

TUTORIAL
1.32

The Israelites did not believe God would give them Canaan

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: ***Exodus 40:36-38, Numbers 10:11, 13:21-30, Ch 20, 21:4-9.***

Last time

God gave Moses a copy of the Law engraved on panels (tablets) of stone. He also gave specific, detailed instructions for the construction of a large tent or pavilion – a Tabernacle. This would provide a centre for community worship and the sacrifices to atone for their sins – failures to live up to God’s standard. In an inner room, the Most Holy Place, God’s glory would rest on the atonement covering, the lid of the golden chest containing the Law. Aaron would be the first High Priest, and patriarch of a line of priests.

God brought them to the edge of Canaan

We pick up the Narrative at a point when the Israelites begin their journey again. Since the dramatic events of the Law being given, the Tabernacle has been completed. And because it had been done according to His instructions, God has come to live with them. His glory has settled in the Tabernacle. The entire community of Israel can see the evidence of God’s presence in the form of a cloud covering the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:36-38)

Then one day, 10 or 11 months after they first came to the foot of Sinai, the cloud rises up, indicating that the entire community should get ready to move. With God leading them, they journey through the wilderness until they eventually come to the border area of Canaan, the land God had promised centuries before to Abraham. A place called Kadesh Barnea. Corresponding roughly to modern-day Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, and the western parts of Jordan and Syria, the land God had promised for Israel’s homeland as a nation is by no means uninhabited.

A number of tribes - Semitic peoples – i.e. descendants of Shem and mostly speaking languages related to Hebrew, exist in city states throughout the area. A number are aggressively trying to expand their territory, wealth and influence through warfare. It seems that without exception, as communities,

they had long ago turned away from God's Story and worship of Him as Creator, to pursue cult practices and local stories.

Centuries before, in reference to one of these groups, God told Abraham that his descendants would return to Canaan at a point when the sins of the Amorites would warrant their destruction. God had graciously given them opportunity to turn to Him in repentance, but that opportunity was now at an end. He would use events to achieve His dual purpose: providing the promised homeland for the nation of Israel, while also meting out judgment on the existing inhabitants who refused to acknowledge Him as Creator God.

The Israelites didn't trust God to give them the land

A number of events take place while the Israelites are camped at Kadesh Barnea, but we pick up the Narrative with God telling Moses to choose 12 men – one from each of the ancestral Israelite tribes - to go into Canaan and come back with a report of what they found. (Numbers 13:1,2, 21-29)

After nearly 6 weeks of travelling to different areas they bring back news and even physical evidence of a rich, fertile country. But they also relate disturbing accounts of heavily fortified towns and inhabitants of huge stature – giants. Two of the group of 12 spies, while not denying the realities of the challenge before them, encourage the people not to be dismayed...to believe that God would enable them to conquer all the territory He'd promised. (Numbers 13:30) These two individuals, Caleb and Joshua, will have notable roles in the ongoing Narrative. Their encouragement falls on deaf ears. The people listen instead to the negative, fearful counsel of the other 10 spies and, true to form, begin to ask through their tears why Moses and Aaron didn't leave them to die in Egypt or the wilderness. Becoming increasingly agitated, they consider stoning Caleb and Joshua and overthrowing the leadership of Moses and Aaron. In the stark context of the Narrative, the lack of faith and gratitude toward God of these people can seem incredible. But the reality is, in that sense they are much more typical than exceptional. Despite all the evidence, people do not readily acknowledge who God is, what He has done, or take Him at His word.

As in every other such case, before and since, lack of faith and rebellion against God has dire consequences for the Israelite community. God declares that this generation will not be the ones to enter in and inhabit the promised territory. They will wander for 40 years, a day for each year the spies explored the land. Eventually they'll die in the wilderness and it will be their children's generation that will inhabit the land that God has promised for the nation.

Water from another rock

God continues to give an account in His Story of events, and His interaction with the Israelites while they are wandering in the semi-arid wilderness, probably of the Sinai peninsula. An account is given (Numbers Ch 20) of a time when the nomadic community runs out of water. Just like another time, years before, when God had recently brought them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, they did not turn in faith to God for help. Instead they complain and blame Moses and Aaron for leading them out to die here in the wastelands. This time God tells Moses that water will be provided if he will speak to a nearby rock. But Moses, frustrated with the people, strikes the rock with his staff. Although God does bring water out for the Israelite community and their livestock, He is displeased with Aaron and Moses over their disobedience to His instructions. In time Aaron would die without entering the promised land and then, later, Moses would also.

The bronze snake

It isn't long until the Israelites, weary and frustrated by the long journey, begin again to complain against God and His designated mouthpiece, Moses. They complain about the lack of good food and drink in the wilderness, expressing hatred for "this horrible manna". This time God's punishment comes in the form of poisonous snakes whose bite is lethal. When the people acknowledge their sin and ask Moses to pray for the Lord's help, He tells Moses to make a replica of a snake and put it on a pole. People having been bitten by a poisonous snake who look at the bronze replica will be healed.

This provides us with yet another powerful analogy for understanding God's perspectives and intentions. Like the Israelites and the snakes, the human race has no way of escaping the lethal "bite" of sin. Death is a very appropriate result for us as a rebellious, ungrateful people. But, for no reason other than His grace and mercy, God promised to send a Deliverer who would destroy the power of Satan and provide a solution to the dilemma of our sin. The symbolic connections between God's response to Israel's physical predicament here, and how through the Deliverer He would deal with the much larger dilemma facing the entire human race, are of course explicated later in the Narrative.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Consider the way God was directing every movement of the travelling Israelite community. How do you feel about this picture of a very “hands-on” God, directly involved with His people, wanting them to be dependent on Him for every aspect of their daily lives? What would you say has been the picture built up throughout your Christian experience of the kind of relationship God is seeking to have with His children?
2. Territorial sovereignty and land rights are obviously highly controversial issues about which wars continue to be fought today. What foundations of truth then should help us correctly view the Biblical account of God giving the land of the Canaanite nations to the Israelites? How would you try to explain this to someone from our society given the widespread influence the media has on popular opinion and the perspectives that many people unthinkingly hold?
3. What is your personal response to the account of God, first of all, sending the snakes to punish the Israelite’s unbelief, and then providing the remedy in the form of the brass serpent. Without going beyond truths covered in the Biblical narrative so far, put in your own words what this powerful story tells us about God and how He relates to human beings.



ACTIVITIES

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1. Research the tribal situation that existed in Canaan when the Israelites spied out the land and do a short write-up of your findings. Find out a little about the tribes who occupied the land, where they were located and a little about their languages, cultures and religions.