

NUMBERS

Chapter 21

Arad Destroyed

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 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.” 3 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 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. 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)

21:3 *Hormah.* 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 Serpent

4 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. 5 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.” 6 Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 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. 8 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.” 9 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.

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, 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. (CSB)

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. Just as Moses' attack on the rock was more than it appeared to be, 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 fiery serpent and set it 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)

and 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 Song of the Well

10 And the people of Israel set out and camped in Oboth. 11 And they set out from Oboth and camped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness that is opposite Moab, toward the sunrise. 12 From there they set out and camped in the Valley of Zered. 13 From there they set out and camped on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness that extends from the border of the Amorites, for the Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites. 14 Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD, “Waheb in Suphah, and the valleys of the Arnon, 15 and the slope of the valleys that extends to the seat of Ar, and leans to the border of Moab.” 16 And from there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, “Gather the people together, so that I may give them water.” 17 Then Israel sang this song: “Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!— 18 the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter and with their staffs.” And from the wilderness they went on to Mattanah, 19 and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, 20 and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that looks down on the desert.

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. 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 ...valleys of the Arnon. 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)

King Sihon Defeated

21 Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, 22 “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 by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory.” 23 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 Jahaz and fought against Israel. 24 And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. 25 And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. 26 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 Arnon. 27 Therefore the ballad singers say, “Come to Heshbon, let it be built; let the city of Sihon be established. 28 For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon. It devoured Ar of Moab, and swallowed the heights of the Arnon. 29 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. 30 So we overthrew them; Heshbon, as far as Dibon, perished; and we laid waste as far as Nophah; fire spread as far as Medeba.”

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)

King Og Defeated

31 Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites. 32 And Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who were there. 33 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. 34 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.” 35 So they defeated him and his sons and all his people, until he had no survivor left. And they possessed his land.

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 *defeated him.* 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)