

NUMBERS

Lesson 24 - Chapters 20 and 21

After the interlude of Numbers chapters 18 and 19 that sought to make the point that the Priesthood the Lord established was permanent and needed; and the ordaining and re-issuing in more detail of some instructions regarding holiness, purification, and the terribly serious nature of impurity caused by death, chapter 20 picks up again with the actual journey of the Israelites towards the Promised Land.

What we are about to read takes place about 40 years after the Israelites fled Egypt, and so their time of wandering is drawing near a close.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 20 all

Israel arrives at the southernmost border of the region of Canaan, as they close in on their destination. The place is called Kadesh, and is usually considered to be one and the same as Kadesh-Barnea. This was a desert region, and we're told that this place was considered to be in the wilderness of Zin. Where the wilderness of Paran leaves off, the wilderness of Zin begins. So, Israel was more or less at the boundary between two areas.

With virtually no comment, and zero emotion, we're told that Miriam (sister to Moses and Aaron) dies and is buried there. Hebrew literature.....particularly the Bible.....is so very different in many respects to other literature of its day and well into the future. When we read Egyptian, or Hittite, or Arabian, or later Greek and Roman historical accounts, they dwell on the circumstances surrounding deaths and battles. Just like our modern day Hollywood films that tend to focus on conflict and carnage, because people find it more interesting than character development and the establishment of principles, so it has been since time immemorial. Yet, here we have a great example of how the Bible deals with these matters: perhaps the central female figure of the Old Testament, Miriam (if we discount Eve as a special category), dies and it is listed as little more than a minor accounting record. We might say in a knee-jerk reaction that it was because she was a woman, in a male dominated society, and therefore had little value; but we don't get significantly more verbiage when we come to the deaths of Moses, Aaron, or many other of the primary male Biblical figures.....so gender is not the issue.

It is truly fascinating, or ironic, or perhaps both, that the focal female personage of both the Old and New Testaments are each named Miriam. For the mother of Jesus, who Christianity tends to call Mary, was a Jew; but Mary was not a Jewish name. Her real and actual given Hebrew name was Miriam.

And, as we have seen often in the journey of the Israelites, once again they are in need of water. And, once again they go to Moses and want to know what he is going to do about it. And, once again they openly express their distress at being led out into a barren place, when what they longed for lay behind them in Egypt. Back in Egypt, they say, they had plenty of food.....figs, grapes, pomegranates...and, more pertinent to this story, plenty of water. Living along the Nile meant they NEVER thirsted for enough water.

Not knowing what else to do, Aaron and Moses go to the Wilderness Tabernacle, and there fall on their faces in worship seeking the council of the Lord. And, Yehoveh appears to them and speaks to them. And, the gist of the conversation is that Aaron is to take his rod, his staff, (the one that budded) and walk over to some conspicuous rock that was nearby. They were to assemble the community of Israel as witnesses to what was about to happen; then Moses was to speak.....or better, order.....the rock to give up water.

Moses did as he was told. He took the rod, went to the rock, and then proceeded to speak very harshly to the people. Basically, he says, 'you always come griping to me, and expect me to handle everything for you. Somehow or another, even in a place where there is no water, I'm supposed to just manufacture it for you and fix these problems as though I made them in the first place.' Then he turns and whacks the rock with Aaron's staff, twice, and out flowed apparently enormous volumes of water. Because for 3 million people and all those animals to survive, the US Army Quartermaster estimates that it would take something on the order of 11 million gallons of water, every day!

Well, the people were happy enough; but it turns out the Lord doesn't feel the same way about it. He informs Moses and Aaron that because they did not affirm God's sanctity in front of the Israelite community, that neither of them will enter the Promised Land. We have no record of a response or reaction from Moses or Aaron, but one can only imagine their shock and depression from this edict of God.

And, anyone studying this might want to ask himself: why? Why such a harsh decree from the Lord to the very two men who He has used, and to some degree used up, to achieve His purposes. What is it that Moses and Aaron did that would bring this sort of wrath from God upon them? The obvious is that Moses disobeyed God; he hit the rock that he was only supposed to verbally order to produce water. But, this seems so small a thing in comparison to the consequences.

In truth, there have been many theories produced to explain this devastating retribution upon Moses and Aaron. Among those theories are these: that in striking the rock he struck it twice instead of once. Also that his character flaws were displayed: a blazing temper caused Moses to care little for a very real need of the people (water), and thus saw the matter as mostly a bother to him personally. Another is that he doubted God, and thus God told him exactly that ("because you did not trust in Me"). And of course the most popular is that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as ordered by God.

I think that the matter primarily comes down to an attitude Moses displayed in front of Israel in which he unintentionally validated a pagan belief held by most people of that era; and in doing

so failed to show God as the One who brings forth the water, not a man. We must remember that Israel was but a few months removed from Egypt. They behaved and thought more as Egyptians than Hebrews. Deep seated in their belief system was the acceptance of magic and of sorcerers; men who possessed special power that was loaned to them by the gods. Thus sorcerers invariably made quite a show of it using incantations accompanied by all sorts of gestures when they did their magic. And naturally these magicians were greatly feared and revered for the power they claimed to possess.

Moses and Aharon took credit for the water coming forth from the rock; in fact in the way they behaved they implied it was by THEIR power that this amazing thing happened. Verse 10 says: "Listen here you rebels are WE (Moses and Aaron) supposed to bring you water from this rock?" Then Moses struck the rock and water gushed forth.

Some of the great Hebrew sages say that the great sin resulted from Moses saying, *notsi'* meaning, "shall WE draw forth" when what he should have said is *yotsi'*, meaning, "shall HE draw forth". By saying *notsi'* Moses was giving credit to he and Aaron as though they had the power of sorcerers to call forth water from a rock, instead of directing all honor and glory to YHWH who is the one with the power.

The result of this rash public indiscretion is that it reflected badly on God. Thus the Lord says in verse 12: "But Adonai said to Moshe and Aharon, 'because you did not trust in me, so as to cause me to be regarded as holy by the people of Israel.....' The water being miraculously provided for the people from an inert rock should have been yet another opportunity for God to display His mercy and love and unlimited ability to care for His own, as well as His immutable uniqueness apart from men or other gods. The sanctity that should have been accorded to Yehoveh became muddled in the minds of all those who could have benefited greatly from the lesson that among the Hebrews there will be no sorcery or sorcerers.

The Hebrew word used in verse 12 as "holy" or (depending on your bible version) "sanctified" is *kadash*. In other words God says that He was NOT *kadash* as He should have been in the provision of the water. And from the root of the word *kadash* comes *kadosh*, *kodesh*, and other forms that all center on the difficult concept of holiness. As I told you in an earlier lesson, in reality the root of *kadash* is generic in it's meaning and only applies to the divine if used in that context. *Kadash* generally means to set apart or to separate or to make a distinction. Thus I gave the example of my wife separating dark loads from light loads when doing laundry and that the Hebrew work *kadash* could appropriately be used to describe her act of separating colors of clothing before washing them.

God wanted to show that He stood alone, distinct, apart from any other being but instead Moses and Aaron attempted to show THEMSELVES as being distinct and apart from Israel. They showed THEMSELVES as inherently possessing many of the powers of Yehoveh. Since God was denied His due in the miracle of the water from the rock, Moses and Aaron would be denied their due from being the leaders of Israel. For when verse 12 is completed it says: " You will NOT bring this community into the land I have given to them".

What a huge warning this is especially to those who hold themselves up as God's

representatives and leaders of His congregation of Believers on earth. How many pastors and teachers and prophets claim a power and ability of their own to be used at their own discretion when in fact they have no inherent power at all. Or they claim personal credit for acts of God. Not even a week ago I heard a TV pastor who was trolling for funds for his ministry say that if people would send him \$1000 that he would covenant with them and vow a 3 fold return in their investment in his ministry. He was proudly saying that he had the spiritual power to cause God to miraculously give you back \$3000 if you sent \$1000 to support this particular ministry.

Well let me be very clear on this: Moses penalty for displaying such a haughty attitude and also misleading people into thinking something that is simply not the truth is that he was never allowed to enter into the Promised Land.

As was usually the case in that era, the place where this all happened was named according to what happened there; so it came to known as the Waters of Meribah (Meribah meaning, "quarreling"). And, it is fascinating that despite Moses and Aaron's high-handed sin against the Lord.....and despite the quarreling of the people aimed AT the Lord.....in the end He still used it to affirm His ***kadash***, His sanctity. It would seem that the object of the Israelite peoples' anger and frustration was Moses. But, as we keep being reminded, whatever issues we might have with God's Mediator is no different that having that issue with God. How we respond to God's Mediator is the same as responding to Yehoveh Himself.

Suddenly in verse 14 the scene shifts. The first time Israel was attempting to enter Canaan 38 years earlier, it was from the south; in fact it was not far from this very place they were at now, Kadesh. So Moses decides on a different approach; he'll try to enter from the east. But there's a problem; the most direct route to the place where Moses wishes to cross into Canaan, the Jordan River, requires going through the territory of Edom. Etiquette and good statesmanship requires that emissaries, representatives of Israel, be sent to the King of Edom to ask his permission to pass through the land of Edom. So Moses sends a message to whoever was the current king: please allow us to pass through, after all, we are your brothers.

This was no self-serving flattery nor was Moses' calling Edom "brother" a figure of speech or a Middle Eastern display of friendship; indeed, Israel WAS Edom's brother. Jacob is Israel's alternate name. Jacob's twin brother, Esau, is Edom. This was not symbolism. For Edom is but another name for Esau as is Israel but another name for Jacob. So even though the last time the Bible spoke of some dealings between a repentant Jacob (who was returning home to Canaan from Mesopotamia) and a forgiving twin brother Esau (who had his birthright stolen by Jacob), attitudes had obviously changed over the last 5 centuries or so as far as Esau's descendants were concerned.

Now interestingly, all evidence (and some reliable Egyptian records) indicates that Edom at the time of the Exodus did not have any walled cities in they're territory. They even had but a few permanent villages because the people of Edom were nomadic, very much Bedouin-like. Yet it is obvious from those same records that they were a formidable people and didn't seem to have any problem mounting a sizeable militia for their defense when the need arose. And that's exactly what happened.

Despite Moses' plea to the king of Edom to remember their common blood heritage, and a promise of peace and respect, the king denies them entry into his region. Moses promises NOT to take any path except the King's Highway, and not even take any water from Edom's wells. In fact they will hurry to cross through their territory. The King's answer remains swift and sure: "NO!" And he says if you try to cross through we'll attack you. In order that Moses understands that this is not an idle threat the king sends a large contingent of men to block their path. Moses got the message and Israel turned away from Edom and headed towards a place called Mount Hor that was on the edge of Edom, but not IN Edom.

Exactly where Mount Hor was located is disputed. First, Mount Hor is obviously a generic name because Hor is but a derivative of the Hebrew word Har, which means mountain. So if we take the term literally, the place they went to was called Mount Mountain. Likely this just indicates that wherever they went the most prominent feature was a sizeable mountain.

Moving along quickly, the Scriptures tell us that the Lord now decides that Aaron's days are completed and at Mount Hor Aaron will die. As is the custom of this era the words telling of Aaron's pending death are "let Aaron be gathered to his kin." As we have discussed on a number of occasions (but I think this point cannot ever be made often enough until it is firm in our minds) this "gathered to his kin" concept was an ancestor worship related phrase. While today we would say of a departed Believer, 'he died and went to be with the Lord', no such thought even remotely existed to the Israelites neither of the Exodus nor of much later times. Rather the thought and hope was that some mysterious life essence of himself would live on with their ancestors, not with God. Why is this important for us to grasp? Because the Hebrews were always living on the edge of idolatry and had a difficult time divesting themselves of centuries of pagan beliefs that they lived under and were surrounded with. The concepts that the average Christian holds today about death and dying (and a laundry list of other principles) were not yet developed in these ancient Israelites. The laws and commands they received from God they took in the life context of their current beliefs and living situation and generally only added it all to their lives in small doses, in one form or another, just like we tend to do in modern times. And their beliefs in the days of Moses generally matched those practiced by Egypt.

Let me give you an example of what I'm getting at when I speak of life **context** that I hope will make an impact not just in helping us to identify with those Biblical Hebrews, and helping us to think in the terms they thought in as we read them in the Bible, but also as we deal with modern day Christian brothers and sisters who live outside of the US in cultures that are at total odds with our own. American Believers (in particular) tend to think that our views and doctrines and traditions are THE views and doctrines and traditions, and all else are error or improper. For example: the American Church is very prosperity oriented. In general our doctrine in this regard can be summed up by saying that prosperity is not only a hoped for but (in many cases) an expected blessing from the Lord as a reward for our belief and trust in Him. And that if we do NOT have material prosperity it is often seen as an outward sign of our personal lack of faith or commitment to our local congregation or to Him. In other words in America we expect prosperity blessings to include (or even be completely centered upon) material wealth. Nice cars, big houses, designer clothes, high paying jobs, etc. are indicators (at least partially) of our standing with God. Thus if you have little prosperity, you have must

little faith and thus little standing with God.

While the European and Eastern Churches also have their own version of a prosperity doctrine, theirs is all about health, peace, children, and wellbeing. In fact the European and Eastern Churches are ANTI material prosperity. They see the possession of personal material prosperity as crude and pagan, strictly against the teachings of Christ. A Christian who has done well financially is generally looked down upon and their faith is suspect. To pray for or seek material prosperity is an unthinkable thing for them; it would be the height of apostasy to their thinking. Why these enormous differences between the American Church view of the place of prosperity in our doctrine versus almost all other churches in the other nations on this planet? **Different life contexts.**

Our American society is a wealth-oriented society from top to bottom. From just a secular viewpoint alone Americans who don't have the things we desire are seen as underprivileged and downtrodden. And our goal is generally to always strive for more so we have expectations about our lives that tomorrow we'll have more than we had yesterday. And as Christians we have a helper in God to see to it that we achieve that material prosperity that is so important to us. That is the American life context.

In Europe and the Eastern societies who are more socialist in their thinking, less is more. In fact to the European Christian less is MORE godly. Equality is NOT an equal opportunity to advance; equality means literally everybody living in the same condition. A Doctor should be paid the same as a custodian. A coal miner should have the same sized apartment as a company CEO. There should be no rich or poor. If I have plenty of food, so should you. My prosperity, by definition, takes away from yours because under socialism the economy is a zero-sum game; there is a finite amount of resources to go around. The goal is equal sufficiency for all. That is their life context (obviously I am generalizing because nothing is quite that clean and neat).

So, which doctrine of prosperity is right; the American or the Eastern and European? Well we won't debate that today. The point is that our American Christian viewpoint and their Eastern Christian viewpoint about prosperity were adapted to the realities of our respective societies, not the other way around. So whatever God told the ancient Hebrews they took it in the life context of their long held beliefs, not as a complete replacement of the old beliefs. They didn't somehow just remove centuries of ideas from their minds about what seemed to be self-evident givens about life and the world of the gods; they added what they were given by Moses at Mt. Sinai to the mix.

Therefore it was automatic that since Aaron was a good man, that when he died, naturally his life essence would, as a reward, go on to live with his departed family members, his deceased ancestral kin. As Israel was on the verge of entering the Promised Land, and as Aaron (and Moses were to be excluded due to their high-handed sin of striking the rock with Aaron's staff and taking personal credit for the water that came forth, it was time for Aaron to be replaced. Further the Lord ordered that Aaron was to strip of his High Priest's garments and turn them over to Eleazar, his son, who would assume the position as the new High Priest.

Moses did as he was told, and he led Eleazar and Aaron to the summit of Mount Hor. And, verse 27 makes the point that the entire congregation of Israel witnessed this event. Up on the mountain Aaron died and Eleazar became the new High Priest. Please notice a couple of things: first, as with the death of Miriam, the death of Aaron is simply matter of fact. There is no eulogy. There is no recounting of his great sacrifice and service to the Lord and people of Israel. This is the standard Biblical treatment of the passing of all the great Bible personalities. Second point: Aaron was a fortunate man. He lived to know that his son would succeed him as High Priest. Yet as we'll soon find out, Moses received no such honor. A son succeeding his father was a cherished tradition that the father hoped for. A father passing his business or mantle of leadership on to his son to succeed him still means something to us in our era, but it was everything in ancient times. That Moses' sons did NOT become the new God-appointed leaders of Israel must have been greatly disappointing to Moses.

When Moses and Eleazar come back down the mountain without Aaron the nation of Israel knows that Aaron is gone, and so the whole of Israel mourns for 30 days. Why did Moses and the others ascend a mountain for this event? Well as you've probably noticed, great spiritual ventures in the OT take place on mountaintops. Part of this is because it was believed that the gods lived on mountaintops. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it is now believed that El Shaddai means God of the Mountain. For God to call Moses and Aaron and Eleazar to come up to the mountaintop indicated a momentous spiritual was occurring in the presence of God. Yet God was not dwelling on a mountaintop right now; the Wilderness Tabernacle was His earthly abode. Why didn't God call them to the Tabernacle as a good place for Aaron to die? There was no way that Aaron could die in the Tabernacle area or it would have defiled God's holiness. So it had to be up on a mountaintop, a high place that in Hebrew is called **bemah**, that this important changing of the guard takes place.

Let's move on to chapter 21.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 21 all

The 30-day period of mourning Aaron is over, and so the Israelites are once again on the move but they don't get far. There is simply no way to hide the movement of 3 million people; the word is out and all the indigenous people of Canaan and the surrounding areas are watching Israel like hawks. Every one of these nations would have sent out scouts to see just where the Israelites were going. Israel's intentions to move into Canaan were no secret; it was simply a matter of the route and the strategy of conquest.

An unnamed Canaanite king, the king of an area called Arad, isn't waiting for Israel to move upon him and so makes a preemptive strike. Arad is a region located in the Negev; the capital city of Arad is on the western side of the hills that separate the giant rift valley called the Arabah, from the coastal plains of the Mediterranean. At first Arad's forces gain the upper hand and take some of the Hebrews prisoner. The Israelites are not battle-tested yet and so likely did not fight very well at all. But this is going to be a turning point; in proper response to their trouble, the whole community turns to God and makes a vow that if He will lead them to victory they will offer to Him all the captured booty they take from the enemy. Take a look at verses 2 and 3. Most translations will say that if the Lord will hand the Canaanite people over to them,

they will DESTROY the enemy's cities. Next, it says that the Lord accepted their vow, and delivered up the Canaanites, and so their cities were destroyed and therefore the place was named Hormah, which means destruction.

Actually the vow was NOT that Israel would not necessarily destroy the cities: rather it was that they would "put them under ban". The Hebrew word is **herem**, and what this is indicating is a significant act of self-denial. The self-denial was that there would be a ban placed on the towns such that the Israelites could not loot them for themselves. The Israelite army was a militia; each man armed himself and supplied his own food. Therefore whenever an enemy town was taken typically the victorious soldiers looted the town and whatever each man could take for himself was his reward (his pay, actually) for his service and the risk he took. But what the Israelites did was to offer God all the booty of the towns they took in exchange for His supernatural assurance of victory. And by the way, the Israelites did destroy the towns in the process, but the vow was NOT to destroy the towns, it was to give everything of value that was captured to the Lord for His favor. The destruction of the towns was partly the process of taking the towns, and at times partly the way of offering up the towns as a sort of "burnt offering" to God.

The next verse, 4, tells us something kind of interesting but we have to look at a map to understand the matter. At this time Israel was right on the border of the Land of Canaan. Recall that their request to the king of Edom to allow them to pass through his land fell on deaf ears. In fact the king sent out some troops to stand in the way (this was probably just saber rattling, because there was no battle); in the end each side just went their own way. Next we have Aaron being escorted up to a mountaintop where he died, and his son assuming the position of High Priest. And then we have this king of Arad come and make a preemptive strike on Israel. This all happened over a period of little more than a month and within the very small area of just a handful of miles in either direction, not more than 20 miles to the south and west of the Dead Sea.

But verse 4 says they now turned to go by the way of the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea) in order to avoid going through Edom. Why after this victory over Arad did they not just continue to go straight north? Or why did they not just ignore Edom's threat, especially now that Israel was flush with confidence after their recent battle victory, and take the route they had originally intended: through Edom and up to the Jordan River?

It is fairly well documented that going straight north would have run Israel headlong into an enemy that seemed undefeatable: a people known as the Sea Peoples, who would eventually be called the Philistines. Apparently, very early into the journey, it was decided that they would not take that route. Recall the statement of Exodus 13:17 concerning the route that God refused to take the Israelites on to the Promised Land:

NAS Exodus 13:17 Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt."

God did not want Israel to go up against the Philistines, and so going north from Arad into

Philistine country was out of the question.

Why, then, didn't they just go through Edom? There is absolutely no doubt that the Edomites would not have been able to stop Israel. I wouldn't even begin to venture a guess as to how many Edomites there were at this time; but as a nomadic society, it could not have been very many.....scores of 1000's perhaps. But, how could that have ever matched up to Israel's 600,000-man army? It couldn't. No, this had much more to do with Moses' truthful plea to the king of Edom, calling them a brother. Moses.....and therefore apparently the Lord.....did not want the Israelites to annihilate Edom. Yehoveh did not want the descendants of Jacob killing the descendants of his twin brother, Esau.

So, after defeating the king of Arad's forces, Moses led the Israelites south, towards the Gulf of Aqaba, which achieved the purpose of skirting the territory of Edom and avoiding conflict with them. This involved a journey of 90 miles south, about 15 miles east, before they turned northward again. This must have really chafed at the people of Israel. Let me tell you, this is some serious desert territory. Unpleasant to say the least. And, it must have felt like they were backtracking probably at least a month's worth of travel. Therefore, as it says at the end of verse 4 and beginning of verse 5, "...the people grew restive on the journey and spoke against God and against Moses."

We'll leave it here and see what God does about this latest rebellion next week.