NUMBERS

Chapter 21

*Arad Destroyed*

**When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them.  2 Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.”  3 The LORD listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.**

**21:1–3** The first battle of the new community against the Canaanites was provoked by the king of Arad, perhaps as he was raiding them. The result was a complete victory for the Israelites—a new day for them, since they had been defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites a generation before (14:41–45). (CSB)

**21:1** *the Canaanite, the king*. King’s identity and location are not clear. (TLSB)

*Arad*. See map, p 250. A city, but may also describe a region of the Negeb surrounding it. Archaeologists believe the city of Arad was well populated and prosperous before the time of Abraham but largely abandoned during the time of Moses. (TLSB)

**21:2** *totally destroy.* See NIV text note. (CSB)

**21:3** *Hormah.* See NIV text note; the association with Israel’s earlier defeat is made certain by the use of this place-name (see 14:45). (CSB)

**21:1–3** The Canaanite king of Arad learns of the movement of the Israelite nation and responds by attacking some of the outlying citizens, carrying some into captivity. In this example, the Israelites show their faith in God by coming to Him for guidance before striking back. God is faithful. When His people return to Him, He hears their prayers and has mercy on them. • We praise You, O Lord, for hearing our prayers. Grant us ready ears that listen to Your Word with sincerity. Amen. (TLSB)

*The Bronze Snake*

**4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;  5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.  7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”  9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

**21:4** *the way to the Red Sea*. The Gulf of Aqaba is meant, on the east side of the Sinai Peninsula southeast of Canaan. This region (likely near Punon was well known for its copper mines. (Copper is used for making bronze.) (TLSB)

*impatient*. Caused by travel away from Canaan rather than toward it. (TLSB)

With Moses’ determination not to engage Edom in battle (see note on 20:20), the people became impatient with him and with the direction the Lord was taking them. Flushed with victory, they were confident in themselves. They forgot that their victory over Arad was granted by the Lord in response to their solemn pledge (v. 2); now they were ready to rebel again. (CSB)

Following the thirty days of mourning, Israel sets out from Hor to go around Edom (Num 20:20-25). Attention to these places indicates that Israel was going back to where they started from. They were walking in circles. On the road going nowhere, they begin to believe that the Lord’s delays are his denials. – Even this generation, which was removed forty years from the life of Egypt, repeated the complaints of the first generation. (PBC)

**21:5** WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT US UP OUT OF EGYPT – Egypt never looked so good as when the Israelites were in the desert. In the wilderness all they remember is the fleshpots of Egypt, not the whips and the bricks. They go even so far as to call Egypt a land flowing with milk and honey (Num 16:13). Once they had to slave for their bread under the lash. Now they pick up manna for free. But impatience has clouded their memory.

Tertullian: “Although they were there nourished with divine supplies, nevertheless [they] were more mindful of their belly and their gullet than of God” (*ANF* 3:679). (TLSB)

*we detest this miserable food!* The people’s impatience (v. 4) led them to blaspheme God, to reject his servant Moses and to despise the bread from heaven. This is the most bitter of their several attacks on the manna (see note on 11:7). Just as Moses’ attack on the rock was more than it appeared to be (see note on 20:11), so the people’s contempt for the heavenly bread was more serious than one might think. Rejecting the heavenly manna was tantamount to spurning God’s grace (cf. Jn 6:32–35, 48–51, 58). (CSB)

**21:6** *fiery serpents*. Hbr *nechashim seraphim*; similar to the word for “bronze” The wordplay may refer to the shiny, metallic brown appearance of some species of adder. (TLSB)

*fiery*. May also describe the pain that accompanied the animals’ bites. (TLSB)

**21:7** *We have sinned*. A second time, the people resort to prayer, which shows they begin to understand the way of life in which the Lord will lead them: sin, repentance, restoration, and service. (TLSB)

**21:8–9** In response to the people’s confession of sin (v. 7), God directed Moses to make an image of a snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and live. (See the typological use of this incident in Jn 3:14–15).(CSB)

**21:8** MAKE A SNAKE AND PUT IT UP ON A POLE – Israel had confessed its sin after a rebellion one other time in Numbers (14:40). But then they went out without the Lord’s presence and were defeated (14:41-45). Their confession was shallow; they believed they could fulfill the promises of the Lord through their own efforts. This background of the earlier confession helps explain why the Lord does not simply get rid the serpents immediately. The bronze serpent by itself does not have the power to heal (as Israel mistakenly believed, 2 Kings 18:4). No, it is the serpent connected with the promise of the Lord that brings life.

Hbr term also used to describe a sign, which could likewise mean a miracle, as in “signs and wonders.” God’s word of promise made the healing possible. The Fathers held that this pole/sign was in the shape of a cross. Just: “Moses, by the inspiration and influence of God, took brass, and made it into the figure of a cross” (*ANF* 1:183). See Basil (*NPNF* 2 8:299). (TLSB)

**21:9** *bronze serpent*. Hbr *nechash nechsheth*. God spared those who accepted the means of rescue He provided. Healing did not magically emanate from the coiled piece of metal but depended on faith in the power of God’s Word. Cyril of Jerusalem: “That brazen serpent was hung up as a remedy for the biting serpents, not as a type of Him that suffered for us, but as a contrast; and it saved those who looked upon it, not because they believed it to live, but because it was killed, and killed with it the powers that were subject to it, being destroyed as it deserved” (*NPNF* 2 7:431). Cyril of Jerusalem: “Whoso had been bitten by the living serpent, and looked to the brasen serpent, might be saved by believing” (*NPNF* 2 7:87). John Wycliffe: “Christ, in his own person … [is] the sacrament of sacraments.… Jesus our living serpent, having the likeness of sin upon him, though he could not possibly sin, was suspended on the cross, that those who are stung by the poison of the old serpent, sin, may become spiritually whole” (*TT*, pp 157–58). Later, when its healing power was not attributed to the Creator but to the creature, the bronze serpent was destroyed by King Hezekiah (2Ki 18:4). His action was necessary because serpents were the idolatrous object of veneration among the earliest peoples. But the rescue from death that God wrought through the bronze serpent was only a type of what He intended when His incarnate Son bore our sin and was lifted to the cross. When faith looks up to Christ crucified, God saves from eternal death all victims of the fatal venom of sin (Jn 3:14–18, 36). Irenaeus of Lyons: “The law never hindered them from believing in the Son of God; nay, but it even exhorted them so to do, 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 vivifies the dead” (*ANF* 1:465). (TLSB)

HE LIVED – This account is especially dear to people of the NT because Jesus pointed to it in John 3. Just as the Israelites were from the poison of the snakes when they looked in faith toward the bronze snake, so believers of all ages can look to Christ in faith and be saved from the spiritual poison of sin. (PBC)

**21:4–9** As Moses guides God’s people in the direction of the Red Sea, away from their primary objective of the Promised Land, rebellion begins anew. Our lives also persist in the pattern of rebellion, repentance, and restoration. Those in Israel who repented received God’s salvation by looking to the sign of His mercy in faith (v 9). What an excellent precursor of God’s redemption through the cross. Those who look upon the cross in faith are saved. • Gracious Lord, send Your Holy Spirit to deepen our faith in Christ, that we live by daily repentance and faith in Your Son. Amen. (TLSB)

*The Journey to Moab*

**10 The Israelites moved on and camped at Oboth.  11 Then they set out from Oboth and camped in Iye Abarim, in the desert that faces Moab toward the sunrise.  12 From there they moved on and camped in the Zered Valley.  13 They set out from there and camped alongside the Arnon, which is in the desert extending into Amorite territory. The Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.  14 That is why the Book of the Wars of the LORD says: ”... Waheb in Suphah and the ravines, the Arnon 15 and the slopes of the ravines that lead to the site of Ar and lie along the border of Moab.” 16 From there they continued on to Beer, the well where the LORD said to Moses, “Gather the people together and I will give them water.” 17 Then Israel sang this song: “Spring up, O well! Sing about it, 18 about the well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people sank— the nobles with scepters and staffs.” Then they went from the desert to Mattanah,  19 from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth,  20 and from Bamoth to the valley in Moab where the top of Pisgah overlooks the wasteland.**

**21:10–13** The people skirt Edom and make their way to the Arnon, the wadi that serves as the border between Moab and the region of the Amorites and that flows west into the midpoint of the Dead Sea. (CSB)

**21:10** *set out*. Turned eastward and northward. It seems they followed a course just east of the King’s Highway, skirting and at times crossing into Edomite territory. At certain places, some of the Edomite tribes enriched themselves by selling food to the desert wanderers, despite their king’s command (cf Dt 2:6). The borders of Edom and Moab may have been somewhat fluid, and central control may not always have been effective. (TLSB)

**21:11** *toward the sunrise*. On the east side. (TLSB)

**21:14–30** Some scholars regard the songs of ch 21 (vv 14–18, 27–30) as intrusions into the narrative account because they appear to interrupt the sequence of events. However, Moses uses a similar approach in Gn 2–3; Ex 15. (TLSB)

**21:14** *Book of the Wars of the Lord.* Mentioned only here in the OT. This is not in existence today; it was presumably an ancient collection of songs of war in praise of God (see note on 10:3 for music in war). Cf. the “Book of Jashar” (Jos 10:13; 2Sa 1:18). (CSB)

Nothing more is known of this book. It appears to have been a separate collection of songs celebrating the numerous victories of Israel against opposing forces (e.g., the Song of Moses, Ex 15). (TLSB)

*Waheb* … *border of Moab*. Brief quotation merely indicates the joy of the Israelites that they had reached the unidentified sites in the Arnon valleys. Cf vv 17–18, 27–30. (TLSB)

**21:16** *I will give them water.* The quest for water had been a constant problem during the desert experience (see ch. 20; Ex 17). (CSB)

**21:17–18** The “song of the well” may also come from the Book of the Wars of the Lord (v. 14). (CSB)

**21:17** *this song*. Joyful “Song of the Well,” sung because the Lord had led them to a place where they merely had to dig below the surface to find a natural supply of water. The days were over when they traversed dry areas and were dependent for water from a rock. (TLSB)

**21:18** *scepter*. At times denotes the insignia of rulers (Ps 60:7; 108:8), but can also be rendered “lieutenant” or “lawgiver (Jgs 5:14; Is 33:22; Gn 49:10 KJV). Here, it seems to mean that the people used their staves to dig below the surface when directed to do so by Moses, “the lawgiver.” (TLSB)

**21:20** *Pisgah*. Lit, “the cleft.” Always has the definite article in Hbr. Denotes various heights; may be translated as a common noun (23:13–14; Dt 3:27; 34:1). Places of encampment, listed here, in ch 33, and Dt 1–2, cannot always be identified with certainty. (TLSB)

**21:10–20** God carries His people to the east side of the Jordan River. Finally, 40 years of wilderness wandering are about to end. We can almost hear the shout of joy echoing through the passage of time. For the time being, all the hardships and the sin of doubting God seem only a fleeting memory. Despite the moaning of an ungrateful people, God keeps His Word sworn in a dream to Abraham (Gn 15:17–21). He will keep His Word to you too. • Faithful Lord, You supply us with all good things, especially the blessings of salvation. Preserve us in this faith. Amen. (TLSB)

*Defeat of Sihon and Og*

**21 Israel sent messengers to say to Sihon king of the Amorites: 22 “Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king’s highway until we have passed through your territory.” 23 But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the desert against Israel. When he reached Jahaz, he fought with Israel.  24 Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified.  25 Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements.  26 Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken from him all his land as far as the Arnon. 27 That is why the poets say: “Come to Heshbon and let it be rebuilt; let Sihon’s city be restored. 28 “Fire went out from Heshbon, a blaze from the city of Sihon. It consumed Ar of Moab, the citizens of Arnon’s heights. 29 Woe to you, O Moab! You are destroyed, O people of Chemosh! He has given up his sons as fugitives and his daughters as captives to Sihon king of the Amorites. 30 “But we have overthrown them; Heshbon is destroyed all the way to Dibon. We have demolished them as far as Nophah, which extends to Medeba.” 31 So Israel settled in the land of the Amorites. 32 After Moses had sent spies to Jazer, the Israelites captured its surrounding settlements and drove out the Amorites who were there.  33 Then they turned and went up along the road toward Bashan, and Og king of Bashan and his whole army marched out to meet them in battle at Edrei. 34 The LORD said to Moses, “Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you, with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon.” 35 So they struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land.**

**21:21–26** As with Edom (20:14–19), Israel requested freedom to pass through the land of the Amorites. When Sihon, their king, tried to meet Israel with a show of force, he suffered an overwhelming defeat. The land of the Amorites was in Transjordan, extending from the Arnon River (at the midpoint of the Dead Sea) to the Jabbok River (v. 24), which flows into the Jordan some 24 miles north of the Dead Sea. (CSB)

**21:21** *Amorites*. Had invaded territory on all sides of the Fertile Crescent. In their thrust eastward, they had founded a dynasty in Babylon, of which King Hammurabi is famous for his law code (c 1728–1686 BC). They had also penetrated Canaanite lands east of the Jordan (cf Gn 10:16). (TLSB)

**21:24** *the Jabbok*. Flows into the Jordan c 25 mi N of the Salt Sea. The area conquered by Israel north of the Arnon River had been in part owned by the Ammonites before the Amorites seized it. The former had been forced to move east of the Jabbok (cf Dt 2:37; Jsh 13:10, 25; Jgs 11:13, 22). Moabites and Ammonites were descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew (Gn 19:36–38). (TLSB)

**21:25** This region was not part of the Promised Land. (TLSB)

**21:27–30** This third ancient poem in ch. 21 was an Amorite taunt song about their earlier victory over Moab (v. 29). Perhaps the “song of Heshbon” was also preserved in the Book of the Wars of the Lord (v. 14). (CSB)

**21:27** *ballad singers say*. Mocking song (cf Hab 2:6). (TLSB)

**21:28** *fire came out*. Characterizes the attack of Sihon. Possibly ironic, if Chemosh was the god of fire. (TLSB)

**21:29**† *Chemosh.* A god of the Moabites (1Ki 11:7; 2Ki 23:13; Jer 48:46). (CSB)

Chief god of the Moabites (cf Jer 48:46). Related to Milcom, god of the Ammonites, as well as Canaanite gods Baal and Molech. According to the Moabite Stone, Chemosh was a savage war god. (TLSB)

**21:21–30** For a second time, the Israelites seek permission to travel the King’s Highway. This time, they are denied its use by Sihon, king of the Amorites. The Israelites lay claim to Sihon’s land, which later became a home for the tribes of Reuben and Gad (32:1–5). God protects His people and overthrows the false religions of the nations. • Lord, protect us with Your Holy Spirit as Your Word and Sacraments preserve us in the one true faith. Amen. (TLSB)

**21:32** By taking Jazer, perhaps north of Heshbon, the Israelites completed the conquest of the Amorite territory of Sihon. (TLSB)

**21:33** *Bashan.* The region northeast of the Sea of Galilee. (CSB)

Fertile territory held by another Amorite king who was enormous in size (Dt 3:1–11). When its two capitals, Edrei and Ashtaroth (directly east of the Sea of Chinnereth), fell into their hands, the Israelites controlled the entire Transjordan area from the Arnon River to the vicinity of Mount Hermon (Dt 3:8), the source of the Jordan River. (TLSB)

**21:35** *struck him down.* By defeating Og, Israel now controlled Transjordan from Moab to the heights of Bashan in the vicinity of Mount Hermon. The victory over Sihon and Og became a subject of song (Ps 135:11; 136:19–20), and is a regular part of the commemoration of the works of the Lord in the Passover celebration. (CSB)

**21:31–35** Og, a second Amorite king, marches against the Israelites. The Lord delivers another victory. The Israelites now lay claim to all the land east of the Jordan. This territory is later given to the half-tribe of Manasseh. God uses the battles at Jahaz (v 23) and Edrei (v 33) to strengthen the resolve of His people. On their own, they could not win against the Amorites, but with God, all things are possible. • Lord, lead us in the path of righteousness, trusting that all things are possible with You through Christ Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)