

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM NUMBERS

### "Serpents of Fire"

Numbers 21:4-9

#### CONSIDER HISTORY

Regretfully, accounts in Scripture are often confused with secular history and discussed as myth. It is helpful to find, however, that archaeology has cried out in defense of the Word of God. But whether it does or doesn't, Scripture is still accurate and dependable. Now excavations at Timna, 25 kilometers north of Eilat, revealed a temple of the Egyptian god, Hathor. It was used in the 13th century B.C. and abandoned by the Egyptians about 1150 B.C. Then it was taken over by the Midianites who covered it over with curtains to make a tent shrine. Inside of this tent temple, a copper snake five inches long was found. This was probably an imitation of the Mosaic account confirming the historicity of the Biblical account. Praise the Lord!

#### CONSIDER DISCOURAGEMENT

Scripture is clear that Israel got discouraged in the wilderness (v. 4). Indeed, the literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase is "the soul of the people was shortened." That means they were impatient, unable to keep their temper (cf. Prov. 14:29). But there was explanation for this, albeit no reason to be that way--after all God kept the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness! But the kings of Edom and Arad had rejected the nations request. True, Israel triumphed over Arad, but not without a fight. They lost their high priest, Aaron. What would be next. They now took the long road from Mt. Hor via Aqabah around Edom to enter Canaan from the east. Thus, "because of the way" they became discouraged.

#### CONSIDER COMPLAINTS

Discouragement led to complaints (v. 5). The order of the complaints is important--first against God and secondly against His servant Moses. Bad attitudes need to be seen in this way. The basic complaint was that Israel had been taken from Egypt and brought into the wilderness to die. This was the way of the new generation whom God promised would enter the land of Canaan (14:31). The people preferred the flesh pots of Egypt to God in the wilderness--incredible! Three specific complaints are levelled:

- a. No bread in the wilderness

- b. No water in the wilderness
- c. No satisfaction in the wilderness

Note: To answer the above: a. God had given manna and quail above and beyond every need. b. God had provided water miraculously. c. The manna was originally delectable (Ex. 16:31), but now was detested as being worthless and miserable (Hebrew for "light"). Check out Psa. 78:24-25; 105:40!

#### CONSIDER GOD'D JUDGMENT

In response to the complaints of the people, God sent fiery serpents among the people (v. 6). The word fiery is the same as "seraphim" (Isa. 6:2). It means "burning ones" because of the inflammation they caused. These serpents bit the people and many died. It is a disaster to complain against God and His servants.

#### CONSIDER ISRAEL'S CONFESSION

Thank God the record is there to prove it. Israel confessed her sin and God's grace became the instrument of restoration (v. 7). Note the same order as in v. 5 (against the Lord and against Moses). The appeal of the people is for Moses to pray for the removal of the serpents. He did that. This is not the only time that Moses prayed and interceded for the people (cf. Num. 16). Prayer to God was the only escape the people could conceive.

#### CONSIDER GOD'S PROVISION

As an antidote to the snake bites, Moses was instructed by God to make a metal replica of a serpent. While the serpent may have been brass, bronze (copper alloys), it may well have been the pure metal (cf. Deut. 8:9). The discoveries at Timna suggest copper. The serpent was to be put on a pole and those who looked at the serpent would live. Presumably this also means they were immunized thereafter. Moses did as he was instructed (vv. 8, 9). This incident is used of our Lord in the N.T. (John 3:14-15). Jesus Christ was at once the Averter of God's wrath and the Channel of God's love--just like the serpent. Why this mode of healing rather than a serum of some sort? Among other reasons, these two: a. God demanded sacrifice for sin. Therefore, a dead reddish color snake was set forth as atonement. b. God demanded personal appropriation of His healing power--everyone who looked would live (cf. Lev. 1-4).

#### CONSIDER YOUR RESPONSE

Believe and be saved (John 3:15).