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## A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

### THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

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#### A TASTE OF VICTORY (20:1–21:35)

##### The Place of the Passage

This passage begins “in the first month” (20:1) of a new year. The text does not state which year this is, but it is probably the start of the fortieth year, as this passage reports the final march of the people to their last encampment on the edge of the Promised Land. With the events of this passage, the people’s wanderings end as they reach Canaan’s border. As they approach the land, the people experience their first taste of warfare—and their first victories. Notwithstanding these early victories won by the hand of the Lord, the exodus generation is as full of complaints as ever, as we approach the end of that generation. Few books of the Bible showcase the patience of God so beautifully as Numbers, which sets his stubborn faithfulness against the people’s stubborn faithlessness.

##### The Big Picture

Despite real losses due to the people’s faithlessness, the Lord continues to be faithful and advances his purposes for them with great victories.

##### Gospel Glimpses

BRONZE SERPENT. John 3:16 is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” But have you ever noticed that Jesus makes this statement to explain the significance of the bronze serpent in Numbers 21:4–9? In John 3:14–15, Jesus retells the bronze serpent event and then in verse 16 adds his “for” statement to explain how the bronze serpent was a type<sup>1</sup> of himself. The “so” in John 3:16 does not mean “so much” but rather “in this way,” further drawing a parallel between the bronze serpent and Jesus’ work on the cross. The bronze serpent was raised up for the people who were dying in their sins. They looked in repentance and received life. So it is with those who trust in the cross of Christ.

##### Whole Bible Connections

EDOM. Edom, located on the southeast border of Israel, shares a relationship to Israel that spans nearly the entire Bible. The Edomites originated from the offspring of Esau when he separated from Jacob (Genesis 36:6–8). It is their parentage in Isaac’s twin sons—Israel descending from Jacob and Edom from Esau—that leads to their frequent depiction as “brother” nations (Numbers 20:14; Deuteronomy 23:7; Obadiah 10; Malachi 1:2). But, like Jacob and Esau, their brotherhood is one of rivalry (I Samuel 14:47; 22:9; II Sam. 8:14; I Kings 11:14–16; II Kings 3:9; 8:20).

When the Babylonians invade Judah in the sixth century BC, the Edomites participate in the devastation of Jerusalem (Psalm 137:7; Obadiah 10–14). By the time of Jesus' birth, Herod the Great is reigning over Israel. The Bible records little about Herod's lineage, but extrabiblical evidence indicates he is probably an Idumean (Idumea being the name at that time for Edom). In spite of this tumultuous history, Jesus welcomes the crowds that come to hear him "from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon" (Mark 3:7–8).

### **Theological Soundings**

**JUST WAR AND HOLY WAR.** Far too often, religion has been used as a pretext for war. Israel's conquests in Canaan have sometimes been misused to justify such warfare. However, attention to the text reveals a careful distinction between true "holy war" and other forms of war. During the days of Abraham, God's people lived at peace among the Canaanites, even engaging in business and military alliances with them. God had not authorized judgment upon Canaan, "for the iniquity of the Amorites [was] not yet complete" (Genesis 15:16). Then, four centuries later, the divine Judge did declare final judgment exclusively upon Canaan (Deuteronomy 9:4–5). The term "holy war" should be used only for an actual decree from heaven pronouncing judgment<sup>2</sup> on a people. Israel's authorization for holy war was strictly limited to the peoples of Canaan. All other enemies were to be approached with "terms of peace" (Deuteronomy 20:1–20). Other wars might be fought defensively but not merely for conquest. The battles in Numbers 20:14–21; 21:1–3, 21–35 are carefully described to show the divine judgment visited upon Canaanite Arad in contrast with efforts to maintain peace with the non-Canaanite nations of Edom, the Amorites, and Bashan. The latter two are defeated in what Numbers describes specifically as defensive warfare. In Judges 11:12–28, Jephthah again stresses the defensive posture of Israel's warfare that results in their possessing land east of the Jordan, outside of Canaan. The conquest of Canaan is a foreshadowing of the final judgment that one day will purge the whole world of sin in order to make the land a dwelling place for righteousness. But the Canaanite conquest cannot be used to justify human leaders' initiating religiously motivated violence.

### **Glossary of Terms**

**JUDGMENT.** Any assessment of something or someone, especially moral assessment. The Bible also speaks of a final day of judgment when Christ returns, when all those who have refused to repent will be judged (Revelation 20:12–15).

**TYPOLOGY.** A method of interpretation in which a real, historical object, place, or person is recognized as a pattern or foreshadowing (a "type") of some later object, place, or person. For example, the Bible presents Adam as a "type" of Christ (Romans 5:14)

**Please answer the following questions:**

**Leviticus Chapter 20**

1. Who died at Kadesh? (1)
  
2. What did the Lord tell Moses to do to provide water for the Israelites? (8)
  
3. What did Moses do instead? (9-11)
  
4. As a result of this disobedience what would not the Lord allow Moses and Aaron to do? (12)
  
5. Who would not allow Israel to pass through their country? (18-21)
  
6. What did Moses do to Eleazar before Aaron died? (28)
  
7. Miriam's death is reported at the beginning of chapter 20 (v. 1), and Aaron's death is reported at its end (vv. 22–29). Furthermore, Moses will not be permitted to enter the land (v. 12). A transition between generations is taking place. But the people's complaining at the end of their wanderings is just like it was at the beginning. What is it about Moses' response to this instance of the people's complaining that will keep him from leading them into the land?
  
8. For their failure, Moses and Aaron are told they will die in the wilderness (v. 12). It might seem unfair for this singular failure to bar them from leading the people into the land, but what does this tell us about the standard of perfection that must be met by a mediator who would successfully lead God's people into his rest?

## **Leviticus Chapter 21**

9. What three kings did Israel defeat? (1-3,21-35)
  
10. Why did the Lord send poisonous snakes to bite the Israelites? (4-7)
  
11. What was the remedy for the snake bites? (8-9)
  
12. What did the Israelites sing at the well? (16-18)
  
13. The attack of the king of Arad is Israel's first confrontation with the Canaanites as they reapproach the border (v. 1). Why is the result of this confrontation at the place called Hormah (v. 3) different from the previous time Israel confronted Canaanites at the place called Hormah (Numbers 14:39–45)?
  
14. Israel is not authorized to attack non-Canaanites, for only the Canaanites are under God's judgment. How does Israel's varied responses to Edom, Arad, the Amorites, and the Bashanites illustrate Israel's carefulness to limit conflict to God's commandment?
  
15. In the middle of narrating these conflicts, Numbers 21:10–20 reports a well Israel digs in an uninhabited region of "no man's land" between the Amorites and the Moabites (v. 13). How does this peaceful development of making unclaimed wilderness habitable contribute to the "taste" of settling the land that the exodus generation receives on the borders of Canaan?