

Commentary for Lesson 3

March 15, 2020

The Israelites in the Wilderness

Focal Passage: Numbers 21:4-9

Background Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:9-15

Purpose: To confess our self-centered approach to our relationship with God

Note: For those readers who use supplementary commentaries to prepare for each week's lesson, we will post downloadable commentary on AdultBibleStudies.com through the summer quarter. We will publish an annual commentary for purchase for Fall 2020–Summer 2021.

The Itinerary (Numbers 21:1-13)

Numbers 21:1-3 describes a battle that took place at the city of Hormah (also Numbers 14:39-45). This account explains the derivation of the name *Hormah* (the name means “utter destruction”). Hormah was located about ten miles east of Beersheba.

This section is probably a later insertion into the narrative of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, since Hormah was not located near the territory of Edom (where the Israelites were located at the time). Why this incident is recorded here is difficult to determine. The name *Hormah* is explained in another way in Judges 1:17.

From Mount Hor, the Israelites journeyed southward toward the Gulf of Aqabah and the city of Ezion-geber. No one knows for certain the derivation of the name *Atharim* (verse 1).

Verses 4-9 narrate Moses' making of the bronze serpent. The people resorted again to complaining about their fate in the wilderness, and the result was punishment. They were bitten by fiery serpents. After the people confessed their sin, Moses interceded on their behalf, and God relented and offered a way out.

The “bronze snake” (NIV) or “serpent of bronze” (NRSV) was a cultic object worshiped by the Canaanites; it is called “Nehushtan” in 2 Kings 18:4. The fact that this object is called by several different names in this passage may indicate a combination of different sources.

According to verses 10-13, the Israelites went northward through the region east of the Jordan River. Their detour around Edom was finished. They were now in eastern Moab. Amon (verse 13) was on the northern border of Moab. "Toward the sunrise" means to the east.

Earthly Things and Heavenly Things (John 3:3-15)

In verse 3, Jesus' response begins with two important words. He says, "Amen, amen" ("I tell you the truth," NIV; "Very truly," NRSV). This term signifies Jesus' understanding that his forthcoming statement is vitally important. All of Jesus' statements throughout the four Gospels, preceded by "amen," say something significant about the kingdom of God. His use of the term in these verses is no exception.

And, here, in John's Gospel, the term has a further importance. It introduces words that, in true Johannine fashion, carry double meanings (such as "dark," "light," "lamb," and so forth). But it also introduces a conversation that will function on two levels: the level of humanity represented by the other person and the level of the divine represented by Jesus (as in the conversation between Jesus and Mary). Or we could explain this two-level conversation as two-directional: One direction is Jesus speaking from God to humanity; the other direction is from humanity to God

In verses 3-10, both of these characteristics are easily recognizable. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be "born again" ("from above," NIV; NRSV) to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus was speaking from God to humanity, explaining that a person must be redirected, repositioned, reconstituted toward God. This identifies a person as a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus couldn't understand this. His conversation was on the level of humanity. Nicodemus was thinking from humanity to God. He responded in human terms: How can this happen to an old person? I cannot be born again from my mother's womb. From the human side, this is impossible.

Jesus deepened and broadened the conversation.

Again, using the term "truly," Jesus related "born again" to "water and the Spirit." He clearly stated to Nicodemus that he was speaking on a higher level, a level initiated by and dependent upon the activity of God's Spirit. Although John had baptized with water, Jesus now baptized with the Spirit (1:33).

Throughout this Gospel and the Book of Revelation, water is a symbol of fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Revelation, which is associated with the Gospel of John, statements about water and the Spirit abound. For example, God judges the earth by taking away water but allows the

redeemed to receive water (Revelation 8:10-11; 16:4-5). The “lamb of God” leads people to the water of life (7:17; 21:6), and a river of life gushes from the throne (22:1-2).

Jesus continues his teaching in verses 7-8. Again, he emphasized being born anew. An alternative translation is “born from above.” Nicodemus should not marvel at this, because it is God’s work and not the work of humanity. God’s work in human eyes is a miracle, a marvel. But from God’s side, it is simply God’s work. And with God, anything is possible.

The Greek word for “wind” (*pneuma*) also means “spirit.” The double meaning is significant. Following the witness of John the Baptist and the Cana miracle, water clearly signifies the Holy Spirit. So Jesus now explains that the “Spirit” of God moves and works where it will. But the emphasis is not on the mystery of movement but on the healing of the Spirit. Hearing the sound implies the “voice of the Spirit.” To be born from above, then, is to hear and be sensitive to the voice of the Spirit. We do not know where it comes from because it comes and speaks from God, not humanity. What a wonderful statement about the action of God’s word for our salvation.

And Nicodemus voices the only human response to such a divine truth: How can this be? (verse 9). It is too marvelous for humanity, but not for God. Jesus responds with a little gentle prodding, emphasizing Nicodemus’s status as a teacher as opposed to his inability to understand. The implication is that even a serious religious person may not hear the voice of the Spirit. Such a person may be too caught up in human religious activity and not take time to listen for the Spirit of God, who freely moves toward us and for us.

Nicodemus, as a teacher of the Law, would have been aware of Jewish teachings about the Spirit. The Spirit was to come in the last times (Isaiah 32:15; Joel 2:28-29). In some Old Testament passages, the coming of the Spirit is connected with the sprinkling of water (Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25-26). Perhaps these ideas inspired Nicodemus’s thinking after his meeting with Jesus.

The remainder of this section comprises a profound teaching of Jesus. The point has been made about hearing the Spirit of God. The Spirit unites humanity with God in fellowship. Now Jesus seems to be saying, “Listen closely for the sound of the Spirit. Strain to listen, in spite of your religious training. Allow the Spirit to freely lead you to God. Rely upon the Spirit and not your religious training.”

In verses 11-15, Jesus further contrasts earthly and heavenly truth. Again, Jesus began with “Amen, amen. . . .” Using the terms “speak,” “know,” “testify,” and “seen,” Jesus portrays God’s activity toward humanity. God is the Word spoken; and, as was done for John the Baptist (1:33), the Spirit gives us eyes to

Adult Bible Studies **Commentary**

see, know, and witness. Those who do not receive the testimony are, first, Israel, represented by Nicodemus, then, humanity in general. And humanity cannot believe without the Spirit (verse 12). Because Jesus comes down to humanity, he lifts us up to fellowship with the Father, taking our humanity back to the presence of God (verse 13).

As a Moses figure, Jesus the Word would lead all humanity to a right relationship with the Father when he was “lifted up” (verse 14) on the cross (Numbers 21:9). Thus, the Spirit’s gift of faith in him as the door to eternal fellowship (“eternal life,” verse 15).

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