

Numbers

Lesson #8

The Deaths of Miriam and Aaron

(20: 1 – 21: 35)

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Review

In the wake of the rebellion, Moses turned to the Levites, those of his own tribe, and to the priests, Aaron and his descendants. He must have their support to succeed; indeed, to survive! So Moses “sweetened the pot,” giving Aaron and his sons exclusive rights at the tabernacle and a greater share in the sacrifices and the tithes, while giving the Levites additional privileges, as well.

God also introduced the ritual of the “red heifer,” a red cow without blemish or defect, which would be slaughtered and its ashes used as a purification offering for those who touched a dead human corpse. The ashes of a red heifer combined with spring water, go far beyond the “cleansing” ritual we studied in Leviticus 21 & 22.

The introduction of the red heifer at this point in Numbers suggested a significant increase in the number of dead human bodies as the journey to the “Promised Land” continued.

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Preview

Lesson #8 brings bad news and good news. First the bad news, and there's a pile of it: Moses' sister Miriam, who fished baby Moses out of the Nile River and brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, dies in the wilderness of Zin; Aaron, too, who had accompanied Moses in his showdown with Pharaoh in Egypt, dies at Mount Hor; Moses himself rebels against God, resulting in God forbidding Moses to enter the Promised Land; Edom forbids the Israelites from passing through their territory, a requirement for their journey to Canaan; and the entire Israelite community camps on a pile of venomous vipers, and many of them are bitten and die. Moses is now alone, sinking in a swamp of bad news—and his most difficult days are yet to come.

The good news? The Israelites defeat the king of Arad in the Negev desert, and they defeat both Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan—their first, small military victories, giving the Israelites some much-needed encouragement.



Think for a moment about a young family, slaves in a country not their own, at the mercy of a brutal, foreign king; a young family: Amram and his wife, Jochebed; their 10-year old daughter, Miriam; and their 3-year old son, Aaron.

Jochebed is pregnant, only days from giving birth, when the decree arrives that all newly-born male slave-children shall be drowned in the river. The slaves have reached critical mass and insurrection crackles in the air: male children grow up to fight . . . and they must be eliminated.

After the child's birth, Jochebed hides him, frantically seeking to spare him. But babies cry, and he'll surely be discovered.

So, Jochebed forms a desperate plan.



Watching carefully, day after day, the eddies and the currents in the river, she puts the baby in a basket, lined with pitch; tucks him in a warm blanket; and carefully places the basket in the river.

Downstream, in a secluded rivulet, the king's daughter bathes daily, her attendants in tow. Jochebed sends her 10-year old daughter Miriam to hide in the bulrushes, watching carefully to ensure her mother's plan works.

When the basket floats gently down the rivulet toward the shore, the princess spies it, has it retrieved, unwraps the blanket and sees the baby silently crying. At that very moment —when God brings together a baby's tears and a woman's heart—Miriam steps out and says: *"Shall I go and summon a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?"*



William Blake. "The Compassion of Pharaoh's Daughter" (pen, ink and watercolor over pencil), 1805. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



And with that, the baby Moses joins the royal family of Pharaoh and is brought up as a prince of Egypt, the beloved adopted son of the princess and grandson of the king . . . cared for by his mother Jochebed, with Miriam and Aaron as his playmates.

Miriam and Aaron watched as Moses grew, educated in “all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” groomed for greatness. They watched, too, as Moses fled Egypt, a murderer and a wanted felon. For 40 years they kept in touch covertly, until the crime had been forgotten. And they joined Moses when he returned to Egypt, saying: “Let my people go!”

With Moses, they passed through the Red Sea, and Miriam sang a great victory song. They endured the trials of the wilderness, and they shared the heavy burden of leadership.



And then in the 3rd year of the Exodus . . .

“The Israelites, the whole community, arrived in the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed at Kadesh. It was here that Miriam died, and here that she was buried.”

(20: 1)

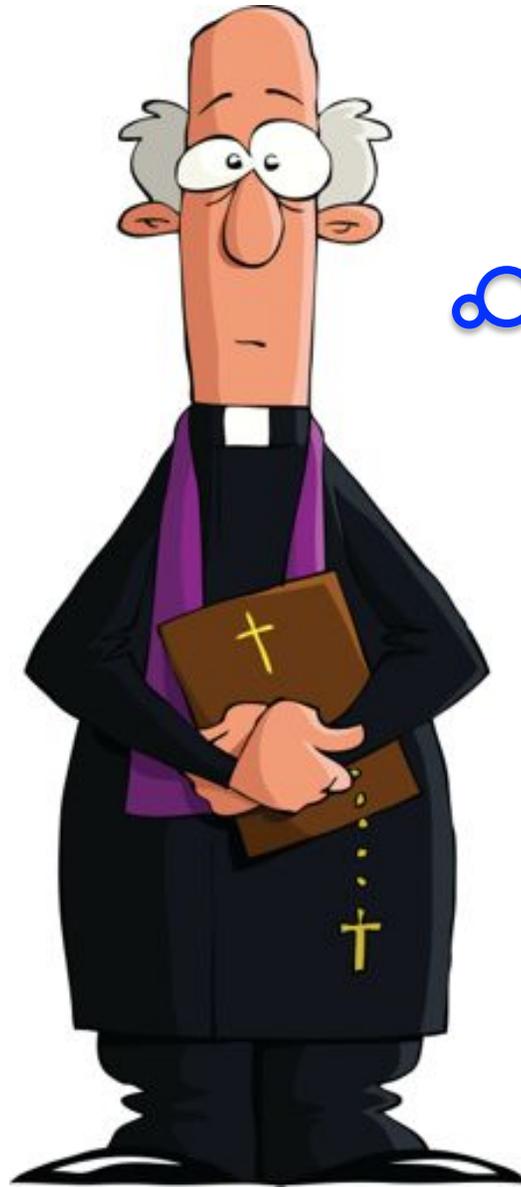
One sentence. One sentence whose stark brevity captures the unspeakable grief that Moses must have felt at the loss of his sister, whose stalwart support saved his life and sustained him through the darkest of days.



With the mounting burden of discontent and rebellion—

- 1. of the man who gathered wood on the Sabbath being stoned;**
- 2. of Dathan and Abiram and their families being swallowed alive by the earth;**
- 3. of Korah and the 250 community leaders being incinerated;**
- 4. of 14,700 Israelites who grumble against God being killed by a plague; and**
- 5. of God’s command that the *“entire wicked community that conspired against me: here in the wilderness they shall come to their end and there they will die”* (14: 35): over a million deaths looming in the future—**

add to this, the death of Miriam.



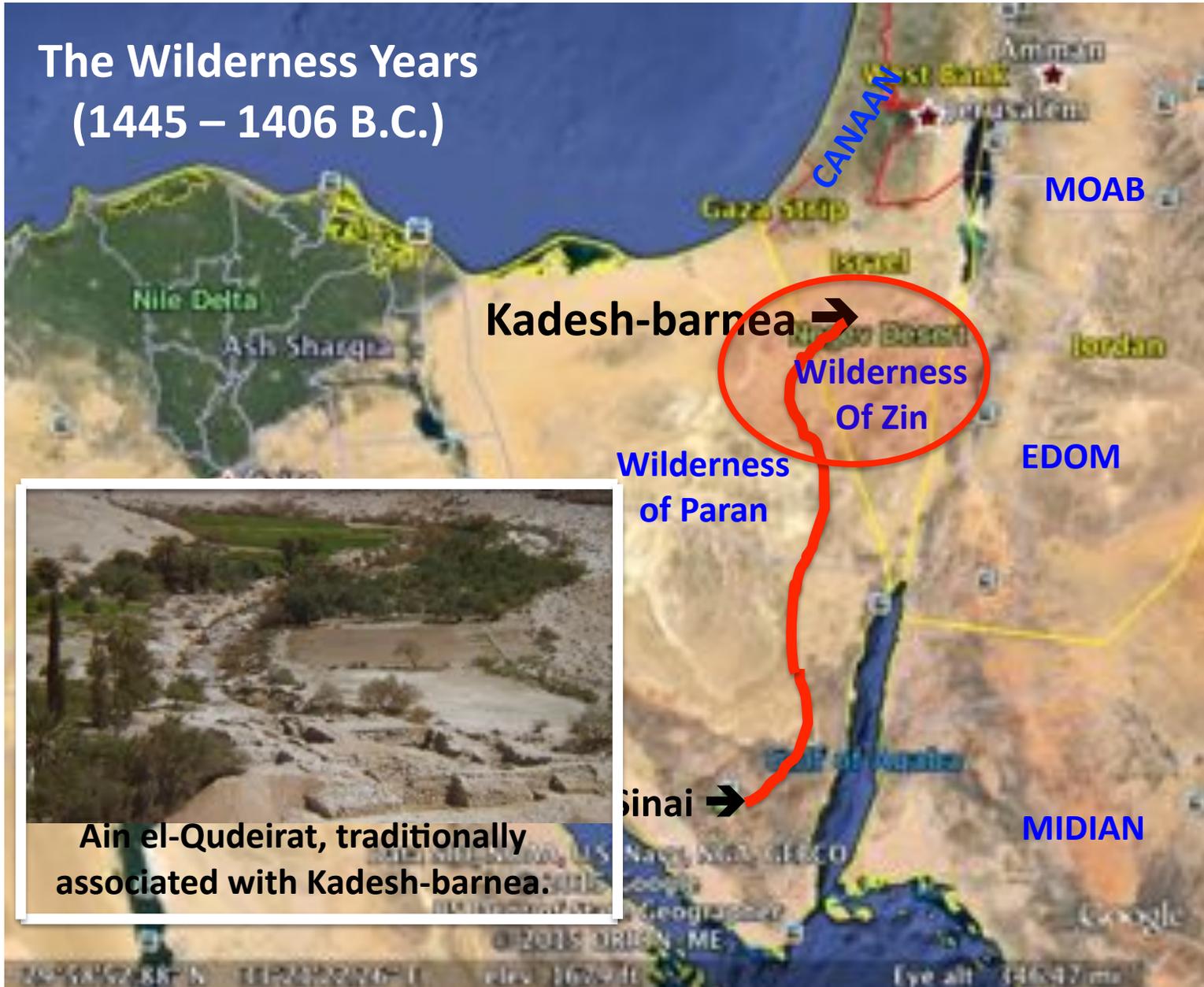
It was a devastating
time for Moses . . .
and it only gets
worse!

“Since the community had no water, they held an assembly against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, exclaiming, ‘Would that we had perished when our kindred perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord’s assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place? It is not a place for grain nor figs nor vines nor pomegranates! And there is no water to drink!’ But Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting, where they fell prostrate.”

(20: 2-6a)

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The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)



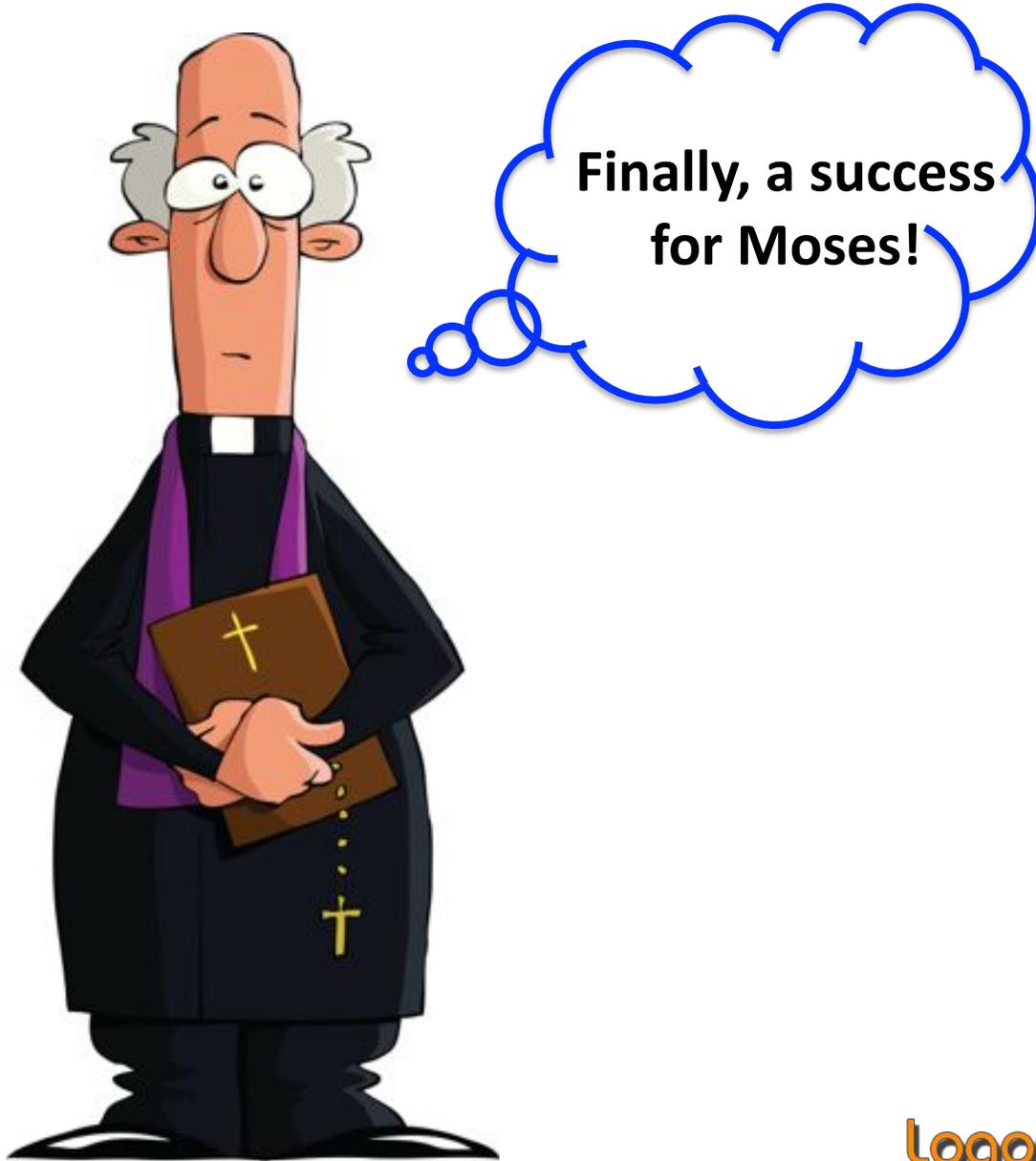
“The glory of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord said to Moses: Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother, and in their presence command the rock to yield its waters. Thereby you will bring forth water from the rock for them, and supply the community and their livestock with water. So Moses took the staff from its place before the Lord, as he was ordered. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly in front of the rock, where he said to them, ‘Just listen, you rebels! Are we to produce water for you out of this rock?’ Then, raising his hand, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff, and water came out in abundance, and the community and their livestock drank.”

(20: 6b-11)

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**Tintoretto. *Moses Striking the Rock* (oil on canvas), 1563.
The Städel Museum, Frankfurt, Germany.**





Not so fast, Padre!

The Lord said to Moses:

“Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother, and in their presence command the rock to yield its waters. Thereby you will bring forth water from the rock for them, and supply the community and their livestock with water.”

(20: 8)

But what did he do?

“Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly in front of the rock, where he said to them, ‘Just listen, your rebels! Are we to produce water for you out of this rock?’ Then, raising his hand, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff”

(20: 10-11)



***“Because you did not have confidence in me, to acknowledge my holiness before the Israelites, therefore you shall not lead this assembly into the land I have given them”
(20: 12).***

**Michelangelo. *Creation of the Sun and Moon* (fresco, detail), 1511.
Sistine Chapel, Vatican.**





**Tough patooties.
That's the way the
cookie crumbles!**





Notice how Moses accepts the Lord's punishment without so much as a whimper. You know he must be feeling devastated, especially after the death of Miriam, yet he remains silent, lips clinched grimly and a tear trickling down his cheek.

Nonetheless, he presses on, sending messengers to the king of Edom requesting safe passage through his territory, north on the King's Highway.

The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)



“From Kadesh Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: Thus says your brother Israel: You know of all the hardships that have befallen us, how our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we stayed in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our ancestors harshly. When we cried to the Lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel who led us out of Egypt. Now here we are at Kadesh, a town at the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your land. We will not cross any fields or vineyards, nor drink any well water, but we will go straight along the King’s Highway without turning to the right or to the left, until we have passed through your territory.”

(20: 14-17)

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•That sounds like a reasonable request, and Moses addresses the king of Edom as “your brother Israel.”

•Recall the twins, Jacob and Esau, who struggled with each other even in their mother’s womb. Later, God renamed Jacob, “Israel,” and he became the founder of the Israelite people; Esau became the founder of the Edomite people. Although they both were the twin offspring of Isaac and Rebecca, they had a deeply troubled and contentious past.

•Two million Israelites traversing Edom—especially after the king of Edom has heard about the disastrous plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army—is unacceptable.

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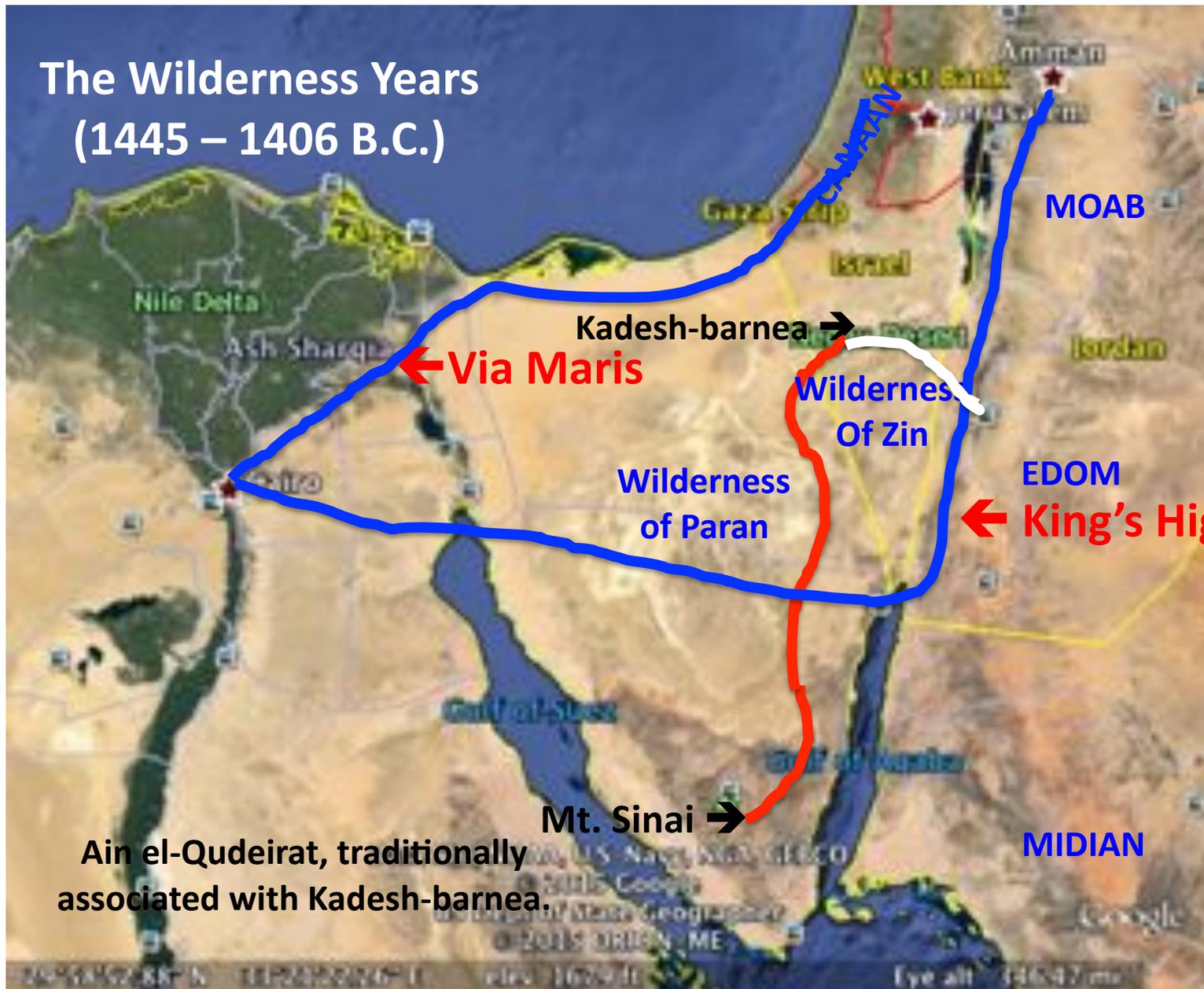
Hendrick ter Brugghen. *Esau Selling His Birthright* (oil on canvas), 1628.
Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid.

“But Edom answered him, ‘You shall not pass through here; if you do, I will advance against you with the sword.’ The Israelites said to him, ‘We will go up along the highway. If we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. It is nothing—just let us pass through on foot.’ But Edom replied, ‘You shall not pass through,’ and advanced against them with a large and heavily armed force. Therefore since Edom refused to let Israel pass through their territory, Israel turned away from them.

(20: 18-21)

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The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)



Ain el-Qudeirat, traditionally associated with Kadesh-barnea.

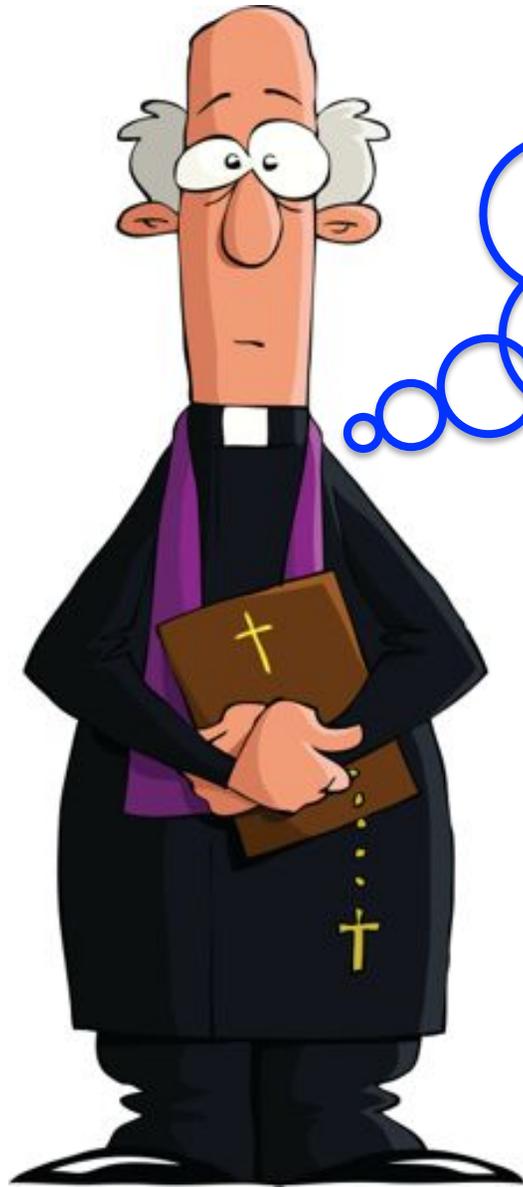
“Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites, the whole community, came to Mount Hor. There at Mount Hor on the boarder of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land I have given to the Israelites, because you both rebelled against my directions at the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up on Mount Hor. Then strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar, his son, but there Aaron shall be gathered up in death . . . Then Aaron died there on top of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, all the community understood that Aaron had breathed his last; and for thirty days the whole house of Israel mourned Aaron.”

(20: 22-29)

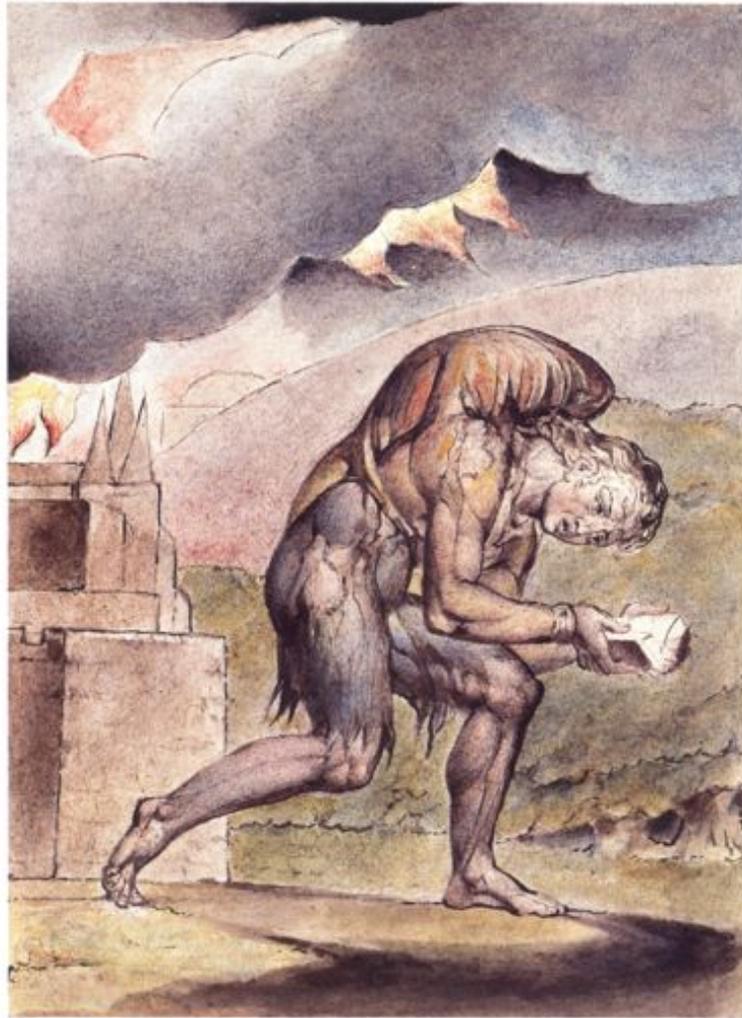
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The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)





How much more can Moses take? The complaining, the rebellions, the death of Miriam, his banishment from the Promised Land, and now the death of Aaron!



**William Blake. *Christian Reading in His Book* (sketch and watercolor), c. 1824-1827.
Frick Collection, New York.**

“When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who ruled over the Negeb, heard that the Israelites were coming along the way of Atharim, he engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive. Israel then made this vow to the Lord: ‘If you deliver this people into my hand, I will put their cities under the ban. The Lord paid attention to Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they put them and their cities under the ban. Hence that place was named Hormah.’”

(21: 1-3)

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Finally, a small victory for Moses! Frankly I was very worried about him.

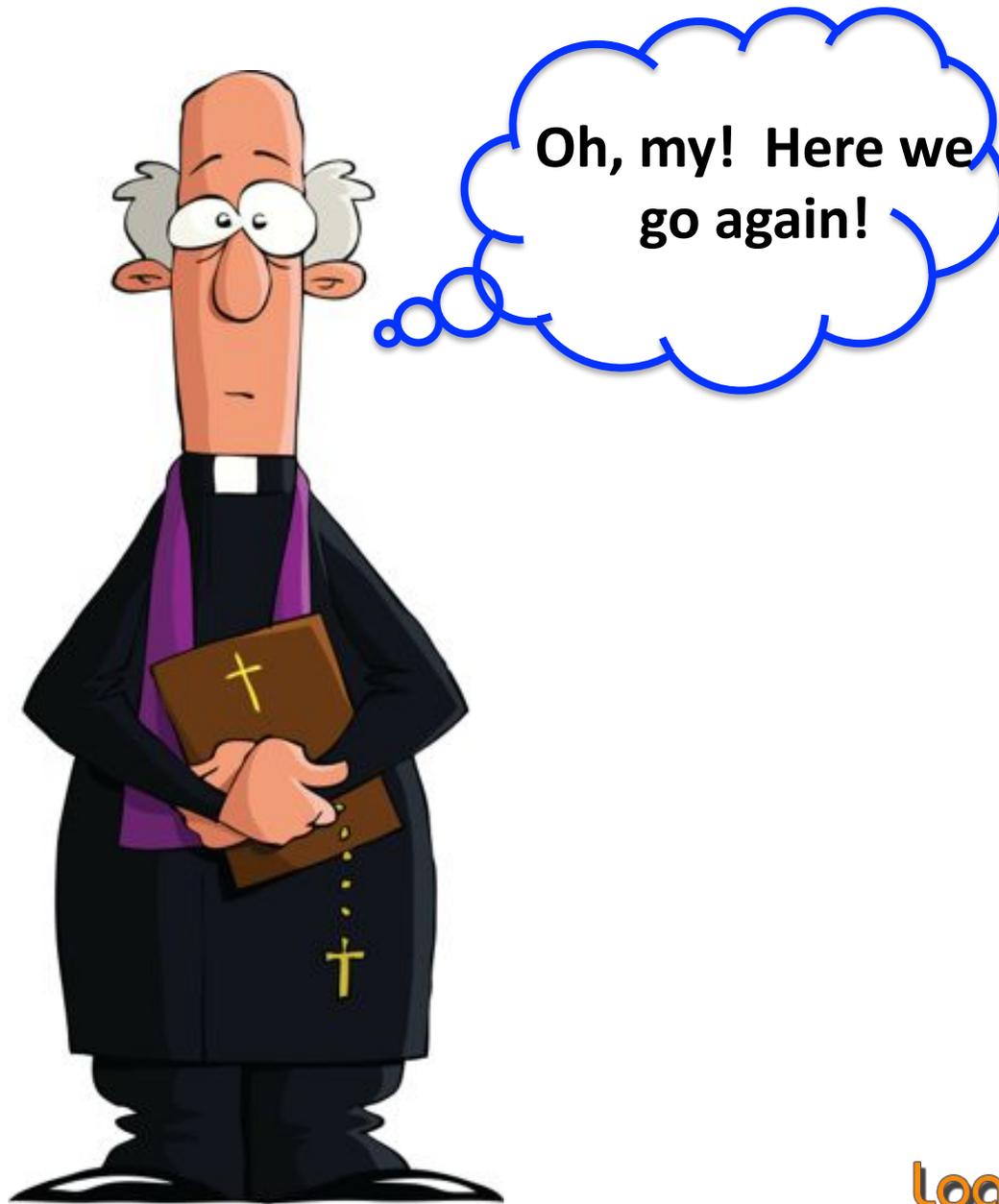
- Archaeologists are uncertain where this battle took place, but presumably somewhere between Mount Hor and Kadesh-barnea.
- This is the first time in Scripture that the Israelites put a conquered people “under the ban.”
 - The Hebrew word is *herem*, and it means the total destruction of an enemy and everything that belongs to him, including his women and children, every living creature. *Herem* occurs as a verb in the Hebrew Scriptures 51 times; as a noun 28 times.
 - *Herem* is quite frankly a war of extermination, or genocide.
 - The concept poses obvious moral and ethical issues. It’s a concept we’ll have to deal with as we move through Scripture, especially when God commands that it be done. We will explore it in detail in our study of Joshua.

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“From Mount Hor they set out by way of the Red Sea, to bypass the land of Edom, but the people’s patience was worn out by the journey; so the people complained against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!’”

(21: 4-5)

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“So the Lord sent among the people seraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of the Israelites died. Then the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned in complaining against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord to take the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said to Moses: Make a seraph and mount it on a pole, and everyone who has been bitten will look at it and recover. Accordingly Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever the serpent bit someone, the person looked at the bronze serpent and recovered.” (21: 1-3)



**Anthony Van Dyke. *The Brazen Serpent* (oil on canvas), c. 1619.
Prado Museum, Madrid.**



You might be asking yourself, “What could this strange episode in the wilderness possibly mean? How could gazing at a brass serpent on a pole cure a snake bite?”

Jesus addresses this very topic in his late-night conversation with Nichodemus in John 3: 13-15—

“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

We have spoken about biblical typology, and it is in full bloom here, as illustrated in a 15th-century *Biblia Pauperum* [a pictorial Bible for “paupers”] from the Netherlands:

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“Abraham signifies the heavenly Father who sacrificed his son (that is, Christ).”



“The serpent hung up and stared at by the people signifies Christ on the cross, whom every believing person who wishes to be rid of the serpent (that is, the devil) should gaze upon.”

Christ on the Cross



Sacrifice of Isaac →

← **Moses and the Serpent of Brass**



“Moses and the Brass Serpent,” *Biblia Pauperum*, (printed book, Ms Auct. M.III.13), 15th century. Bodleian Library, Oxford.



So, whatever happened to that “Serpent of Brass” that Moses crafted? Is it sitting in a museum somewhere?

Well, it turns up again at the time of king Hezekiah, the 13th king of Judah (715-686 B.C.), over half a millennium later:

“In the third year of Hoshea, son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah, became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Abi, daughter of Zechariah.

He did what was right in the Lord’s sight, just as David his father had done. It was he who removed the high places, shattered the pillars, cut down the [A]sherah [poles], and smashed the bronze serpent Moses had made, because up until that time the Israelites were burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)”

(2 Kings 18: 1-4)

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We should not confuse Moses' "Serpent of Brass" with the "Rod of Asclepius," the Greek god of healing and the medicinal arts. They are not directly related, although the serpent is an archetypical symbol of healing: 1) in shedding its skin, it represents new life; and 2) the serpent it is associated with the duality of life/death, sickness/healing.



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Since the king of Edom will not permit the Israelites to travel directly north up the King's Highway, Moses decides to take them across the King's Highway, and then north by the desert route, entering the "Promised Land" through the backdoor of Moab.

The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)



“The Israelites moved on and encamped in Oboth. Then they moved on from Oboth and encamped in Iye-abarim in the wilderness facing Moab on the east. Moving on from there, they encamped in the Wadi Zered. Moving on from there, they encamped on the other side of the Arnon, in the wilderness that extends from the territory of the Amorites; for the Arnon forms Moab’s boundary, between Moab and the Amorites. Hence it is said in the ‘Book of the Wars of the Lord’:

‘Waheb in Suphah and the wadies,
Arnon and the wadi gorges
That reach back toward the site of Ar
and lean against the border of Moab.’”

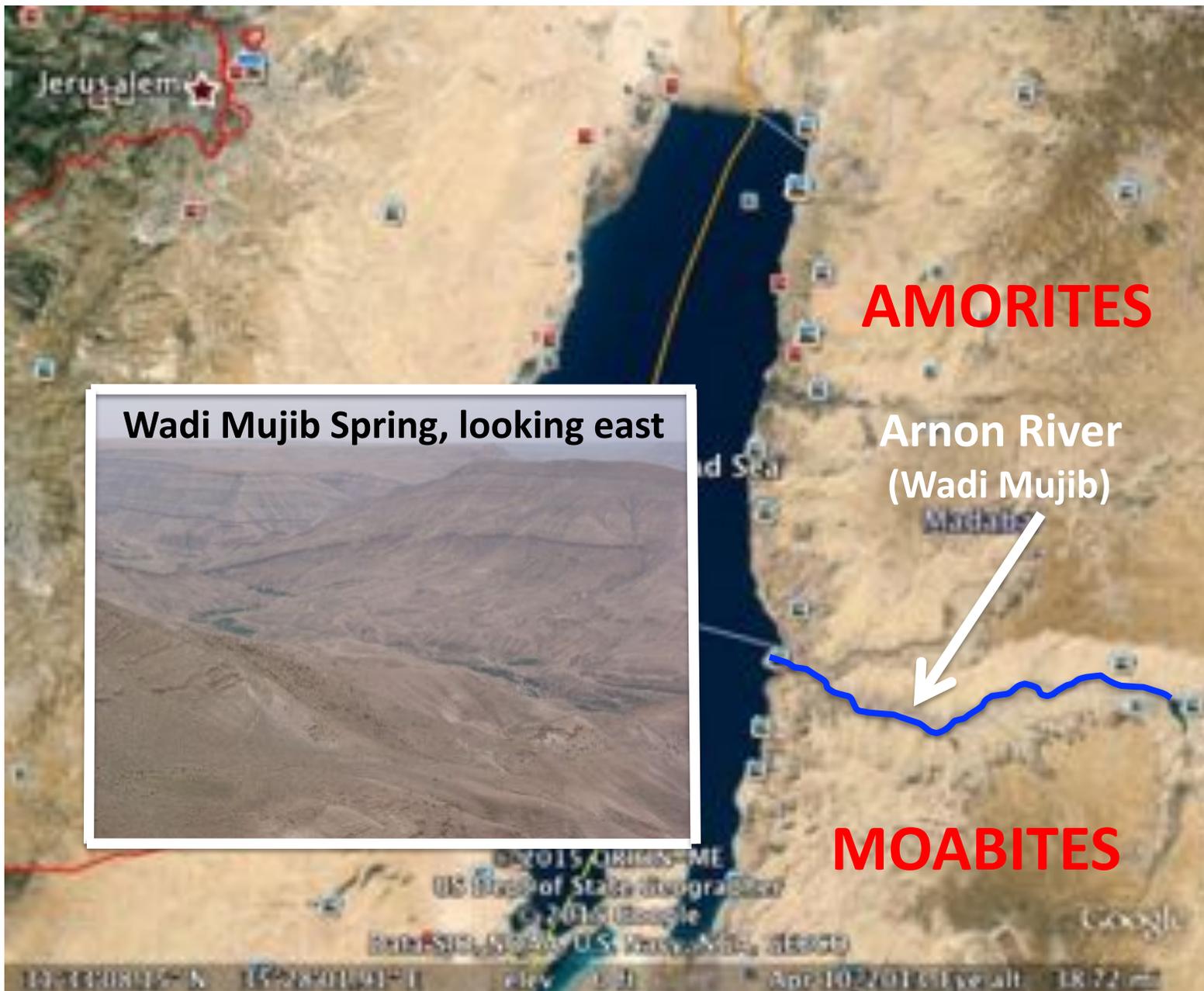
(21: 10-15)

“From there they went to Beer, which 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!—so sing to it—
The well that the princes sank,
that the nobles of the people dug,
With their scepters and their staffs—
from the wilderness, a gift.’

From Beer to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth, from Bamoth to the valley in the country of Moab at the headland of Pisgah that overlooks Jeshimon.”

(21: 16-20)



Wadi Mujib Spring, looking east

AMORITES

Arnon River
(Wadi Mujib)

MOABITES

“Now Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, with the message, ‘Let us pass through your land. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, nor will we drink any well water, but we will go straight along the King’s Highway until we have passed through your territory.’ Sihon, however, would not permit Israel to pass through his territory, but mustered all his forces and advanced against Israel into the wilderness. When he reached Jahaz, he engaged Israel in battle. But Israel put him to the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and as far as Jazer of the Ammonites, for Jazer is the boundary of the Ammonites. Israel seized all the towns here, and Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon and all its dependencies.”

(21: 21-25)

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The Deaths of Miriam and Aaron

“Then they turned and went up along the road to Bashan. But Og, king of Bashan, advanced against them with all his forces to give battle at Edrei. The Lord, however, said to Moses: ‘Do not fear him; for into your hand I deliver him with all his forces and his land. You will do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon. So they struck him down with his sons and all his forces, until not a survivor was left to him, and they took possession of his land.’”

(21: 31-35)

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The Deaths of Miriam and Aaron



To this point in our story the Israelites have conquered the east side of the Jordan River, exterminating the people of Sihon and Og and taking their land.

It is a great victory that becomes the stuff of poetry:

Psalm 135: 8-12

Praise, the name of the Lord!

Praise, you servants of the Lord!

Who stand in the house of the Lord,
in the courts of the house of our God! . . .

He struck down Egypt's firstborn,
of human being and beast alike.

And sent signs and wonders against you, Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.

It is he who struck down many nations,
and slew mighty kings—

Sihon, king of the Amorites,
and Og, king of Bashan . . .

And made their land a heritage,
a heritage for his people Israel.



And that's cause for celebration, I suppose, for the land east of the Jordan River is lush, a land "flowing with milk and honey." But it is not the "Promised Land."

The "Promised Land" is west of the Jordan River—the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites—and it will take another generation of brutal warfare to capture it . . . and many more generations to actually settle it.

But we'll take it one step at a time!



Have a look at Dr. Creasy's video, "The Brazen Serpent."



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Questions for discussion and thought

1. How do you think Moses felt upon the death of Miriam?
2. How do you think Moses felt upon the death of Aaron?
3. Do you think God forbidding Moses from entering the “Promised Land” because he struck the rock, rather than speaking to it, is too harsh of a punishment?
4. What does Moses’ punishment say about God?
5. The serpent of brass is a very strange episode. Why do you think it is in Scripture at this point in our story?

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