

Study 37: Numbers – The Wanderings (Nm 10:11 to 22:1)

Introduction. It's important to place *Numbers* in the context of the entire *Torah*. *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy* all continue the themes related to the Mosaic covenant introduced in *Exodus*. *Leviticus* provides the people with a kind of instruction manual, a liturgical guide, for how God is to be worshipped in the Tabernacle and ultimately in the Temple. It also establishes laws governing social justice, economic life, priestly duties, liturgical feasts, and more. It covers all aspects of Israel's life, reminding the people of the all-encompassing role of liturgy in their lives. (Fittingly, "liturgy" comes from the Greek, *leitourgia*, which means "work of the people.")

Note: *How important, how pervasive is the Church's liturgy in our lives? The Law given to Israel in Leviticus foreshadows the sacramental life of the Church. This is Jesus' gift to us, one designed to span the Christian's entire spiritual life, from re-birth in Baptism to the funeral liturgy through which the Christian community comes together to ask God to receive the faithful one into eternal life while praying for God's mercy and forgiveness.*

Deuteronomy, which consists largely of homilies by Moses, focuses on living the Law by obeying God's command to be holy. Perhaps this command can best be summed up by these words of Moses:

"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good?" [Dt 10:12-13]

Jesus, of course, presents these same eternal truths to the disciples, teaching that their fulfillment is present in the Gospel. (See Mt 5:17; 22:36-40 and Jn 14:15.)

In truth, then, we cannot separate the books of the *Torah*. They are all of one piece, each presenting a different aspect of God's plan, not just for Israel, but for all of humanity.

Background. As discussed in our previous study guide, *Numbers* continues the *Exodus* story that ended with Israel's covenant at Sinai and its acceptance of the Law. In this Study Guide we will focus on *Number's* second section [Nm 10:11-22:1] in which we read the story of Moses and God's people as they wandered from Sinai to Moab. Although these chapters cover most of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, we should realize that the author did not intend to write a detailed, chronological history. He was more intent on offering a theological narrative focused on God's plan for Israel as a holy nation, a process that ultimately would continue over many centuries. *Numbers*, then, describes God's relationship with His people as it is revealed through specific events.

In these chapters the author presents us with the following the key events as Moses and God's people make their way through the wilderness from Sinai to Moab:

- a. Departure from Sinai
- b. Rebellion: people, Aaron, Miriam – sin and chastisement
- c. Rites and observances
- d. Rebellion: people, Levities, priests – punishment
- e. Purification: red heifer, water from the rock, bronze serpent
- f. Kadesh, departure, military victory

Many scholars refer to the period that began with Israel's departure from Sinai as its so-called Heroic Age, an age that was often far from heroic. Nevertheless, this journey from Sinai was certainly foundational and began the religious and political formation of Israel as a people. Neither the journey nor this formation moved forward smoothly because the Israelites still resisted both God's sovereignty and Moses' attempts to mold them into a united people. The series of rebellions described in *Numbers* clearly shows us that the Sinai covenant with the Lord was not based on coercion or force. It called for the people's free acceptance, which they had openly declared before Moses and the Lord:

“Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, ‘All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do’” [Ex 24:7].

They might have heard, but they certainly didn't “do”, at least not for long. Their disobedience fills the central narrative of *Numbers* with tension, largely internal. The author makes no effort to hide or disguise the rebellious unfaithfulness of the people. I've always believed that this alone is strong evidence supporting the reliability of the historical narrative found in the Pentateuch.

Departure from Sinai. *“In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month” [Num 10:11]* God commanded His people to begin their trek through the wilderness. After keeping His people at Sinai for nearly a year, God issued His command by raising the cloud of His Presence from the Tabernacle, a sign that their journey had begun [See Ex 40:36]. Because Moses, obeying God's instructions, had so thoroughly prepared and organized the people, their departure proceeded with military like precision. It also had the markings of a liturgical procession centered on the Tabernacle and its sacred contents, all carried by the Levites, just as Moses had instructed in Nm 2.

Curiously, though, Moses retained the services of Hobab, a Midianite and presumably Moses' father-in-law (or brother-in-law), as a capable guide [Nm 10:29-33]. (There is some confusion here since Moses' father-in-law is elsewhere called Jethro and Reuel. Did he have a third name, or was Hobab the name of Jethro's son-in-law?) We might question why Moses called on Hobab since the cloud of God's Presence went before them by day, providing guidance and protection, just as it had during their departure from Egypt [Ex 13:21-22]. The answer may well be that God often makes use of what theologians call “double agency,” mediating His work through both divine and human means. And in a practical sense, Moses, too, might have sought an alliance between Hobab's people and his own by offering to share God's bounty. As Moses promised:

“And if you go with us, whatever good the Lord will do to us, the same we will do to you” [Nm 10:32].

At first the tribes observed the order of march and all seemed to go well. The wilderness, however, is a place of extremes, especially when it comes to the availability of food and water. Within three days everything had changed and, at a place Moses named *Taberah* (the *fire* of God's anger), the people began to complain to Moses about the conditions they must endure. Fearing that God would punish the people for their ungratefulness, Moses interceded with prayer. But “the rabble among them” continued and intensified their complaints, mostly about food. Dissatisfied with the manna God continued to provide for them, they yearned for the meat, fish, and other foods they had enjoyed while in Egypt. This remarkable lack of gratitude is described well:

“The riffraff among them were so greedy for meat that even the Israelites lamented again, ‘If only we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are famished; we have nothing to look forward to but this manna’” [Nm 11:4-6].

“...nothing...but this manna” – nothing but this miraculous gift from God that kept them from starving. Let's see...The Lord freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, defeated the pursuing Egyptian army, piled miracle upon miracle, nourished them with manna, quail and water, and is now leading them to the land He promised them and their ancestors, a land of their own, flowing with milk and honey. And their response is ungratefulness and rebellion. As a New York rabbi once said to me while discussing this passage, “Go figure.”

The Burden of Moses. Faced with the people's hostility and rebellion, Moses underwent a serious personal crisis. He knew God, Israel's Father in faith, had formed His people into a budding nation. But he also knew God expected him to exercise the responsibilities of leadership. For Moses this was a recurring issue, one he had previously faced when God first called him at the burning bush [Ex 3:11; 4:1] and during the Exodus [Ex 18:13-27]. On each occasion he questioned why God had burdened him with so much responsibility. Now, once again, he claimed he could not be the leader God expected him to be, that he was unable to satisfy the people and respond to all their questions, needs, and complaints:

“I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. If You will deal thus with me, kill me at once, if I find favor in Your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness” [Nm 11:14-15].

These were pretty hard words. But perhaps this was exactly what God wanted from Moses: an admission that he couldn't do it alone and needed God's help. Internally, Moses' plea might have been an act of humility and abandonment, an admission that he needed God, a willingness to accept his own weakness and trust that God's “will be done” in His life and in the lives of God's people.

God answered Moses by providing him with a leadership team of elders, seventy men who would share Moses' many burdens and responsibilities [Nm 11:24-25]. The seventy gathered with Moses around the Tent of Meeting where God sent

His Spirit upon them. And they prophesied. The Spirit rested also on two who had not joined them at the Tabernacle. The Spirit, then, moves where He wills irrespective of human wishes. Discerning this, Moses exclaimed:

“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them” [Nm 11:29].

Note: *We, too, should understand that the Spirit moves in our world as well, but that He moves according to God’s will, not ours. Discernment, recognizing the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, is the product of prayer in which God reveals His will for us. And here, too, we encounter a foreshadowing, a type of the Holy Spirit’s descent on the Blessed Mother and the disciples at Pentecost, fulfilling Jesus’ promise to His Church: the gift of the Holy Spirit [See Acts 2:1-4; Jn 16:7,13-14].*

Rebellion. But the people continued to complain about the food God provided, grumbling that they never should have left Egypt. They asked for meat, having forgotten the evils of Egypt and remembering only its plenty. God, however, reminded Israel of the reality of their lives before and after their liberation. To satisfy the cravings of the people His Spirit sent an abundance of quail, but followed this with a great plague in which many died. Thus God vividly revealed the truth of the people’s lives before He freed them from slavery. This all happened at a place fittingly called *Kibroth-hattaavah* or “graves of greed” [Nm 11:31-35].

The complaints, however, escalated as the malcontents made their presence felt. Even Miriam and Aaron joined in the grumbling and criticized Moses for his marriage to a Cushite, a foreigner who was probably his wife, Zipporah, who was a Midianite. (The Cushite people were linked to the Midianites, so this may well have been the case.) But in truth Moses’ sister and brother were actually jealous of Moses’ authority, for their words betray them:

“Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” [Nm 12:2].

Once again God intervened and, calling the three siblings together in the Tent of Meeting, revealed the special nature of His relationship with Moses:

“With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord” [Nm 12:8].

As punishment Miriam became leprous, an affliction that demanded her exclusion from the camp. Moses interceded, begging God to heal her, but God demanded that she be “*shut up outside the camp for seven days*” [Nm 12:14]. When the seven days were complete she was healed and a chastened Miriam was allowed to return.

God then instructed Moses to send men from each tribe into Canaan as scouts (spies) to determine the strength and numbers of the people and the quality and richness of the land. Once again, we find an instance of “double agency” for God certainly didn’t need spies to provide details about the people of Canaan, but it was important that Moses and the people see for themselves what they would

encounter when they entered the Promised Land. It also turned out to be a test of both their faith and their trust in God, a test they would fail.

The spies spent a prophetic forty days in Canaan but returned with a mixed message. The Land of Canaan indeed “*flows with milk and honey,*” but “*the people...are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large*” [Nm 13:27-28]. The report of the scouts, and their obvious fear of the Canaanites had a negative effect on the people. But one of the scouts, Caleb, of the tribe of Judah, filled with faith, spoke up and quieted the people. He encouraged them to trust in the Lord:

“Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it”
[Nm13:30].

But with the exception of Joshua, the other scouts, acting out of fear, disagreed and embellished their original report causing the people to rebel once again. Fear, of course, is the opposite of faith and can spread quickly like a plague. Overcome by their growing fears, the people not only “*murmured against Moses and Aaron*” but even accused God of plotting their deaths. Again they yearned to return to Egypt and decided to replace Moses with a leader who would take them back into Egypt, back into slavery.

At this point Caleb, joined now by Joshua, another of the scouts, gave an impassioned plea in which they described the bounty and goodness of the Promised Land and warned against fear and faithlessness. They concluded with:

“Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them” [Nm 14:9].

These wise and prophetic words only led the people to threaten Caleb and Joshua with stoning. But God intervened in a most public way and “*appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the people of Israel*” [Nm 14:10]. Speaking to Moses, He reviled the people for their lack of faith despite His many miraculous signs. God threatened to disinherit His fickle people, “*strike them with a pestilence,*” and make a new and greater nation that would obey and worship Him.

Moses’ love for the people led him to intercede once again, arguing that Egypt and the other nations will think less of the Lord...

“Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which He swore to give to them, therefore He has slain them in the wilderness”
[Nm 14:16].

Moses also used God’s own words [See Ex 34:6-7] to make his case to the Lord when he added:

“The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression...” [Nm 14:18]

Although God relented and forgave His people, justice demanded that their sin be punished, particularly in light of their earlier acceptance of Law and Covenant. God’s verdict: the people of this generation, those over the age of 20, would not enter the Promised Land [Nm 14:29]:

"...your little ones...I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness..." [Nm 14:31-33]

Of that generation, only Caleb and Joshua were spared. It was a harsh but just punishment for their frequent rebellion in the face of God's constant goodness.

Note: *How often have we seen this? How often does the faithfulness and sinfulness of parents lead to suffering in their family? Children are not responsible for their parents' sins, but they are certainly not spared from their effects. Jesus particularly addressed the serious sin of leading "little ones" astray [Mt 18:6].*

But repentance and obedience are never easy. The people again rejected the God-given authority of Moses and the sovereignty of the Lord. They decided to take matters into their own hands and enter the Promised Land from the south through the Negeb. Moses warned them that disobedience would bring failure:

"Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord for that will not succeed? Do not go up lest you be struck down before your enemies, for the Lord is not among you" [Nm 14:41-42].

The description of the Israelite defeat is brief but telling. In two short verses it offers both the cause and the result. They "dared" defy the Lord, abandoning both His Presence and His mediator; and they were defeated:

"Yet they dared to go up high into the hill country, even though neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp. And the Amalekites and Canaanites who dwelt in that hill country came down and defeated them, beating them back as far as Hormah" [Nm 14:44-45].

Note: *Interestingly, in 1896 archaeologists discovered what has been called the "Merneptah Stele" at Thebes in Egypt. On it is a description of several victories by the pharaoh Merneptah and his allies. Hieroglyphics describing the last of these victories are thought to mention Israel. Many scholars believe it to be a reference to the defeat described in Nm 14. Egypt of course was a regional power and was probably allied with many of the small kingdoms in Canaan.*

We, too, can learn from failure when we reject God's Word and God's Will and try to go on without Him. Jesus reminds us of this when he cements the relationship between love and obedience:

"Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him" [Jn 14:21].

Since leaving Egypt the Israelites had many opportunities to recognize God's saving Presence. In caring for them He was their source of life and survival. But after setting out from Sinai they again failed to trust that God would satisfy their need for water, food, and protection. Their cries to God are not, however, prayers of lamentation, but are really only complaints. They do not cry out in faith, but grumble through a lack of faith. This post-Sinai rebellion is far more serious than

their earlier murmurings en route to Sinai. Having received the Law and agreed to the Covenant, they were, in a sense, on probation, with the wilderness being a place of test, a test they failed.

Like the Israelites, we too can say we desire only to follow God, to seek His will in our lives. But many forces, both internal and external, conspire to pull us away from God and lead us to idols. Not surprisingly, it is often the most basic needs – food, water, defense, internal order – that become the biggest idols. And like any idol, they lead only to death.

I first heard the acronym, KISS (Keep it simple, stupid), from my high school physics teacher. He used it to explain that many great advances in understanding our physical universe involved rather simple, elegant equations. He referred to Newton's second law of motion ($f=ma$) and Einstein's formulation of the mass-energy relationship ($e=mc^2$).

Years later, as a naval officer, I often applied the acronym when planning tactical operations. But the universe, even our little slice of it, is amazingly complex and by striving for simplicity we inevitably overlook countless influences we can neither anticipate nor understand. I recall an admiral once remarking during a debrief of a naval exercise that had not gone well, "Gentleman, our lesson today is simple: we are not God!"

The admiral, of course, was not offering theological insight, but only an excuse for our lack of success. Had we succeeded, the cause would surely have been his wisdom and leadership. Our failure, however, he attributed to circumstances beyond his control. But there was truth in his comment. Despite our planning and our attempts to account for all possible eventualities, we often fail. God alone is omniscient and omnipotent; His will always triumphs. If, like the rebellious Israelites, we reject God's will and live our lives as if He does not exist, we will ultimately fail, often catastrophically.

There is irony here. In our desire to simplify the complex, to squeeze the infinite into our finite minds, we ignore the simplest rule of all: Trust God to lead us to the fulfillment of His holy will. It all comes down to three things: to love, to trust, and to obey God. This was Moses' plea to God's People, a plea the Church continues to make today.

Numbers 15: Offering, Atonement, and Sin. In Nm 15 the narrative is again interrupted by a seemingly unrelated legal discussion. But the text actually connects to the rebellion just described. The first section of the chapter [Nm 15:1-21] addresses sacrifices that Israel should have offered to God in thanksgiving for all He had done for them. Despite the rebellion of the people and their rejection of God's word, we see God's faithfulness in the future fulfillment of His promises. In describing the sacrifices, the Lord began by saying to Moses:

"Say to the people of Israel, when you come into the Land you are to inhabit, which I give you..." [Nm 15:2]

God is challenging the words of the scouts who had returned from the Promised Land with dire warnings. *You, Israel, will indeed come into the Land, but it will be the Israel of your children that enjoys the fruit of my promise.*

The sacrifices then described, sacrifices of both animals and grain, expand on laws Israel has already received in *Leviticus*. They are shared sacrifices of joy and thanksgiving through which the peace (*shalom*) of the world is repaired. The addition of flour, oil, and wine to the offerings present us with an image of a full meal and also point to the three seasons when wheat, grapes, and olives are harvested. The sacrifices, then, are to be offered in thanksgiving for the fruitfulness of the land, and the bounty resulting from the people's labor. This contrasts with the Israelites recent rejection of God's gift of land and food.

The alien or stranger shall be allowed, but not required, to make these same offerings. In other words, one rite shall apply to all:

"For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are so shall the sojourner be before the Lord" [Nm 15:15].

Aliens, therefore, are protected by the Law. There shall not be a law for the Jew and another for the alien. The same justice will apply to all. This was especially important since strangers were often treated poorly by most ancient societies. But among the Israelites, the alien is counted with widows and orphans as ones deserving justice [See Dt 14:29; 16:11]. Dealing with these same issues in today's far more complex world presents Christians with a challenge that we must ultimately face.

The next section [Nm 22-31] addresses sacrifices of atonement for sins committed unwittingly. These wrongs, which are not serious sins, must still be admitted and remission comes by making the prescribed offering. But he who sins knowingly "reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people" [Nm 15:30]. And so here we encounter a glimpse into Christian moral theology in which the gravity of a sin is dependent on such things as intent.

Nm 15 concludes with a section describing the punishment for grave sin, in this instance the intentional breaking of the Sabbath. Although he had not yet lit the prohibited Sabbath fire, the sinner's collecting of sticks showed intent. Actually, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes this same approach when He merges murder and anger, lust and adultery [Mt 5:21-27]. That the sinner was stoned to death no doubt seems harsh to us, but this was the usual way in which capital punishment was applied at the time, and shows how grave serious sins against God's law were viewed.

"Liturgical" Revolt. In Nm 16 we encounter another revolt that, again, leads to dire consequences. Korah, a Levite, along with two other prominent men, Dathan and Abiram, plus "250 leaders of the congregation," accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves "*above the assembly of the Lord*" [Nm 16:3]. They were actually rejecting the priesthood, the hierarchy (High Priest, Priest, Levite, the congregation or assembly of the people) established by God. Additionally, they defied the Word of God by rejecting His punishment for their earlier rebellion and lack of faith. Their rebellion, therefore, was based on an obvious desire for power.

Moses proposed a test, telling the rebels to take censers – symbols of the priesthood – and offer incense – i.e., perform priestly service – at the Tabernacle. God will then decide who should be priest. God, of course, did decide and the earth opened and swallowed the rebels and those who supported them. The bronze censers were taken from the fire and made into a bronze “covering for the altar” which was a sign to the people that they should trust and obey God’s Law.

Remarkably, even in the face of this deadly punishment, the people blame Moses and Aaron for all that has happened: “*You have killed the people of the Lord*” [Nm 16:41]. They, too, are punished by a plague that kills thousands.

God then tells Moses to get a rod from the leader of each of the 12 tribes, inscribe the leader’s name on it, and place them all in the Tent of Meeting. God told Moses that the rod of the one He chose would sprout. Moses did as God had instructed and the next morning found that the rod of Aaron “*had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds*” [Nm 17:8]. Moses gave the other rods back to the tribal leaders and, following God’s command, placed Aaron’s rod before the testimony (covenant) as a sign to “*make an end of their murmurings against me, lest they die*” [Nm 17:10].

Note: *People sometimes question the Old Testament punishments that God seems to inflict, assuming they conflict with or contradict the teachings of Jesus. This has actually led people to such heresies as Marcionism that rejected the Old Testament and the God of Israel, who it viewed as a lesser and wrathful god. As Christians we believe there is but one God, the God of both the Old and New Testaments. It’s important to realize that God’s plan for the salvation of humanity demanded faithfulness by Israel, the people from which a Savior would come. The punishments inflicted on the faithless show the blessings that flow from following the covenant and the punishments that flow from violating it. We see evidence of this in the New Testament as well; and in the Gospel Jesus often spoke of severe punishment for those who reject God and His gift of faith. [See Acts 5:1-11; Mt 7:2-23; Mt 10:34 ff; Mt 24:41-42,46; Mk 16:15-16] Keep in mind, too, that the human authors might have been guilty of some exaggeration to ensure that Israel would not fall prey to the sins and faithlessness of their ancestors.*

Numbers 18 & 19: Priestly Service. In Nm 18 the priests and Levites were instructed on the importance of approaching holy things and rites reverently, and reminded that they were solely responsible for their priestly and related service. This relieved the people of their concerns that they would be punished for priestly sins [See 17:12-13]. It also reminded priests and Levites that theirs is a service to God not a claim to either power or prestige. We encounter this as well in the New Testament when those chosen to lead the people are warned that they will be judged on how they fulfill their responsibility. [See Mt 23; 1 Cor 11:27-34; Jas 3:1]

Nm 18 also combines a number of laws and prescriptions from other parts of the *Torah*, all relating to priestly service. Levites shall be landless, dependant on God and the people of Israel for their support. A system of tithing was established to

ensure their well-being and to highlight the society's relationship to God and His providential care.

Nm 19 is really all about ritual cleansing and first introduces the rite of the red heifer. Its origin was probably pagan and might have been adopted by the Jews. Its meaning, too, is rather obscure although it seems to be a rite of atonement and protection. A layman slaughtered and immolated the heifer outside the camp, but did so under the supervision of the priest. The New Testament and some of the Church Fathers refer to the rite as a prefiguring, a type, of Jesus' sacrifice. As we read in Hebrews:

"The bodies of the animals whose blood the high priest brings into the sanctuary as a sin offering are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood" [Heb 13:11-12].

The text also addresses the very real problem of dealing with human corpses, especially after the plague that led to so many deaths. Certainly this was partly to avoid contagion, a common concern of all ancient people. But the cleansing and purification rituals of the Jews also demonstrated their reverence for both life and death, which came from God. The deeply religious nature of the purification rituals go far beyond any concerns about contamination.

Numbers 20: Rebellion, Disobedience & Punishment. In Nm 20 the Israelites arrived at Kadesh, an inhabited area of oases. It is here that Miriam, the sister of Moses, died and was buried. Having left the desert wilderness, Israel was now in contact with other peoples and faced an entirely new set of challenges. At first they had little water and, predictably, the people confronted Moses and Aaron accusing them of wanting them to die. Once again they looked back to Egypt, comparing its delights with the seemingly less hospitable Kadesh. When Moses and Aaron went to the Lord asking for help, Moses was told to assemble the congregation and:

"Take the rod...and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water" [Nm 20:8]

But Moses added a flourish of his own. Rather than just *"tell the rock"* as the Lord had commanded, Moses *"lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice"* [Nm 20:11]. This may seem a minor offense, but more was expected of Moses [See Lk 12:48] and his action displayed a lack of faith that God's Word, spoken through Moses, was efficacious. And so, God punishes Moses and Aaron. They will not enter the Promised Land:

"Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" [Nm 20:12].

Nm 20 continues with the king of Edom rejecting Moses' appeal to pass through his territory en route to the Promised Land. Unwilling to risk conflict with the Edomites, Moses led the people to Mount Hor, *"on the border or the land of Edom."* It was here that Aaron died and his son, Eleazar, became the second high priest of Israel.

“And when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days” [Nm 20:29].



Following Aaron’s death Israel was attacked by the Aradites of Canaan. Israel asked God for help and He brought them a victory, including the capture of the Aradite city of Hormah. Despite this victory, Moses’ subsequent long detour around Edom caused the people to once again complain, but this time against both God and Moses. As punishment God sent serpents who bit the people causing many to die. The people repented of their sin and begged Moses to intercede. Moses prayed and received this command from the Lord:

“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and when everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” [Nm 21:8].

Moses fashioned a bronze serpent and did as God commanded, freeing the people from this punishment.

In John’s Gospel Jesus refers to this bronze serpent, raised up and held before the people by Moses, as a foreshadowing, a type, of His death on the Cross:

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” [Jn 3:14-15].

And so it is not the bronze serpent that cured the people, but God’s mercy and forgiveness, a truth echoed in the Book of Wisdom:

“But your sons were not conquered even by the teeth of venomous serpents, for your mercy came to their help and healed them. To remind them of your oracles they were bitten, and then were quickly delivered, lest they should fall into deep forgetfulness and become unresponsive to your kindness. For neither herb nor poultice cured them, but it was your word, O Lord, which heals all men” [Wis 16:10-12].

Numbers 21: Victories. Nm 21 describes Israel’s movements en route to Moab. God continued to provide for their needs as they traveled through this inhospitable land. The final events of this section of *Numbers* concern Israel’s attempts to pass peacefully through the lands separating them from the Promised Land. Sihon, the king of the Amorites, denied Israel entry and attacked them at a place in the wilderness called Jahaz. Israel, however, defeated the Amorites, took their cities, slew their king, and established themselves in their land. Making their way toward Bashan, they are attacked by Og, the Bashanite king, but again God brought victory and the destruction of Israel’s enemies.