

NUMBERS

Lesson 25 - Chapter 21

Last week we had just started Numbers chapter 21. And, in this chapter we see a continuation.....full of difficulties.....of the Israelites' journey toward the Promised Land, Canaan.

The King of Edom had refused to allow them to pass through his territory, the most preferred route that would take the people to just north of the Dead Sea, where they would cross the Jordan River from the east to enter Canaan. Then, the King of Arad attacked Israel, although the Israelites eventually defeated him, took some of his cities captive, looted them and gave the booty to the Lord as payment of a vow. And, while looking at a map it might have made sense for Israel to just go straight north, through this conquered king's territory, it would have caused their eventual encounter with the Philistines: something the Lord wanted them to avoid at all cost.

So let's read from verse 4 and go until the end of chapter 21.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 21:4 - end

The only reasonable route that was open to Moses was called the Way of the Sea of Reeds, or Yam Suf. In modern terms this was a well-traveled highway that skirted the western edge of Edom and ended at the northernmost tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, a finger of the Red Sea.

The route was among the most difficult of the entire wilderness journey. It was hot, rugged, and merciless. Those leaders who had been in the prime of their lives when they left Egypt were now elderly and weary from 40 years living like Bedouins. Those who were elderly when living Egypt were dead and buried. The Israelites openly questioned Moses' choice to go around Edom, a journey that would add at least a month through some of the worst terrain imaginable. The common Israelites were neither stupid nor uninformed; there seemed to be no good pragmatic reason to take this arduous route around Edom because they well knew that the nomadic militia of Edom could never have stopped the enormous 600,000 man army of Israel from passing through. The show of force that Edom had made earlier was just that: a show of force and probably a bluff. They didn't attack Israel nor inflict any kind of damage upon them that was recorded.

But the threat achieved its desired effect. Even more, Moses recognized the natural kinship of the Edomites and did not want to inflict grave damage on so close a relative. In a few days after turning south the people became depressed, disillusioned, and angry and spoke out against Yehoveh and Moses. If they had learned anything by now it was that it was folly to

speak against Moses and to imagine that doing so in no way involved Yehoveh. When they rebelled against God's Mediator, they rebelled against God. So they openly gripped not just about Moses but also about the God who had redeemed them from their Egyptian oppression.

The gripe is the usual argument: things were better back in Egypt. Why would you disrupt us, bring us to this horrible place, and then just allow us to die? But this time they took one more bold step in their rebellion: they said they had come to hate the food, the manna that the Lord had provided for them for the last 40 years. They said they were sick to death of the bread from Heaven.

In response to this utter lack of gratitude and trust the Lord sent poisonous serpents to bite them, and it killed many Israelites. Here we see that despite the rebellion a certain maturity in understanding of the people of Israel; they recognized instantly that the serpents were a divine plague upon them and that their only hope of survival was to plead with Moses, their Mediator, to intercede with Yehoveh on their behalf.

Finally they understood that Moses' position was without equal and irreproachable. There were not multiple mediators; there was no democratic solution. Even more the people had come to realize the other vital principle of redemption and forgiveness of sin: the necessity of repentance.

I hope you paid close attention as we moved through Exodus, then Leviticus, and now most of the way through Numbers as it has been exposed that ritual without repentance was ineffectual. Over and over God says that it is the condition of the heart that matters. Over and over again it is made clear that the various rituals of atonement and purification were a matter of obedience not magic; but ritual by itself accomplishes nothing. Ritual by itself, without the confession of wrongdoing, trust in the Most Holy One and a contrite spirit, are indeed nothing but worthless mechanical acts of self-righteousness. And I want to make it as clear as possible to all who are listening (because it is hurtful to me the way Hebrew history and liturgy and the Torah itself has been so maligned and distorted): there was no general belief among the Hebrews that robot-like obedience to the Law brought a proper and good relationship with Yehoveh. This erroneous concept of a works-righteousness that is invariably attributed to the Jewish people by the Church simply was not the norm in Israelite culture. Even more, there was no belief (in general), that their reward for doing the Law was any more than simply pleasing God. Of course I cannot deny that such thoughts and practices didn't exist among a minority of Hebrews, but it was not the ways of the mainstream teachers or followers of Yehoveh.

Let me say that in another way: this belief (that is almost universal within the Church) that the OT was a works-based method of attaining salvation that required no faith, was later replaced with a faith-based redemption (called the New Covenant) that declared works to be bad or irrelevant is simply inaccurate and non-Biblical. First, salvation didn't mean to an ancient Hebrew what it means to followers of Yeshua. Salvation for them meant that Israel would become a world power, from which the Laws of the God of Israel would become the universal standard for all mankind. Salvation was similar to what happened to Israel when they left Egypt: it was an escape from the oppression of an earthly oppressor in order to establish a

Kingdom of God on earth in Canaan. There was no thought, and there remains no thought, that if they obey the Law they will go to live with God in heaven. The Hebrews obey God because they love Him. They obey His Laws because the best thing in life for them is to please the Lord. Any kind of eternal reward for being faithful to Yehoveh is secondary.

Now we can all look at the Hebrews, historically, and criticize them to one degree or another for slowly and steadily focusing on creating and following manmade traditions (what, today, the Church calls faith doctrines) instead of the principles and laws as written down in the Holy Scriptures (Jesus berated His own people for this). And as Believers we can know with a certainty that despite their love of God, too many Jews have rejected His Mediator and Son, Yeshua, and this condemns them in a way that grieves my heart.

However because Christians have accepted and fostered this distorted view of the way Jews see Torah, Tradition, and Judaism we not only falsely accuse an entire people of religious folly and legalism, we also falsely accuse the Old Testament itself (and thereby accuse God, the author of the Word) of *establishing* legalism in the first place (even if only for a time as is the Dispensationalist teaching). I unequivocally tell you today that this is a falsehood that has eroded the heart of the Church for centuries, has marginalized the very people who wrote down and protected the Holy Word of God and who produced Our Savior, and has created the kind of enmity between the Church and the Jewish people (where there should be brotherhood) just as it was between Israel and Edom (Jacob and Esau).

Back to our story. Moses saw the peoples' admission of their sin against God and also their contrite hearts and so as their Mediator asked God to heal them. Thus we come upon one of the most difficult and controversial stories in the Bible: the tale of the brazen serpent hung up on a pole. And we read that when the Israelites looked upon this brazen serpent their snakebites were healed. What makes this all the more difficult is that Jesus Himself makes mention of this incident and even draws a comparison between that and His coming crucifixion.

Listen to words ascribed to Yeshua in **John 3:14**: ***NAS John 3:14 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;***

So what are we to take from this wilderness event? How does this bronze serpent matter compare to the death of Christ? Well let's first see what Numbers says happened and why.

Yehoveh told Moses to make a fiery serpent and to mount it to a pole and when anyone who had been bitten by this divinely ordered plague of poisonous snakes looked up at it they would be healed. We're told that Moses complied, made the serpent out of either copper or bronze, and indeed looking upon the serpent healed those who had been bitten; and that's about all that is said. This ought to immediately be a warning to us not to read more into it that what is here, or to heavily speculate (as has been done on a grand scale especially by gentile Christians).

Let's begin by examining the phrase about the pole and the serpent in the original language: The Hebrew says that Moses was to make a **saraph**. And, right there is where the difficulty begins. Because if we turn to Isaiah 6:2, we see this remarkable verse:

NAS Isaiah 6:2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And wouldn't you just know it, the heavenly Seraphim of this passage is precisely the same word and Hebrew spelling.....saraph.....as what it was that Moses hung up on the pole, that is usually translated as fiery serpent. Here's the thing, the Hebrew word for serpent or snake is ***nachash***. And in neither Numbers 21:8, nor in Isaiah 6:2, is the word ***nachash*** used.....only ***saraph***.

Is it possible that what was hung on that pole was not a snake, but something else since the term ***saraph*** is not precisely defined? Well not likely because in 2 Kings 18:4 we find another mention, at a time perhaps 5 or 6 centuries after the wilderness incident, about this very object. Listen to the verse: ***NAS 2 Kings 18:4 He (Hezekiah) removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.***

The Hebrew used here for bronze serpent was ***nechosheth nachash***; ***nechosheth*** means bronze, and here we find our usual Hebrew word for serpent or snake, ***nachash***. So here in 2 Kings is an independent account that indeed the object placed on the pole was in the shape of a snake, a serpent looking thing at the least.

But this entire incident is very bothersome for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that the serpent is the primary Biblical figure for representing Satan from the first chapters of Genesis all the way through Revelation. So is what we have here a God-ordained symbolized representation of Satan hung on a pole (that somehow heals snake bites) and is then in the New Testament compared to the Messiah's experience on the Cross, by none less than Jesus Himself? Yet when 5 centuries later Hezekiah destroys the pole and serpent he is praised for doing so?

Let's peel this onion back another layer by understanding what the problem was that caused Hezekiah to take down and destroy that long-cherished bronze serpent, a virtual icon of the Israelite's wilderness experience. Did Hezekiah do a bad thing or a good thing by taking it down? Did it please God or was it no different that spitting on the Cross of Christ?

Well, here's why Hezekiah did what he did: ***NAS 2 Kings 18:1 Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king. 2 He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. 3 And he did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.***

Further as, we just read in verse 18:4, "***.....for until those days the sons of Israel had burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.***"

The pole and the serpent had become an image that the Israelites worshipped. They burned

incense to it. It had become such an important object of worship that they had even been given a name: Nehushtan. But how was what the Israelites were doing in Hezekiah's day substantially different than what had happened in the wilderness, with Moses, at God's direction? Even more since Christ equated (in some way) His crucifixion with the brazen serpent being lifted up on a pole; don't we adore the very pole, the cross that Christ was lifted up on? What's so different about the pole that God ordained be erected with the **saraph** on it in Moses' day, as opposed to the same pole used as an object of worship in Hezekiah's era, as opposed to the pole used to execute Jesus that is used today essentially an object of worship?

Tough questions. The ancient Rabbis have some very interesting takes on both the brazen serpent AND, separately, the Seraphim that stand guarding God's throne. And please keep in mind that the exact same Hebrew word (saraph) is used for the serpent on the pole here in Numbers and for the heavenly creatures that translators call Seraphim. What follows is more or less a summary of the thoughts of several of these Rabbis and Sages, with a couple of my own peppered in.

First, let's revisit Isaiah 6:2: **NAS Isaiah 6:1 *In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."***

So what can we say about Seraphim (in Hebrew, **saraph**). They are heavenly spirit beings; they have several wings; they STAND above the Lord who sits on His throne, and they are so holy and pure that they are allowed to take the very coals from the Heavenly Altar. Part of the meaning of the term saraph is "burning" or "fiery" and it comes from this association in Isaiah 6 with the fiery coals of the Heavenly Altar. So Seraphim are seen, by definition, as fiery creatures. Remember these are spirit beings so all association with anything physical is figurative.

From this we see that they can fly through the air (wings) as well as back and forth between Heaven and Earth, and they are allowed the closest access to God. They even were permitted to carry the purifying coals from the Heavenly Altar fire that takes away iniquity and forgives sins. Seraphim are amazingly holy, powerful, and given tremendous authority. And they are associated with fire.

Further if we compare Biblical descriptions of Cherubim and Seraphim we find that they are generally identical. Some Sages have suggested they are but two names for the same thing. In fact it is likely that while Cherubim is the proper name for a particular kind of heavenly being,

saraph (or Seraphim) is probably meant to be more of a description and may well only be describing a characteristic of Cherubim, fiery. Others opine that they are two beings of equally high order; that they are essentially the same type of being but have been given slightly different tasks. Be that as it may, Cherubim and Seraphim are a special and higher order of heavenly being than what is typically called Angels. They are the guardians of God's throne and His personal holiness.

Now here's where we have to broaden our subject matter just a bit to include Satan. We are told that Satan began as a very high order heavenly being. That he was among the most beautiful and the most powerful of heavenly beings.

And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels: and they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world; and he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Apocalypse 12:7-9)

We find this statement in one of the books of the Apocrypha, but this same statement is also found almost word for word in Revelation, which we'll see shortly.

Then, we find this startling bit in Isaiah 14:12: ***NAS Isaiah 14:12 "How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations! 13 "But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. 14 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' 15 "Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, To the recesses of the pit.***

Here we have a statement that tells us that Satan was in Heaven, he was gorgeous, but he was sent down to earth because of his desire to usurp God. But he didn't go without a fight.

Now, here's one more verse and we're getting close to at least putting a couple of pieces together. This is a familiar verse to most of us, as it is about God dealing with Satan, the serpent, as a result of his deceiving Eve into partaking of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. ***NAS Genesis 3:14 And the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly shall you go, And dust shall you eat All the days of your life;***

Now notice that the serpent (Satan) was cursed in that from that day forward he would crawl on his belly. Obviously he was upright before this time or the curse of crawling on his belly would have no meaning. And we must never think that Satan was simply the first snake on planet earth. The Bible makes it clear that this "serpent" was unlike any beast of the field, or any other living thing. He was unique; in fact, he could speak!

OK. Let me throw one more small bit of information your way: another very familiar passage to most of you.

NAS Revelation 12:7 *And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, 8 and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven.*

Here's the thing: in addition to being symbolized as a serpent, Satan is now symbolized as a dragon. And obviously this IS Satan, and he was HIGHER than angels because it even speaks of *his* angels and his fight with Michael that we read about a few minutes ago.

So what is a dragon? Well, first of all, the dragon is a mythical creature that goes back to ancient China. It does not appear to be part of Middle Eastern culture or lore. There were, for sure, other god creatures of the Middle East that were generally part man, part beast, and that had wings but they were not dragons. Dragons were all beast, they had no human element. Since dragons also became part of Greek folklore the Greeks invented their own word for this creature of fantasy, thus we have the Greek word **drakon** in the New Testament, which we pronounce in English as dragon.

Now what is it that John had in mind when he chose the word translated as "dragon" in Revelation? Was it this mythical fire-breathing creature that any Hebrew would have taken as pure fantasy, if they were even familiar with it? There is utterly no record that Jews knew what a dragon was, let alone included the image of dragons in their literature. So it is highly unlikely that this was what John had in mind. I suspect John saw something more within the context of his own culture (his own Hebrew culture) of which the Chinese style dragon was certainly not a part. The Jewish John would have envisioned something more along the lines of a Biblical creature, not something Greek; something evil, fiery, a spiritual being that had wings and could fly.

I see a rather interesting connection between the winged Seraphim that stood erect in Heaven, the earthly Serpent in the Garden of Eden that had been cast out of Heaven (who used to be erect but was cursed to crawl on its belly), the Saraph that was put on the pole and held high up into the air, and the Dragon who is Satan, that is fiery, flies with wings, has the look of a serpent, and is identified in Revelation as Satan.

Could it be that the heavenly being that was cast out of Heaven was a Saraph (a Seraphim), and it was a rebellious saraph who became known on earth as Satan? It is quite interesting that Jesus said this about Satan:

NAS Luke 10:18 *And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.*

In the Bible lightening is but another representation of fire. It is at times called fire from heaven. In other words, Jesus was essentially saying, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like a fiery streak through the sky". And we know that a Seraphim was a fiery heavenly being.

As Numbers 21 states, it was a SARAPH put up on the pole of Moses and held up high. And that the so-called Dragon of Revelation, which is identified as Satan, has all the characteristics of the fiery serpent AND has the wings and flying ability of the heavenly Seraphim. Now, there are a couple of places in the Bible that say that the heavenly being that was kicked out of

heaven was a Cherubim. But, as I said earlier, when you compare the descriptions of a Cherubim and Seraphim, they are virtually identical, with just the possibility that their duties were different, and likely saraph (indicating fiery) is but a characteristic of Cherubim.

Let me throw you another curve ball. In the ancient era it was common that amulets of poisonous insects or animals were used to counteract the bite or sting of a poisonous creature. So if a scorpion bit you a sorcerer might perform a ritual over you using a scorpion symbol. It is interesting that while we find this a laughable superstition, in the modern era the medical establishments uses the venom of a poisonous creature to inject into a person who has been bitten or stung in order to counteract the poison. It is really the same principle only one is spiritual and the other physical in its nature.

Back in Egypt, in addition to indicating royal authority, a serpent was seen as a symbol of both fertility and healing; that is how Israel would have thought of the fiery serpent. And in fact, it was for the purpose of healing of snakebites that God ordained the serpent be fashioned and put on the pole. So for the Israelites to see a serpent symbol as healing them from snakebites would have seemed about par for the course; something that would not have been strange at all.

So what are we to take from all this? First, the saraph symbol put on the pole did not, of itself, heal. People didn't touch it. There was no ritual performed with it. It was not a magic object, but it WAS a familiar object. Even the outward principle of its use was familiar. However it was simply the looking upon it, in repentance and trust, that healed. Second, at the least, the saraph on the pole has Messianic overtones because Yeshua gave it Messianic attachments. And, at the least, the Messianic meaning is that just as the saraph would be nailed to a pole and put up into the air, so would Jesus, thereby predicting His own crucifixion. How much beyond the comparison of merely being nailed to a pole Jesus meant to communicate is but pure speculation that has led to much allegory.

Now there has been some interesting other theological thoughts about this, but it is hard to assign these thoughts to more than the category of speculation. For instance that when the serpent was put up on the pole the purpose was not really to look at the serpent, but to look **through** the serpent up to heaven. And that it was essentially the same with Christ; that his body (the human part of him) was not the critical object, rather it was looking in faith **through** his body towards the heavenly throne of God. Maybe.

Another standard teaching is that just as men dying in sin are saved by means of a man (Yeshua) dying on a cross, so are men dying of snakebites saved (healed) by a snake held up on a pole. Perhaps.

Yet another is that because the serpent on the pole was made of bronze, but probably copper, it had to be red in color. And red symbolizes blood in Holy Scripture. So it was prophetic of Jesus shedding His blood on the cross years later. I suppose that's a possible intent.

I could go on and on because that's the problem with allegory and speculation: one can attach any meaning to something via almost any kind of poetic similarity one can think up.

The only solid connections that we see from the Bible about this strange incident are that sin was going to be dealt with by some kind of God ordained object being nailed onto a pole and lifted up into the air. In Moses' era it was the saraph and the sin that was being dealt with was the people's rebellion. In Jesus' era the object was His own body and the sin being dealt with was ALL sin. Another solid connection is that people would look upon that object on the pole and experience some kind of healing. Again in Moses era it was looking upon the fiery serpent, in Jesus' era it was looking upon him. And in both cases it required repentance and a kind of deep trust. Beyond that I'm not sure we can attach much more significance.

Actually I find the more informative and concrete aspects to the story of the brazen serpent to be the Biblically based connection between Seraphim (heavenly Saraph), the Serpent of the Garden of Eden (Satan), the Saraph (fiery serpent) on the pole, and the Dragon of Revelation that was cast out of heaven.

Let me end this segment on the Fiery Serpent with this thought: perhaps the most pointed lesson we can take from this story concerns the all-too-often, gradual, frog-in-a-kettle kind of progression from a God ordained symbol to idol worship. Nothing could be clearer than that the Fiery Serpent on the pole was divinely instructed and so it was pure and good, and the only thing Moses and the people could do was obey and receive healing NOT due to the metal object but due to their obedience to God. Yet there is nothing to indicate that this was more than a one-time single solution to a unique and specific problem; a plague of snake bites due to rebellion. The serpent on the pole was NOT to become a general symbol or a talisman to be used for general healing.

We've seen God do this at other times. Moses was, one time, told to hit a rock to give up water. Another time he was told to SPEAK to a rock to produce water. That didn't mean that Moses was to assume that each time Israel needed water he was, at his own volition, to look around for a promising boulder and by means of speaking to it or whacking it with Aaron's staff produce water for the people. Nor was Israel was supposed to be on the look-out for a rock formation that was almost identical to the one that gave up its water, nor were the people to gather and beg the rock for water, or to burn incense to it, or to begin a rock worshipping cult.

We saw that apparently the Brazen or Fiery Serpent on the pole was kept by the Israelites as an active icon for at least 5 centuries AFTER the Exodus. There is no indication that God intended that Israel should have done that, and no indication that there were other incidents of healing involving that pole and serpent. But people being people, Israel hoped it had found a magic charm for healing whenever they wanted it. People got ill and injured all the time; and just like today, people will do pretty much anything to have their suffering relieved and their bodies' healed and life extended. And so the Hebrews kept the pole with the bronze image of a serpent, and eventually they began to honor and venerate the pole and the Serpent in hopes that paying homage to it would bring about healing. The fault in all this was that they adored the object instead of the One who actually CAN heal; Yehoveh, who has no form at all. King Hezekiah finally realized this and destroyed what began as an authorized, one-use-only divine instrument of God; but through misuse had become a worthless and ungodly object of false worship, sorcery and idolatry.