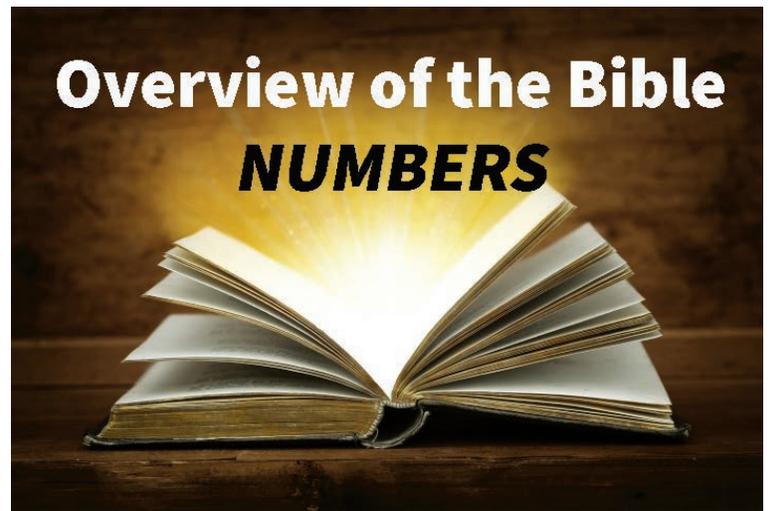


## NUMBERS:

### *Numbers 19.1 - 21.35 – Lesson 32*

Wednesday, February 3, 2021

Chapter 19 is concerned with one type of impurity: ritual impurity contracted by touching something deceased (vv. 11-13, 16) or by being in proximity to something deceased (v. 14). The theme of death was prominent in the previous unit (chs. 16-18), the victims including Korah and his fellow insurrectionists (16:35), and the 14,700 casualties of the plague (16:49).



A person who is contaminated by contact with a corpse is provided with the possibility of cleansing. The ritual involves the sprinkling of the blood of a red heifer/cow that is slaughtered outside the camp. The ashes of the incinerated heifer/cow are mixed with water and sprinkled on the unclean person on the third and seventh days after the contamination (19:17-19).

The second type of impurity, although not called such, centers on the complaint about the absence of water (Ex. 17:1-7). The situation is ringed by the report of the death of Miriam (Num. 20:1) and the death of Aaron (20:22-29).

Interestingly, unlike the Numbers 11, the people suffer no consequences. But Moses does! He is to be excluded from the Promise Land because, as God says to him, *"You did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites"* (20:12). When the people were in trouble, Moses interceded for them. But who will pray for Moses? Does he have a mediator? If nothing else, the story illustrates the principle *"To whom much is given, much is required."*

The text does not give us the specific nature of Moses' and Aaron's sin. The indicting language of 20:12 is simply, *"You did not trust in me."* The Hebrew for *"trust in"* is exactly the same as that with which the Lord indicts his people in 14:11: *"How long will they refuse to believe in me?"* The first generation did not trust/believe in Yahweh, and so they will not enter the land. Moses and Aaron also did not trust in Yahweh, and so they will not enter the land.

Right after the section citing God's rejection of Moses and denial of his opportunity to lead the people into Canaan-land (vv. 1-13) comes the story of Israel, under Moses' leadership still, trying to get Edom's green light to pass through their territory (20:14-21). Moses continues to lead his people in spite of the bad news that he has just received. He is not immediately relieved of his responsibilities, nor does he shrink from ministry.

Some Early Opposition and Victories (20:22-21:35)

Three conflicts are presented in ch. 21. The first is a battle with some Canaanites in the Negeb area. The Israelites are delivered from subjugation after they *"vowed a vow"* to the Lord (21:2), a theme that shortly will occupy the entire chapter of Numbers 30. Moses is conspicuously absent from the narrative of this battle—a sure sign that his pivotal role is winding down since God's word in 20:12 about his exclusion from Canaan. Surely it must be the second generation that gets the credit for this victory rather than the condemned exodus generation. Once more the Israelites complain of no food or water (21:4-9). Also, the Israelites encounter opposition on the way to Moab from Sihon, king of the Amorites (21:21-32), and Og, king of Bashan (21:33-35). Israel must fight not only to get into the Promise Land but also to get to the Promise Land.

The second conflicts add some interesting new developments. This time God does not send water or food. Before Moses can do or say anything, God sends *"fiery/venomous serpents."* The Hebrew word for *"serpent"* here is the same as that of the serpent in Genesis 3: *"bronze one."* The Hebrew word for *"fiery/venomous"* here is sarap, which is used to describe the angelic creatures in the temple in Isaiah's vision (Isa. 6:2).

Faced with the prospect of death through snakebite, the people confess, *"We have sinned,"* and then they ask for a suspension of the plague. The language is a reminder of earlier language in Exodus. Pharaoh says, *"Entreat the Lord to take the snakes away from us"* (21:7).

God's response to the people's request is interesting. Moses does pray, but God does not take away the serpents. He provides a cure, a fiery serpent that is to be raised on a pole. The presence of this elevated serpent does not guarantee immunity from attack. Its presence does become therapeutic, however, when an individual, if bitten, looks at it.

One can easily see how the NT is able to draw a parallel to this event: *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life"* (Jn. 3:14-15).

God did not get rid of the serpents. He also had not abolished the presence of sin. But he had provided relief from the problem, a relief that is like the problem yet different from it. The NT equivalent of the OT *"to look"* is *"to believe."* Here they are synonymous terms. Faith, then, is, as A.W. Tozer has said, *"The gaze of the soul upon a saving God."*

Verses 10-20 of ch. 21 provide an itinerary of Israel's further trek through the wilderness. The journey itself is uneventful, but it is noteworthy by virtue of the two poetic sections in the unit, one a quote from a lost book identified as the *"Book of the Wars of the Lord"* (vv. 14-15)-evidence of real rather than hypothetical sources behind the Pentateuch-and the other, which we may call, for convenience, the *"Song of the Well"* (vv.17-18).

The remainder of the chapter describes Israel's confrontation with Sihon of the Amorites (vv. 21-32) and Og of Bashan (vv. 33-35), with much greater detail for the battle with Sihon than for that with Og. The former is treated in twelve verses, the latter in three.

The people of God have no interest in the territory of Sihon. Rather, their sights are set on something else: a better land *"whose builder and maker is God"* (Heb. 11:10). To that end, the Israelites desire only to pass through to a greater destination. That simple courtesy Sihon refused to grant. An easy-enough yes from Sihon, and there would have been no storm. Instead, there is a no, Sihon sees his cities, especially Heshbon, pass from his control into the control of Israel. And perhaps Israel would have done the same with Sihon and the Amorites had not Sihon rushed his military forces into action (21:23). The Israelites had no choice but to respond militarily, and this they did quite well.

The event sealed and justified by the recitation of a poem (vv. 27-30), the content of which deal at least in part with Sihon's former capture of Heshbon from the Moabites (see v. 29). But now Sihon has surrendered his gains. To be sure, there are extremely difficult problems in translation the poem. At least the whole story, and the poem, in particular, says that gains can become losses, and new frontiers can be forfeited. Stubbornness may be nothing more than stupidity.