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April 24th: Numbers 21 & Mark 14:53-72

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Victories against peoples of the land. The trials of Jesus and Peter.

Some passages referenced:

Numbers 14:44-45 (defeat at Hormah); Deuteronomy 8:14-16 (the wilderness as a place of serpents); 2 Kings 18:1-4 (the idolatrous use of 'Nehushtan', the copper serpent); Deuteronomy 2—3 (another travelogue); Exodus 15 (Song of Moses at the Red Sea); Isaiah 27:2-3 (song of the pleasant vineyard); Judges 11:12-24 (dispute between Jephthah and the Ammonites over the territory taken from the Amorites); John 3:14-15 (Jesus comparing himself to the serpent lifted up in the wilderness).

Acts 6:11-14 (charges made against Stephen concerning blasphemy against the Law and the Temple); Jeremiah 7:1-14 (Jeremiah's challenge to the Temple); John 2:18-22 ('destroy this temple...'); Isaiah 53:7 (the silent lamb before its shearers); Daniel 7:13-14 (the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven); Psalm 110:1 (sitting at the Lord's right hand); Leviticus 21:10 (the high priest commanded not to tear his clothes); Isaiah 50:6 (the mistreatment of the Isaianic Servant).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglican church.net/>).

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Transcript

Numbers 21 When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And the Lord heeded the voice of Israel, and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction.

So the name of the place was Hormeh. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses, Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. And the people of Israel set out and camped in Oboth. And they set out from Oboth and camped at Aya Abirim, in the wilderness that is opposite Moab, toward the sunrise.

From there they set out and camped in the valley of Zered. From there they set out and camped on the other side of the Anon, which is in the wilderness that extends from the border of the Amorites. For the Anon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.

Therefore it is said in the book of the wars of the Lord, Weheb in Suphah, and the valleys of the Anon, and the slope of the valleys that extends to the seat of Ar, and leans to the border of Moab. And from there they continued to Be'ah, that is the well of which the Lord said to Moses, Gather the people together, so that I may give them water. Then Israel sang this song, Spring up O well, sing to it, the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter and with their staffs.

And from the wilderness they went on to Matanah, and from Matanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamuth, and from Bamuth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah, that looks down on the desert. Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into field or vineyard.

We will not drink the water of a well. We will go up by the king's highway until we have passed through your territory. But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory.

He gathered all his people together and went out against Israel to the wilderness, and came to Jehaz and fought against Israel. And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Anan to the Jaboch, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon and in all its villages.

For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab, and taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Anan. Therefore the ballad singers say, Come to Heshbon, let it be built, let the city of Sihon be established. For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon.

It devoured Ah of Moab, and swallowed the heights of the Anan. Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh. He has made his sons fugitives, and his daughters captives, to an Amorite king, Sihon.

So we overthrew them. Heshbon as far as Dibon perished, and we laid waste as far as Nofah. Fire spread as far as Mediba.

Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites. And Moses sent to spy out Jehza, and they captured its villages, and dispossessed the Amorites who were there. Then they turned, and went up by the way to Bashan.

And Og the king of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edreai. But the Lord said to Moses, Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.

So they defeated him, and his sons, and all his people, until he had no survivor left. And they possessed his land. Numbers chapter 21 begins with Israel being attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad.

Arad is a large town in the Negev, about 17 miles south of Hebron. And here we see something important. Israel deals directly with the Lord.

They vowed to the Lord that they will dedicate these cities to him. The name of the place is called Hormat. And this is somewhere that we've encountered about 40 years previously in Numbers chapter 14 verses 44 to 45.

But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, nor Moses departed out of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and defeated them, and

pursued them, even to Hormat. This location was the site where they had tried to go up and take the land after they had been told that they could not go into it because of the rebellion.

And now at that site of former defeat they are dedicating the land to the Lord. Israel vows to dedicate the cities of the Canaanite king of Arad to destruction, and the place is named Hormat, destruction for this fact. But now the Israelites complain again.

They hate the food and they lack water. They complain against Moses and against the Lord. This is the very last complaint of the Israelites along such lines, but it's important to see how things play out.

The Lord lets loose fiery serpents among them. In Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 14 to 16 we read of serpents in the wilderness. The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions, a thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know that he might humble you and test you to do you good in the end.

Numbers 21 is the only reference to encounter with such snakes in the wilderness. Daniel Lowenstein observes that the significance of the Lord releasing the snakes is that he is removing his protection. To this point he's been holding the snakes back.

He's had a hedge around Israel protecting them from encounter with these fiery serpents. These serpents rule in the wilderness and God has protected them to this point and in removing his protection for a short period of time the people recognize their dependence upon him. The people are complaining because the blessings of settled life are in sight.

They're on the borders of Edom and they start to feel their deprivation in the wilderness keenly. They realize they're not eating the food of settled people. They're suffering the difficulties and the hardships of the wilderness and just over the border there in Edom people are living the life of settled people in a land and they realize what they've lost.

What they could have gone back to in Egypt for instance. The Lord in removing his protection for that short period of time helps them to realize how he has assisted them. The serpents are fiery serpents.

Maybe we're supposed to see them as connected with the fire of the Lord, the consuming fire of God as his anger against sin. So fire in the form of serpents. Others have suggested an association with seraphs as celestial dragon-like creatures and these somehow represent or are associated with them.

The people confess their sin and repent asking Moses to intercede for them. Once again

we're seeing failure and rebellion here but there is a change that they are far more tractable. They are far more prepared to repent and to turn to the Lord.

Moses is required by the Lord to make a copper serpent and place it upon a standard. Why copper? Well partly because it plays upon the word for serpent. Also because of its fiery red color.

The copper serpent is a Nahash Nahoshet. We could perhaps call it a copper cobra to try and capture something of the play upon words here. And later on in 2nd Kings chapter 18 there is a reference to this serpent called Nahushetan at that point.

Again playing upon those particular words. Copper snakes dating from the same sort of period have been found in the region as well which suggests further connections. When people were bitten they were supposed to look to the serpent on the standard.

Contact with the serpent was required but it was a contact through sight and faith. A sort of turning to it in an act of appeal, in trust and dependence. Once again we might see something new here.

Israel are supposed to look to the serpent standard that the Lord has provided and find deliverance through that. This is an act that they have to perform as they look towards something that God has given to them. It's not a matter of telling Moses to pray for them.

They have to look themselves. They have to exercise faith themselves in this particular act. Maybe God is training them as this second generation to act in a different way than the previous generation.

Not just to depend upon Moses to intercede for them but to be people who look to God's provision themselves. The copper serpent appears once more in Israel's history in 2nd Kings chapter 18 verses 1 to 4. The danger there is treating the serpent as a magical talisman rather than the provision of the Lord. They're supposed to look to the serpent but in looking to the serpent what they're really looking to is the provision of God for them.

The serpent is not some magical idol. The serpent rather is the standard given by the God who heals them and in looking to the serpent what they are really looking to is the provision of God. The fact that God can deliver them from the lethal creatures of the wilderness.

After many years of wandering in the wilderness they are now swiftly moving towards their goal. There are nine different camps in succession mentioned here interspersed with bits of old poetry. The description of the defeat of Sihon king of the Amorites after this is probably something that occurred during this period.

This same period of journeying is also narrated in Deuteronomy chapters 2 and 3. They are traveling around Moab to the east of the Dead Sea and this is something we can gather from the reference to the Zered and the Arnon. These are rivers that flow into the Dead Sea from that direction. The references to the book of the Wars of the Lord and this is the only reference we have to this particular book in scripture.

The poem that follows is difficult and obscure, extremely difficult and obscure. Perhaps one of the more interesting suggestions is that of D.L. Christensen who interprets the consonantal text as follows. The Lord came in a whirlwind.

He came to the branch wadis of the Arnon. He marched through the wadis. He marched.

He turned aside to the seat of Ar. He leaned toward the border of Moab. However to arrive at this reading Christensen has to tweak the text itself, not just its vowel pointing.

The point of this extract may simply be that of identifying an extra biblical witness to the details of the travelogue without the excerpt needing to be such a statement in itself. The presence of excerpts from other bodies of material from the period in this chapter is an interesting feature of the text. Beyond the entrance into the land itself there's perhaps a sense of an entrance into a broader network of cultural voices and literatures.

They're becoming part of a world of other peoples at this point and the references and snatches of songs and epic poetry helps to give a sense that this is a larger world that they're entering into and they're dealing with a number of different peoples as part of that. This is followed by the Lord's provision of water for the people at a place called Beir, meaning well. A number of the places are named after significant events or objects there.

Horma after the destruction, Meribah after the quarrelling and Hir, Beir after the well. The Israelites sing to the well, seemingly a song called Spring-Up-O-Well. This reminds us of Israel singing at the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 15.

It's also similar to Isaiah chapter 27 verses 2 and 3. In that day a pleasant vineyard sing of it. I the Lord am its keeper, every moment I water it, lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day. In Isaiah chapter 27 Israel is seemingly instructed to sing a known song to the land and here they sing another song to the well which provides them with water.

The song refers to the chieftains of the tribes and their ceremonial staffs. The political leaders of Israel are relating to the land. In the previous chapter Moses was instructed to speak to the rock and it would yield its water.

Here the whole company of Israel speaks to the well from which the Lord is providing water for them. There's a beautiful progression to be observed here. There is a musical relationship between Israel and the land.

They sing to it and it willingly delivers up its gifts to them and the implicit personification of the land is important in Leviticus and here thinking of the land as personified might also help us to see what's taking place. Israel is supposed to relate to the land in the way described here, to as it were sing to it and it will deliver the gifts of the Lord to them. They're supposed to treat the land well to give it its rest and as they do so it will deliver the Lord's gifts to them.

Once again Israel requests right of passage through a land as they did with Edom. However as in the case of Edom, Sihon the king of the Amorites refuses and not only does he refuse he also goes out to fight against Israel. Israel defeated him and dispossessed him.

Finally we are told that they are settling in cities, the cities of the Amorites in Heshbon and its villages, although this likely is referring to a later settling in that territory. There's an old poem about Sihon's victory over the Moabites at Heshbon quoted here at length. Sihon had taken this territory for Moab but Israel dispossessed the dispossessor.

While the defeat of Sihon probably enabled the Moabites to repossess much of their original territory, Heshbon now belonged to Israel and did not revert to its former owners who had proved unable to hold it and had lost title to it as the Lord gave it into the hands of Israel rather than back into their hands. Judges 11 verses 12 to 24 mentions this territory and the disputes about the possession of it later on in history. Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Amorites and said what do you have against me that you have come to me to fight against my land? And the king of the Amorites answered the messengers of Jephthah because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land from the Anan to the Jabok and to the Jordan now therefore restore it peaceably.

Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Amorites and said to him thus says Jephthah Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Amorites but when they came up from Egypt Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom saying please let us pass through your land but the king of Edom would not listen and they sent also to the king of Moab but he would not consent so Israel remained at Kadesh. Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Anan but they did not enter the territory of Moab for the Anan was the boundary of Moab.

Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites king of Heshbon and Israel said to him please let us pass through your land to our country but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory so Sihon gathered all his people together and camped at Jehaz and fought with Israel and the Lord the God of Israel gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel and they defeated them so Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites who inhabited that country and they took possession of all the

territory of the Amorites from the Anan to the Jabok and from the wilderness to the Jordan so then the Lord the God of Israel dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your God gives you to possess and all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us we will possess Israel now is living in the land of the Amorites in settlements on the east side of the Jordan this is their first possession in the land and after defeating Sihon the king of the Amorites they also defeat Og king of Bashan finally after all this period in the wilderness they are starting to receive the promises a question to consider in John chapter 3 verses 14 to 15 Jesus says and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life how does the copper serpent help us to understand the meaning of the cross Mark chapter 14 verses 53 to 72 and they led Jesus to the high priest and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together and Peter had followed him at a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest and he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death but they found none for many bore false witness against him but their testimony did not agree and some stood up and bore false witness against him saying we heard him say i will destroy this temple that is made with hands and in three days i will build another not made with hands yet even about this their testimony did not agree and the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus have you no answer to make what is it that these men testify against you but he remained silent and made no answer again the high priest asked him are you the Christ the son of the blessed and Jesus said i am and you will see the son of man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven and the high priest tore his garments and said what further witnesses do we need you have heard his blasphemy what is your decision and they all condemned him as deserving death and some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him saying to him prophesy and the guards received him with blows and as Peter was below in the courtyard one of the servant girls of the high priest came and seeing Peter warming himself she looked at him and said you also were with the Nazarene Jesus but he denied it saying i neither know nor understand what you mean and he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed and the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders this man is one of them but again he denied it and after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter certainly you are one of them for you are a Galilean but he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear i do not know this man of whom you speak and immediately the rooster crowed a second time and Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him before the rooster crows twice you will deny me three times and he broke down and wept earlier in Mark chapter 14 Jesus was seized by the mob with Judas at night and taken now to Caiaphas the high priest the setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what's taking place the authorities are concerned to deal with Christ as urgently as possible before the feast proper starts and so rather than following a more deliberate and slower procedure of justice they're trying to deal with things as rapidly as

possible the Sanhedrin the Jewish council brings together false witnesses against Christ they're seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire and they repeatedly try and fail until some come forward accusing him of statements challenging the temple Jesus had challenged the temple on a few occasions particularly during the final week in Jerusalem he claimed it had been made into a den of robbers a place of traders a den for brigands to take refuge from God's justice Acts chapter 6 verses 11 to 14 is one testimony to the way that the early Christians were seen to speak against the temple and what it stood for then they secretly instigated men who said we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God and they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council and they set up false witnesses and said this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law but we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us in the story of Stephen's trial we see many of the beats of the story of Christ's trial being played out again and once again there's that threat to the temple that's at the center of the charges being made Jesus is a prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel one of the prophets who speaks against the temple and the way that it's being used in the people's life it's being perverted it's being made into something they're putting their hope in while they're disobeying the will of the Lord in Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 14 we have an example of such a charge the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say hear the word of the Lord all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord thus says the Lord of hosts the God of Israel amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place do not trust in these deceptive words this is the temple of the Lord the temple of the Lord the temple of the Lord for if you truly amend your ways and your deeds if you truly execute justice one with another if you do not oppress the sojourner the fatherless or the widow or shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm then I will let you dwell in this place in the land that I gave of old to your father's brother behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail will you steal murder commit adultery swear falsely make offerings to bail and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name and say we are delivered only to go on doing all these abominations has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes behold I myself have seen it declares the Lord go now to my place that was in Shiloh where I made my name dwell at first and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel and now because you have done all these things declares the Lord and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen and when I called you you did not answer therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name and in which you trust and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers as I did to Shiloh Jesus makes a statement about the temple in John chapter 2 verses 18 to 22 which seems to be alluded here in the statements that are made by the false witnesses against him so the Jews said to him what sign do you show us for doing these things Jesus answered them destroy

this temple and in three days I will raise it up the jews then said it has taken 46 years to build this temple and will you raise it up in three days but he was speaking about the temple of his body when therefore he was raised from the dead his disciples remembered that he had said this and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken so the false witnesses make a true statement but with the attempt to destroy him false witness can have a broader sense than simply a false message Jesus is convicted by true testimony but true testimony that is perverted Jesus is silent before his accusers and once again this seems to be in fulfillment of the scriptures in Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7 he was oppressed and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that has led to the slaughter and like a sheep before its shearers is silent so he opened not his mouth the high priest asks him if he is the Christ the Messiah the son of the blessed what does this have to do with the earlier claims about his statements concerning the temple well the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore and reform the temple Jesus we should remember has been performing messianic style actions for the last few days his triumphal entry his action in the temple calling the Messiah the son of the blessed would not have the same strong metaphysical meaning that later christian theology would give it the son of God in that sense is the one who's the Davidic son the one who's going to inherit the throne of his father David now as we play that out and work out all the things that are associated with that we'll see that it's not just a human figure but the initial and immediate sense of son of God or son of the blessed is not the divine son in the way that we would think about that in terms of the son as the second person of the trinity Jesus affirms the statement that the high priest gives to him in the loaded words I am and he identifies himself once more with the son of man in Daniel's vision in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14 I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples nations and languages should serve him his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed there also seems to be an allusion here to psalm 110 verse 1 the lord says to my lord sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool the hearers of Jesus statement he declares will see Jesus at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven what on earth could this mean Jesus seems to be saying that he's coming to the throne of God in the middle of history to receive power the point is not that he's coming to earth but the leaders of the Jews will see proof of his ascension to power when he is vindicated in the destruction of their temple and city the coming of Christ then the coming of the son of man is not primarily a downward movement to earth rather it's the movement to the throne of God the movement to the right hand of the power of God and the high priest response to this is to tear his clothes we should recall from Leviticus chapter 21 verse 10 that the high priest was specifically commanded not to tear his clothes the priest who is chief among his brothers on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes the high priest in the court charged Jesus with

blasphemy and declare him to be worthy of death they do not however have the jurisdiction to carry out that sentence so they must deliver him to Pilate later on this trial was probably not a trial in the fullest sense of the term more a hearing that is an attempt to establish charges to be presented to Pilate later on the one with the actual authority to cast the death sentence so why was Jesus declared to be guilty of blasphemy first of all he committed a sort of cultural blasphemy he opposed the temple and the religious leaders and he claimed messianic status but also he seemed to go beyond that in claiming to be the son of man who would sit at the right hand of the power of God he was claiming something for himself that went beyond the status of any man this was a blasphemy in a stronger sense of the term the response is to spit in his face to cover his face to strike him and to mock him the way that he's being treated here is probably intended to remind the reader of the isaianic servant in isaiah chapter 50 verse 6 i gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard i hid not my face from disgrace and spitting Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasts with Jesus' trial. Mark brings that contrast to the attention of the hearers of his gospel by moving the narrative to and fro between them both are questioned one is faithful but the other is unfaithful and there's a gradual escalation first he is approached directly by the servant girl and he denies it he then tries to move location and then he's accused to the bystanders by the servant girl and he denies it strongly again then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus his accent gives him away he seems to be a man of Galilee associated with this teacher that's come down from Nazareth in responding to this charge Peter seems to call a curse upon himself an anathema upon himself which is something of the utmost seriousness in denying Christ he's calling a curse upon himself hearing the cock crow that second time brings sudden and horrified self-recognition he recognizes the earlier pride he recognizes his lack of wakefulness he's not been alert he's not recognized what he's been doing and he's sleepwalked into this great sin he comes to his senses he completely removes himself from the situation and he weeps bitterly a question to consider what can we learn from the way that the testing of Peter is contrasted with the testing of Jesus both in Gethsemane and in the house of Caiaphas the high priest