

# Numbers 21:1-9: Kidnappings and Serpents in the Wilderness

- Attack from Arad
  - Israelites are at Mt. Hor (south of Arad), near Kadesh
  - Contrast Israelite response to Numbers 14
    - Note the role that Hormah plays in both Numbers 14 and 21
    - הַרְמָה (*hor.mah*) - proper noun, name of a geographical location
    - הָרַם (*ha.ram*) - to ban, devote, destroy utterly, completely destroy, dedicate for destruction, exterminate
    - “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy [הָרַם] their cities.” (Numbers 21:3)
- Punishment for complaints about food and water
  - Traveling along the “route to the Sea of Reeds” to “go around” Edom
    - Recall context from last week’s interaction with Edom
  - Israelites “spoke against God and against Moses”
  - God responds by sending “fiery serpents” into the camp
  - The Israelites call out for help
  - The LORD instructs Moses to build a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole
  - Anyone who looks at the bronze serpent will be healed
- Geography of the Serpent Incident
  - Numbers 33 itinerary: Mt. Hor→Zalmonah→Punon→Oboth→Iye Abarim→Moab
  - Primary ingredient in bronze: copper
  - One possible location of Punon is a copper mine located in the Arabah
    - Does this story really *require* that they be located near a coppermine?
    - Cf. The incident with the golden calf (does not take place at a gold mine)
- Etymology of the Serpent Incident
  - נְחֹשֶׁת (*ne.ho.shet*) - copper, bronze
  - נָחָשׁ (*na.hash*) - serpent, snake
- Herpetology of the Serpent Incident
  - Several candidates for the serpent in this wilderness environment
    - Most venomous and indigenous is *atractaspis engaddensis*
  - Likely action of the venom
    - A-V block: (ultimately results in cardiac arrest)
    - Venom qualities are unique to this (disgusting!) snake
- Connections to Modern Symbolism?
  - Snake and staff as modern medical symbol (connected to healing?)
    - More likely adopted from Asklepios
    - Accidental co-opting of the “caduceus” via the U.S. military

- Connections to Other Parts of Scripture
  - Hezekiah 2 Kings 18:1-4
    - Destroys the bronze serpent
    - Israelites had been worshipping it by the name “Nehushtan”  
[נְחֻשְׁתָּן] i.e., “bronze, serpent thing”
  - Tangent: Asklepios and other snake-healing symbols in the Bible (John 5)
    - Pool of Bethesda: a shrine to Asklepios (“Asklepion”)
    - The angel stirring the water
      - Text critical note: may not be in original manuscript?
      - Either way, may point to improper religious practices
    - Jesus does not use the water as part of his healing, and he implores the man to “sin no more” while at the real temple where the true God lives!
  - Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus (John 3)
    - You must be born “from on high” / “again”
      - Unique Greek double entendre
      - Nicodemus misses Jesus word-play
    - Jesus makes several OT allusions in this interaction
      - You must be born from water and the spirit
        - Cf. Ezekiel 36 (esp. vss. 24-28)
      - The wind moves independent of human volition
        - Greek and Hebrew have a “spirit” / “wind” double entendre
        - Cf. Ezekiel 37:1-14
      - Nicodemus doesn’t get it... again
        - “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?” (John 3:10)
      - Jesus make a parallel between his life and the bronze serpent
        - An unexpected place to look for healing
          - Why would you look at an image of the very serpents, which are God’s curse against you, for salvation from that curse?
          - Why would you look to an executed man, under God’s curse (Gal. 3:13) for (Deut. 21:23) salvation from that curse?
        - Jesus will be “lifted up”/“exalted”
          - The crucifixion was not a shameful, black mark of Jesus’ track record
          - It is the very means by which he is exalted is the true King of his people