 - iv. the Amorites.

II. Problems with the Edomites

a. Read **Numbers 20:14-21**.

b. Storyline:

- i. The Edomites resided in the hilly territory that is south of the Dead Sea.
- ii. In order for the Israelites to get from Kadesh to the area across from Canaan the Promised Land, they want to pass through the territory of the Edomites.
- iii. The Israelites appeal to the king of Edom, "Thus says *your brother* Israel..." and then proceed to tell him about their time in Egypt, being delivered by the Lord, etc. They explain they just want to pass through their territory, peacefully.
- iv. However, the Edomites are hostile and threaten the Israelites, who will have to go around the territory of the Edomites, instead.
 1. Note: the Israelites are numerous, with a total population likely numbering in the millions.

c. **Question:** Who were the Edomites? Why did the Israelites appeal to the king of Edom as "your brother"?

i. Read **Genesis 25:19-30**.

1. Isaac and Rebekah have twins: Jacob (Israel) and Esau
 - a. The two twins struggle against each other, even in the womb.
 - b. They represent two nations (Israel and Edom).
 - c. The older one (Esau) is destined to serve the younger (Jacob/Israel).
2. Esau was born red and hairy. He is also called *Edom*, because of the incident with the red stew. The word '*Edom*' means '*red*'.
3. The conflict between these two brothers, and the nations that would come from them, begins even before their birth!
- ii. After Jacob deceives his father Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for his older brother Esau, his father then gives Esau a prophetic blessing.

1. Read **Genesis 27:38-41**.

2. Esau (representing his descendants) will resentfully serve his brother (or his brother Jacob/Israel's descendants). However, they will be restless and ultimately will "break his yoke from your neck".
 3. This speaks of ongoing tension between the two nations, in the future. Esau, resentfully, will be dominated by his younger brother but will finally break free of his control.
- iii. The Edomites (sometimes called 'Idumeans') are descended from Esau. Their genealogy for the first several generations is given in **Genesis 36** and **1 Chronicles 1**.
1. The first two kings of the Edomites are:
 - a. Balak (or Bela), son of Beor (**Genesis 36:31-32**); and
 - b. *Jobab*, son of Zerah of Bosrah (**Genesis 36:33**).
 - i. From the last chapter of **Job**, in the Septuagint (LXX) version, this Edomite king 'Jobab' is identified as the same person as 'Job'.
 - d. The area where the Edomites live is referred to as 'Mount Seir' or 'the hill country of Seir'.
 - e. Edomites will be a thorn in the flesh to the Israelites many times during their history. This nation will show up throughout the Old Testament, including:
 - i. Warnings against Edom in **Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos**, etc.
 - ii. In **Obadiah**, most of that short book is a rebuke of the Edomites for their arrogance, and their cruelty toward Judah when they were being carried off into captivity in Babylon.
 1. "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; You who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,' says the LORD." (**Obadiah 3-4**, NKJV)
 2. "For violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. In the day that you stood on the other side— in the day that strangers carried captive his forces, when foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem— even you were as one of them. But you should not

have gazed on the day of your brother in the day of his captivity; nor should you have rejoiced over the children of Judah In the day of their destruction; nor should you have spoken proudly In the day of distress.” (**Obadiah 10–12**, NKJV)

- a. Let us learn lessons from the Edomites, and not repeat their mistakes of being arrogant and cruel.
- f. Famous Edomites mentioned in the New Testament include:
 - i. Esau (father of all the Edomites), the example of an ungodly person who sold his inheritance for some short-term pleasure of the flesh. (**Hebrews 12:16**)
 - ii. Job (based on **Job 42:19-21** in the LXX, which identifies him as the same person as ‘Jobab’, second king of the Edomites, of **Genesis 36:3**).
 1. In the New Testament, he is held up as a great example for us to imitate, regarding perseverance in the face of suffering, in **James 5:11**.
 - iii. All of the Herods, starting with Herod the Great, and their offspring.
 1. Eusebius identified Herod the Great (an Idumean/Edomite) coming to the throne, the first non-Jew to be considered king of the Jews, to be the sign that the Christ’s coming was imminent (Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3, chapter 2). This was based on the **Genesis 49** prophecy:
 - a. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from his loins, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the expectation of the nations.” (**Genesis 49:10**, OSB, LXX)

III. The Death of Aaron

- a. Read **Numbers 20:22-29**.
 - i. These events happen in the sight of the congregation.
 - ii. Aaron dies on Mount Hor, and his son Eleazar replaces him as high priest.
- b. The reason why Aaron dies (rather than living for another few years and being able to enter the Promised Land) is because Moses and Aaron provoked the Lord at “the Waters of Controversy” (or “Waters of Contention”).

- i. This refers back to the events of **Numbers 20:1-13**, where Moses and Aaron went before the people, and Moses struck the rock (rather than just speaking to the rock, as directed).
 - 1. In the LXX, the descriptions in Greek in both places where the disqualifying sin of Aaron are mentioned (**Numbers 20:13** and **20:24**) are identical.
- ii. They are also identical in the Masoretic Text, where it is generally translated, “the Waters of Meribah”.
- c. The death of Aaron, the brother of Moses, spokesman for Moses and first high priest, is a major milestone for the Jewish nation. They mourn his passing for 30 days.
 - i. Read **Numbers 33:37-39**.
 - 1. Aaron died at the age of 123.
 - a. Moses, his younger brother, will die a little later at the age of 120. (**Deuteronomy 34:5-7**)
 - 2. Aaron dies on the first day of the 5th month of the 40th year of the exodus from Egypt.
 - a. In **Joshua 5:6** it says in the LXX that the Israelites spent a total of *forty-two years* in the desert from the time they departed Egypt until they entered Canaan.
 - i. However, in the same passage in the Masoretic Text it says they spent *forty years* in the Wilderness.
 - b. Six months after the death of Aaron (**Deuteronomy 1:1-3**), Moses speaks to the people of Israel in his ‘farewell address’. There, in **Deuteronomy**, Moses recounts the story of their journey through the Wilderness and gives final warnings.
 - c. Therefore, all the events from this point in the book of **Numbers** (and afterward) occur near the very end of the time that the Israelites spent in the Wilderness.

IV. First Battle with the Canaanites

- a. Read **Numbers 21:1-3**.

- b. While the Lord generally desired the Israelites to avoid battles with the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites, they would fight many battles with the Canaanites.

V. The Bronze Serpent

- a. This story is discussed two places in the New Testament, to make important points for us.
- b. Read **Numbers 21:4-9**.
 - i. Storyline:
 - 1. The people are again complaining against the Lord and against Moses.
 - 2. They even complain that they are “sick of this worthless bread”, the manna provided by God!
 - a. Recall that in **Numbers 11:7-9**, it explained that the people would gather the manna as pellets, grind it, and cook it in pots to make cakes. It says that the manna cakes tasted like “pastry prepared with oil and honey”.
 - 3. The Lord sends poisonous snakes among the people. When the people are bitten, they die. This is a horrible, terrifying plague that strikes me as even creepier than most of the 10 Plagues that the Lord brought upon the Egyptians, in **Exodus**.
 - a. The people panic and are convicted of their sin. They are terrified of the snakes, admit their sin, and ask Moses to intercede with the Lord and take away the serpents.
 - b. Rather than simply remove the serpents (which the Lord certainly could have done), He does something else; something very unusual.
 - 4. The Lord tells Moses to put a serpent on “a sign” (literally, in the LXX). This is a common word that can have multiple meanings. In context here, translating it as “sign pole” or “signal pole”, as in the OSB, is reasonable. However, let us consider where the very same Greek word is used in the New Testament:
 - a. “So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?’ Jesus

answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” (**John 2:18–19**, NKJV)

- b. “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’” (**Matthew 12:38–39**, NKJV)
- c. Therefore, the term “sign” can be used in Scripture to refer to a miraculous sign from God.
 - i. **Consider:** Could it be that this word is used in that sense here to suggest that this figure of a serpent being lifted up on a pole would serve as a “sign” pointing of the cross of Christ?
- c. Was the serpent made of bronze or copper, or brass?
 - i. In the OSB, it says this serpent made by Moses was “copper”. You may be more familiar with other translations where it is referred to as “bronze” (NKJV, ESV) or “brass” (KJV, etc.). Which is it?
 - ii. Copper is a very soft metal. To make it harder (for tools, etc.) you add small amounts of other things to it, often including tin, zinc, lead, etc., to make brass or bronze. Bronze was often about 90% copper.
 - iii. Classical bronze was much harder and more rigid than copper, and could be used for tools, armor, swords, etc. Bronze was harder than iron (but not as hard as steel).
 - iv. The Greek word used here in the LXX, according to a standard Greek-English lexicon, can refer to either copper, brass or bronze.
 - v. So while some translations call this metal serpent ‘bronze’, others refer to it as ‘copper’. So I assume the serpent was made of a common metal alloy that was all or mostly copper. So it likely would have been orange or yellowish in color.
 1. Note that the NKJV refers to it as a ‘fiery’ serpent, perhaps alluding to its orange or yellowish color.
- d. Tertullian, a Christian in North Africa, writing c. 197 AD, in *An Answer to the Jews* (Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 166) challenged the Jews of his day regarding this story.

- i. **Question:** Why did the Lord respond with this *odd way* to deal with the plague of poisonous snakes?
 - 1. He could have simply *banished* the snakes, as he did the frogs and locusts during the plagues in Egypt.
- ii. Also, wasn't God emphatic in stating that He did not want His people to *make an image of anything*, to venerate? Isn't this the very thing that angered the Lord, when they made the golden calf at Mount Sinai?
 - 1. The Second Commandment of the 10 Commandments given at Mount Sinai was:
 - a. "You shall not make for yourself *an idol or a likeness of anything* in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..." (**Exodus 20:4-5**, LXX, OSB)
- iii. **Questions:** Why did He now tell them to make an image of...*a snake*? Isn't the form of a serpent associated with Satan and evil?
 - 1. "But I fear, lest somehow, as *the serpent* deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." (**2 Corinthians 11:3**, NKJV)
 - 2. "And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, *that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan*, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." (**Revelation 12:7-9**, NKJV)
- e. Jesus spoke about this story as revealing something important about Himself, in his exchange with Nicodemus in **John 3**.
 - i. Read **John 3:13-17**.
 - 1. Jesus said that he had to be "lifted up", just as the bronze serpent was lifted up by Moses.
 - 2. Also similar to the serpent on the pole Moses lifted up, Jesus was brought into the world to prevent people from perishing.
 - 3. He came to the world (His First Coming) on a rescue mission, to offer life to those who were mortally wounded. He did not come to condemn the world, but to offer hope.

- a. (Only in His Second Coming will He bring judgment.)
- ii. This passage from John (especially **John 3:16**) is often taken out of context to offer a message that all we need to do is believe in Jesus.
 - 1. However, in his talk with Nicodemus Jesus mentions not only faith, but also his crucifixion, baptism and repentance.
 - a. “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” (**John 3:3-5**, NKJV)
 - b. Read **John 3:19-21**.
 - i. Men loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil.
 - ii. Jesus calls all men to walk in the light, to repent of their evil deeds.
 - 2. The point Jesus is making in **John 3:16** is based on what He explained in **John 3:14-15**. He came into the world to bring life to those dying. He is the only way to be cured. He would have to be “lifted up”.
- iii. On being “lifted up”.
 - 1. The only manner of execution I can think of that conforms to this expression is *crucifixion*.
 - a. That would *not* apply to death by: decapitation, poisoning, starvation, burning with fire, illness, etc.
 - 2. Recall from the gospels: “‘And I, if I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” (**John 12:32-33**, NKJV)
- f. Insights from early Christian writers:
 - i. Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul, writing c. 180 AD:
 - 1. “...but he [Paul] has also said, that the law was our pedagogue [to bring us] to Christ Jesus. Let them not therefore ascribe to the law the unbelief of certain [among them]. For the law never

hindered them from believing in the Son of God; no, but it even exhorted them to do so, saying that men can be saved in no other way from the old wound of the serpent than by believing in Him who, in the likeness of sinful flesh, is lifted up from the earth upon the tree of martyrdom, and draws all things to Himself, and restores life to the dead.”

- a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 2; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 465)

ii. From Tertullian, writing c. 197 AD:

1. “Why, again, did the same Moses, after the prohibition of any ‘likeness of anything,’ set forth a brazen serpent, placed on a ‘tree,’ in a hanging posture, for a spectacle of healing to Israel, at the time when, after their idolatry, they were suffering extermination by serpents, except that in this case he was exhibiting the Lord’s cross on which the ‘serpent’ the devil was ‘made a show of,’ and, for every one hurt by such snakes—that is, his angels—on turning intently from the transgressions of sins to the sacraments of Christ’s cross, salvation was worked out? For he who then gazed upon that (cross) was freed from the bite of the serpents.”
 - a. (Source: Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, chapter 10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 166)
 - b. What Tertullian says here regarding “making a show of” Satan reminds me of what Paul said in **Colossians 2** regarding what Jesus accomplished on the cross:
 - i. “...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. *Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*” (**Colossians 2:14–15**, NKJV)

VI. There is a Practical Application for Us

- a. This story is alluded to by Paul, as a direct warning to us.
- b. Read **1 Corinthians 10:1-11**.
 - i. One of the specific sins cited by Paul that disqualified people was “tempting (or testing) Christ”.

1. "...nor let us *tempt Christ*, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents;" (**1 Corinthians 10:9**, NKJV)
2. "We must not *put Christ to the test*, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents," (**1 Corinthians 10:9**, ESV)
 - a. To the best of my knowledge, the only account of the Israelites in the Wilderness being destroyed by serpents is the story involving the bronze serpent, in **Numbers 21**.
- ii. **Questions:** What does it mean to 'put the Lord to the test'? What did the Israelites do to test God, that we should take care to never do?
- iii. The Israelites were putting the Lord to the test. Perhaps this is testing the patience of God by repeatedly, deliberately questioning God's motives. Perhaps it was throwing the blessings of God back in his face (the manna) and considering a sacred gift to be worthless.
- iv. Whatever it was, let us not imitate that kind of heart. Let us fear God, be full of thankfulness, rejoice even in the afflictions that test and refine us, and never complain about anything.
- v. We must never put the Lord to the test as they did, which led to them being killed by serpents. That happened to teach *us* a lesson!
 1. **Never Forget:** God tests us; we don't test God!

VII. Christ Revealed in the Exodus-Numbers Journey

- a. In the past, when I studied and taught the Old Testament (which, after all, is $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible), occasionally I would receive disparaging remarks from other Christians. For example, they would say to me, "Well, I want to focus on the gospels and the New Testament, because *I want to learn about Jesus*."
 - i. My response to criticisms like that was invariably: "Yes, and I want to study the *Old Testament*, because *I want to learn about Jesus*!"
- b. Let us consider *what we have learned about Jesus*, thus far from the story of the exodus journey (from the time departing Egypt through the period of wandering in the Wilderness) from the books of **Exodus** and **Numbers**. We have learned the following things about Jesus:
 - i. His name: 'Jesus' (**Numbers 13**)
 - ii. He was foreshadowed by The Passover Lamb (**Exodus 12, Numbers 9**)
 1. The selected Lamb is a male, without blemish.

2. The Lamb is sacrificed at twilight at eve of Passover.
 3. A memorial meal of flesh of the lamb will be eaten regularly thereafter.
 4. The blood of the lamb saves from death.
 5. After the Lamb has been sacrificed, God's people must get rid of all the yeast (= sin, **1 Corinthians 5:6-8**).
- iii. Red heifer and water of purification (**Numbers 19**)
1. Body of the one sacrificed is consumed 'outside the camp'.
 2. Water of purification associated with the body of the one sacrificed.
- iv. The rock from which water of life comes (**Numbers 20**).
1. The water He gives us to drink is the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus.
 2. The rock (Christ) is to be struck only once by the wood (rod of Moses).
- v. The crucifixion of Christ.
1. Moses and battle against Amalekites (**Exodus 17**)
 - a. All day long, posture with both arms extended, on the wood.
 - b. Between two other men.
 2. Salvation coming from: Wood (foreshadowing the cross) + faith + water (foreshadowing baptism)
 - a. Seen in use of the rod of Moses, Red Sea crossing, and other miracles in **Exodus** and **Numbers**.
 3. Like the bronze serpent (**Numbers 21**)
 - a. He must be "lifted up".
 - b. The people must look to the one lifted up to be saved from the deadly bite of Satan, the ancient serpent.
 - c. This would be the only cure from death.
 - d. Satan would be defeated, and "made a show of" via a public spectacle.