

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 10

Chapters 20 – 21:4

Thirty-nine or forty years had passed since Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. What we do not know is when the forty years actually ended. Did it end at the foot of Mount Sinai or did it end with the taking of the first plot of land in the Promised Land. Another question might be, when did the fortieth year begin? Once again, we do not know for certain that timing. For our purposes, we are going to assume that the Israelites left Mount Sinai as the thirty-ninth year was ending and the fortieth year was beginning.

Mount Sinai to Kadesh

Num 20:1a Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh.

Here we have the reason for determining that the Israelites were leaving Mount Sinai as the thirty-ninth year was ending and the fortieth year was beginning. In this verse we see that the Israelites left Mount Sinai and returned to Kadesh Barnea, the place from which Moses had sent the twelve spies into Canaan thirty-eight years before. Kadesh is located at the southern border of the wilderness of Zin and the northern border of the wilderness of Paran. The verse states that they “came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month.” Surely that is the first month of the fortieth year but a question arises when we look closely. Did they leave Mount Sinai or did they arrive at Kadesh in the first month? The distance is 247 miles. The last trip took them several months, but they were stalled several times because of their rebellion against the LORD, Moses and Aaron. If they had traveled ten miles a day as a nation but rested on the Sabbath, it would have taken them about 30 days to arrive. If they left Mount Sinai on the first day of the month they could have arrived at Kadesh on the 30th day of the same month. If they moved any faster than 10 miles per day, they were surely able to make their departure from Mount Sinai and arrival in Zin in the same month.



Today's route by car from
Mount Sinai to Kadish Barnea

Death of Miriam

Num 20:1b Then now Miriam died there and was buried there.

At Kadesh Barnea, Moses' sister died. Moses was 120 years of age at the time and Aaron was 123. Miriam was several years older than Moses. Exactly how much older we do not know. However, when we first meet her and Moses, she had to be old enough to stay at the Nile River and watch Moses as a tiny baby floating in the bathing area of Pharaoh's daughter, see her find the baby and communicate clearly about the need for a Hebrew woman who could nurse the



Miriam watching over her baby brother, Moses.
Public Domain

child for the royal daughter. She had to be at least six in any estimation, maybe eight would be a better number and possibly twelve would have been the best age because at that age, she would have been considered a young woman eligible to marry without any waiting time for her to mature physically. (Marriage arrangements were often made between families as soon as the girl was weaned; however, the marriage would not actually occur until the girl was physically mature enough to give birth to a child.) The artist of the classic picture of Miriam watching over her baby brother in the bulrushes assumed that she was much older than Moses. However, her dress in the picture would not have been that of an Israelite slave child in Egypt at the time. Nevertheless, Miriam was older than Moses and Aaron by several years.

No Water at Kadesh

Num 20:2 There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. 20:3 The people

thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! 20:4 "Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? 20:5 "Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."

Evidently, the Israelites were their happiest at the foot of Mount Sinai, at the foot of the Mountain of the LORD. However, with the building of the Tabernacle Complex, the LORD was no longer on the peak of the mountain but in the cloud that hovered over the cherubim on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant/Testimony. And although we think of the mountain and the Mercy Seat as the place of the LORD in those days, He had been with them all along from Egypt to Mount Sinai to Kadesh back to Mount Sinai, thirty-eight years and then back to Kadesh. For whatever reason, when they left Mount Sinai, they once again became a rebellious people.

The congregation knew they were back in the same place where so many of them perished thirty-eight years before when they first refused to enter the Promised Land and then changed their minds and attempted to take the land without the help of the LORD or Moses. **"If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD!"** they said. Those speaking were all children under the age of twenty when those rebellious ones were killed; some of those killed could have been brothers of this new generation who were twenty years or older at the time. However, this term "brothers" might better be understood as a reference to tribal relationship between the older generation that had died and the younger generation taking their place. Some of those complaining in this passage could have been as old as 59 at the time. If they were 19 when they left Egypt, spent 40 years in the wilderness and were now the eldest of the new generation, they were all no older than 59 years of age, except for those who still needed to die in the wilderness which included Miriam as we have already seen. We might also mention that which is logical; no one in the new generation between the ages of 40 – 44 would have

remembered their first years in Egypt. Additionally, no one in the new generation under 39 years of age was even born in Egypt. If you break the ages down, the new generation of the nation of Israel represented six decades of life. People from the oldest two decades remembered Egypt (one-third of the people). No one from the youngest four decades knew anything about Egypt except what they had heard while they were living at Mount Sinai (two thirds of the people). It had to be the older ones who added their two cents of remembrance about Egypt, and, quite frankly, most of them were too young when they were living in Egypt to even remember the hardship that their families were under. Life is life for most children up to the mid-teen years. Once I asked my mother, who was a teenager during the great depression, if her family was poor during that hard time. Her answer was, "We were poor before the depression, we were poor during the depression, we were poor after the depression. The great depression didn't affect us much in deep West Texas." Looking back on my life, we were also poor and only after I began earning my own money and buying my own clothes and paying for my own college did I realize just how poor we were. When I received my first W-2 form for taxes and took it home to Mom, I realized that I made more working part-time than she did working full time. It broke my heart. We were poor, poor, poor; but, we did not know it! So it had to be with the Israelites; only a few of the oldest ones would have remembered the hardships in Egypt but that meant nothing to most people who were with Moses in Kadesh at this time in their journey. Kadesh really had nothing for the nation to glean from; it was deserted and it most likely scared the nation in their concerns and imaginations of what the Promised Land looked like. Remember, only Caleb and Joshua had seen the land - Moses had not.

The last of their complaints mentioned water. It should have been the first and most important. We know that, but chances are, they did not. They just knew they needed food and water for their livestock and at least water for themselves.

Speak to the Rock

Num 20:6 Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them; **20:7** and **the LORD spoke to Moses**, saying, **20:8** "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink." **20:9** So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; **20:10** and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" **20:11** Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that when the camp stopped, the Tabernacle Complex was set up. How soon after the camp arrived at Kadesh did this grumbling begin? We do not know, but they had been there long enough for the Tabernacle Complex to be erected. Thirty-eight years before there were 22,000 Levites who helped tear down and erect the Tabernacle Complex. If there were anywhere near that many Levites at this time in the new generation, it meant that

the complex virtually jumped up in just a few minutes when the camp stopped for the evening. Taking it down and packing it also took only a short time. Once the priest had wrapped the four major furnishings inside the Tabernacle with their utensils, the mass of Levites could attack the tents, curtains, poles and ropes and make quick work of the packing and moving.

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces at the door to the Tabernacle and cried out to the LORD. They needed water. But they also needed to see that the authority of the LORD, Moses and Aaron was still intact. The LORD told Moses to **“Take the rod; ... and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water.”** Many may and have disagreed with this conclusion. Because of the severity of this complaint against the LORD, Moses and Aaron, **“the rod”** Moses was to use was Aaron’s rod which had perpetual blooms, blossoms and almonds that was stored in or near the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. Aaron’s rod was a reminder to the nation of Israel of their grumbling about the lines of authority in the nation and the unquestioned authority for Aaron’s line to be the perpetual priests in Israel. Notice where Moses retrieved “the rod.” **“So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him.”** Moses would have had his rod in his hand; therefore, he had retrieved the one near the presence of the LORD. Therefore, it had to be the blooming rod of Aaron.

Moses called the congregation “rebels” and he struck the rock twice. Almost 40 years earlier when the rebellious congregation needed water, the LORD told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, near Rephidim, but this time the LORD changed the instruction and Moses and Aaron sinned.

Sin of Moses and Aaron at Kadesh – Waters of Meribah

Num 20:12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." **20:13** Those *were* the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them.

Moses used Aaron’s rod to sin against the LORD. We have to wonder about Aaron’s participation in this sin besides the fact that the rod belonged to him. He had not carried it at his side for 38 years. Aaron had heard the LORD speaking to Moses; he could have stopped Moses, but he did not. We do not know if that is the reason for Aaron’s guilt; no one really knows why the LORD in this passage implicated Aaron; nevertheless, he was and he would suffer the same penalty as his brother Moses by being excluded from entering the Promised Land.

This rock at Kadesh and the rock at Horeb were collectively called together the **“waters of Meribah”** or the *waters of quarreling*. Moses will mention them together in Deuteronomy 33:8.

Even after the rebellion of the Israelites and the sin of Moses and Aaron, the LORD did not forget His people. He remained holy before them as only He Who is always holy can be. He was faithful to them even though they were unfaithful to Him.

Messengers to Edom

Num 20:14 From Kadesh Moses then sent messengers to the king of Edom: "Thus your brother Israel has said, 'You know all the hardship that has befallen us; 20:15 that our fathers went down to Egypt, and we stayed in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our fathers badly. 20:16 'But when we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt; now behold, we are at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. 20:17 'Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or through vineyard; we will not even drink water from a well. We will go along the king's highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through your territory.'"

Moses sent the message to the king of Edom requesting permission to cross his land. Speaking to Edom, Moses said, **“Thus your brother Israel.”** Why did he use the word “brother?” Four-hundred and seventy years before, Jacob and Esau were still alive. When they were 91 years of age, Esau moved down to the land that we call Edom, south of the Dead Sea. All the descendants of Esau would be called the Edomites. Thirty-nine years later, when Jacob was 130 years of age, he moved his family to Egypt. All the descendants of Jacob and Esau knew their heritage through Isaac to Abraham and back to Adam. As nations, they were brothers. However, at this time, they were actually cousins, 470 years removed. Whether or not they were brothers or cousins, Moses was hoping that the king of Edom, a distant cousin, would allow the nation of Israel to pass through his kingdom and move up into the Promised Land. If he gave his permission, the nation would set out from Kadesh and move straight up the King’s Highway into Canaan Land on the east side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The 2018 Encyclopedia Britannica Online states the following about the King’s Highway.

King’s Highway, also called Via Nova Traiana, ancient thoroughfare that connected Syria and the Gulf of Aqaba by way of what is now Jordan. Mentioned in the Old Testament, it is one of the world’s oldest continuously used communication routes.

The King’s Highway was an important thoroughfare for north-south trade from ancient times. The Roman emperor Trajan (reigned 98–117 ce) renovated the road in order to improve transportation and communications between the regional capital, Bostra, and Al-‘Aqabah. The renovated road was known specifically as the “Via Nova Traiana” to distinguish it from another road that Trajan constructed, the Via Traiana in Italy. The King’s Highway was also



King's Highway marked by the orange line. Moses' plan was to enter Edom and join the highway going north. This map shows the course Moses had to take to avoid Edom's land, marked by the brown line.

an important thoroughfare during the Crusades, and numerous fortified castles remain along its route.

And so in this passage it was Moses' intention to move north along the east side of the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land on the east side. Thirty-eight years earlier, the plan was to move directly north from Kadesh and enter the Promised Land on the west side of the Jordan River.

Edom Denies Passage Second Time

Num 20:18 Edom, however, said to him, "You shall not pass through us, or I will come out with the sword against you." 20:19 Again, the sons of Israel said to him, "We will go up by the highway, and if I and my livestock do drink any of your water, then I will pay its price. Let me only pass through on my feet, nothing *else*." 20:20 But he said, "You shall not pass through." And Edom came out against him with a heavy force and with a strong hand. 20:21 Thus Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through his territory; so Israel turned away from him. 20:22 Now when they set out from Kadesh, the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor.

When the King of Edom denied Moses the right to cross his land twice, he did so by showing his force. Moses did not want to fight his cousins so he did not raise a sword against Edom. The king was ready to fight – strong and mighty in number, but Moses chose not to test his strength against Israel and the LORD. Had he done so, Edom probably would have lost badly. But that did not happen.

Kadesh to Mount Hor – Death of Aaron

Num 20:23 Then **the LORD spoke to Moses** and Aaron at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying, 20:24 "Aaron will be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, because you rebelled against My command at the waters of Meribah. 20:25 "Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up to Mount Hor; 20:26 and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar. So Aaron will be gathered *to his people*, and will die there." 20:27 So Moses did just as the LORD had commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. 20:28a After Moses had stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar, Aaron died there on the mountain top.

Moses led the whole nation back toward the northern tip of the Red Sea to Mount Hor. All we know about the location of Mount Hor is what we have in this passage, **“by the border of the land of Edom.”** What we do not know is where on the border of Edom. We can speculate that it was either on the west to southwest border of Edom because the mount had to be located before the camp reached the Red Sea. It is a mount, therefore it must be somewhere on the mountain range seen on the map above. The range runs on the east side of the Dead Sea and continues south even past the east side of the Red Sea. Therefore, it was not on the southeast, east or northeast side of the Edomite land.

Wherever Mount Hor was located, that was where Moses took Aaron, stripped him of his high priest garb and then Aaron died and was buried. On that same mount, at that same time, Eleazar, who was already a priest ordained thirty-eight years before, became the high priest. Eleazar had worn his father's high priest garb before. Aaron was the official high priest, but at times, Eleazar and Ithamar would put their father's garb on to perform the high priest's duties when Aaron was at rest. There on the mount, the official title was transferred to Eleazar, Aaron's oldest living son. Aaron died because of his participation with Moses in the striking of the rock for water at Kadesh just a few days or so before. Exactly what Aaron did with Moses in that event is still a mystery!

Eleazar Becomes High Priest – Mourning for Aaron

Num 20:28b Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. **20:29** When all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.

A pause in the journey of the nation of Israel occurred with the death of Aaron - thirty days it would mourn. True to God's word, Aaron did not enter Canaan Land. For all purposes, we can safely say that Aaron died on the border of Edom's land and the border of the Negev. We do not see it in Numbers, but when Moses dies, as recorded in Deuteronomy, the nation of Israel will mourn his death in the land of Moab for 30 days also (Deut. 34:5 & 8).

Trouble with King of Arad the Canaanite

Num 21:1 When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

The news had arrived that the nation of Israel was in striking distance in Canaan. For whatever time they were there, they had already come too close to its boarder for the comfort of the Canaanites. As a reminder, the Negev was the name of the desert area directly south of what we consider to be Israel today. If a line is drawn horizontally across the map at the bottom tip of the Dead Sea, we see that everything south of that line and west of Edom was called the Negev (the west side of Edom actually reached into the Negev).

Israel had already moved to Mount Hor and Aaron had died when this king made his move to attack the nation. The king had heard that Israel was coming into Canaan by **“the way of Atharim”** which means *the way of the spies*. It had been thirty-eight years since the spies of Israel had entered Canaan and returned. The spies did not hide on their trip; they simply took the road to Hebron and back from Kadesh. That trade route had taken on the name “Atharim” years before after the news of Israel's sin and failure to follow that route into the Promise Land. The king of Arad knew exactly where to find them – Kadesh! But they were not there when he arrived because they had moved to Mount Hor and had been there for 30 days while they were mourning Aaron's death. It would not have been hard for Arad's king to pick up Israel's trail and follow them. It would have been impossible for that many people to cross the desert without leaving a significant mark on the landscape which included the enormous amount of trash and debris they had to have left behind.

A fight broke out and some Israelites were captured. It was time for the nation of Israel to do what they should have known to do all along – call upon the LORD for help.

Israel's Vow with the LORD

Num 21:2 So Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities." **21:3** The LORD heard the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites; then they utterly destroyed them and their cities. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah.

Finally, the nation of Israel did not complain against the LORD and Moses. Finally, the nation of Israel called upon the LORD to rescue them. Finally, the nation of Israel did something right for a change on their own. It was the only true choice they had; Arad had already taken some of their kin. Surely, even the nation of Israel must have been astonished by what occurred. Arad did not have a chance! By the time the LORD and Israel got through the battle, Arad and everyone with him were dead. But the LORD did not stop there; every person in every city that Arad controlled was also "utterly destroyed."

The area of the Negev that was controlled by Arad was renamed by the Israelites "Hormah." The name means *asylum, a place where something or someone was utterly destroyed*. It would not be long before the Israelites would come back to his area, when the conquest of the Promised Land occurred. This parcel of land would become the inheritance of the tribe of Simeon.

Mount Hor, Around Edom

Num 21:4 Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey.

When the 30 days of mourning were over and Israel's army had returned to Mount Hor where they families were camped, they packed up and made their way down to the tip of the Red Sea and turned to the north to begin the rugged journey up the east side of Edom's land, not on a well-worn path but on a rough, jagged, uneven, harsh and rocky trail they had to blaze. That portion of the journey stirred up the same old aggravation with God and Moses that had plagued the nations' history. Surely, the taste of victory against Arad was in their minds. With that defeat, why did Moses lead them to blaze a new rugged trail instead of marching right through Edom's land on the well-marked, well-watered, well-stocked King's Highway? Edom could not have stopped them. Israel had God's help. Maybe so! But that was not the point of this detour in their journey!