



## Numbers - Chapter Twenty One

### **IV Numbers 20:1-21:35 - Marching from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (continues/concludes)**

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty One

The Chapter commences with Israel being attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad, but the Lord heard the pledge from his people and gave them victory.

The people again complained against Moses and God, so the Lord sent in poisonous serpents to punish the people. They realised they had sinned and pleaded with Moses to intercede for them. He did so and the Lord instructed to Moses to construct a bronze serpent so that, whenever a person was bitten, they could look towards the bronze serpent and they would not die.

The people then continue their journey through the wilderness, with the Lord providing their needs, and finally they arrived in the land of the Moabites. Here, just as they had on their approach to Edom, Israel sent word to King Sihon of the Amorites asking if they could pass through his territory. He not only rejected their request but sent out his army to fight Israel. God gave victory to Israel and they settled in the land of the Amorites for a while. The same then happened with King Og of Bashan, with no Bashanite survivors. So Israel took the land of Bashan as well.

#### **VI.d Numbers 21:1-9 - The Bronze Serpent**

The spying mission was followed by the death of the spies and an unauthorised attempt to enter Canaan, which ended in Israel's defeat at Hormah (Numbers 14:36-45). However, the death of Aaron for his unbelief is followed by victory at Hormah. This marks the turning point: from now on, one victory after another will follow until they reach the Jordan, ready to enter the land of Canaan.

A new day may have dawned, but old habits are not eradicated. The people once again grumble about their food and are punished: this time by poisonous serpents. As an antidote, Moses makes a bronze serpent, which cures anyone who looks at it.

<sup>1</sup> When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

### Numbers 21:1

As the new generation of Israel begin their approach to the Promised Land, they encounter their first hostile army, led by king Arad the Canaanite, in the south. Notice that this battle was not an Israelite initiative; rather, Israel responded to an attack by the king of Arad. This point is made about other engagements in the Transjordan, i.e. the area east of the Jordan River: Israel responded to threats; it did not provoke the war.

Arad and Hormah were in the northern Negeb, but it is uncertain which archæological sites these places are to be identified with. It is surprising to find this account set in the Negeb, for when last located, Israel was skirting the eastern frontier of Edom (Numbers 20:21). Thus it is often suggested that the story of the victory at Hormah was placed here out of chronological sequence in order to highlight the change in Israel's fortunes after the death of Aaron. Some, however, argue that this episode does fit sequentially into the whole narrative.

He fought against Israel and took some of them captive. After having some men lost to Arad, Israel vowed to God that they will utterly destroy the cities of Arad. That is, they would devote the cities of Arad unto God by completely destroying them. God then granted them victory (v.3). It is a strange idea to the modern Christian way of thinking, but Israel at this time would show that property was completely given to God by destroying it, thus making it unusable to anyone else. It was an expensive and whole-hearted way to give things to the Lord. This was Israel's way of saying, "we're not fighting this battle for our own profit, but for the glory of God."

<sup>2</sup> Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, 'If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns.'

<sup>3</sup> The Lord listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah.

### Numbers 21:2-3

We will utterly destroy their towns or devote their cities to destruction. Canaanite cities that resist Israel are to be totally destroyed, according to: <<**But**

*as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God>>* (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

So the place was called Hormah. It was at Hormah that Israel was defeated in their ill-advised attempt to enter the Promised Land by force after rejecting it by faith. Now God has brought them back to the same place, and given them the victory. A real turning point for the nation! So Hormah was the place this policy was first implemented. Its name; destruction commemorates this.

<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> 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 detest this miserable food.’

#### Numbers 21:4-5

To go around the land of Edom. They had to go far out of their way because the Edomites refused them passage (Numbers 20:14-21). In fact, to go around the Edomites, they had to turn back towards the wilderness and away from Canaan. This was obviously discouraging. They had a reason to be discouraged but they had no excuse for their discouragement. They faced a real challenge and something that is no fun at all. Yet, they had no excuse for not trusting in God, and for not looking for his victory through it all.

The people spoke against God and against Moses. Sadly, the new generation sounded like the old: <<*They spoke against God, saying, ‘Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out and torrents overflowed, can he also give bread, or provide meat for his people?’>>* (Psalm 78:19-20). If they continued in the steps of their fathers, this new generation would be no better able to enter the Promised Land than the previous generation was. In fact, they perhaps acted worse than their fathers here. In eight previous passages (Exodus 15:24, 16:2 and 17:3, and Numbers 12:1, 14:2, 16:3, 16:41 and 20:2), the children of Israel are described as speaking against Moses. In those situations, Moses knew (Exodus 16:7-8) and the Lord knew (Numbers 14:27) they were really speaking against God, but the people were not brazen enough to do it directly. Now they are brazen enough, because it says the people spoke against God and against Moses! This was a major problem. They were on the threshold of the Promised Land, closer to it than the previous generation of

unbelief had been ever since the report of the twelve spies (Numbers 13:31-33), and now they were beginning to act with the same unbelief, or worse! Something drastic had to be done.

<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

#### Numbers 21:6

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people. Some translations have these as **fiery serpents**. How were the serpents fiery? Some think they were a red colour, like the colour of fire. Others believe their bite caused an intense burning sensation, so they were called **fiery serpents**. These came from God, to get the nation's attention at this critical place in their journey to the Promised Land. If they kept going in the direction they showed in the previous verses, they would never enter into the land. This would not be the only generation to be threatened by snakes: <<*See, I am letting snakes loose among you, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, says the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 8:17). Paul also warns the church in Corinth using this lesson from Israel's history: <<*We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents*>> (1 Corinthians 10:9).

So that many Israelites died. These victims were probably mostly those of the older generation of unbelief, and this was God's final way of fulfilling his promise that they would perish in the wilderness, and not enter the Promised Land. However, this new generation of critics were just as guilty and equally deserving whatever punishment God deemed appropriate.

<sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

#### Numbers 21:7-9

We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. If this new generation was capable of deeper sin, such as openly complaining against the Lord in v.5, they also have hearts softer and quicker to repent, they quickly humble themselves before the Lord and Moses. They ask Moses to pray for them; they know their answer lies only in the saving work of God. They are not trusting in luck or medical expertise, but only in God. God knows that his people ultimately return

to him when they realise there is no other choice: <<**When he killed them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly**>> (Psalm 78:34), and: <<**I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favour**>> (Hosea 5:15).

Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live. God commanded Moses to make a serpent and Moses makes it out of bronze. It is then set on a pole so that those who looked upon it could be saved, and they were. This was an unusual direction from God with a miracle resulting. There is no immediate logical connection between merely looking at a serpent on a pole and living; or refusing to look and dying. However, God commanded that such a ‘foolish’ thing be used to bring salvation to Israel.

So Moses made a serpent of bronze. The Hebrew term translated bronze can also mean copper. The area through which the Israelites were travelling had copper mines, and archæologists have found a 5 inch or 13 cm long copper serpent in a Midianite shrine at Timna, so it seems likely that copper is meant here. The redness of copper suggested atonement, so symbolically it was well chosen for this occasion; refer to 19:1-10 and the comments made there for more information. Jesus compares his own death on the Cross to the uplifted serpent: <<**And just 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**>> (John 3:14-15). By the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, circa 715 BC, this copper serpent had become an object of worship among the Israelites and had to be destroyed: <<**He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan**>> (2 Kings 18:4).

Whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. God command Moses to make an image of a serpent, even though such images were seemingly forbidden in Exodus 20:4. Actually, Exodus 20:4 forbids the making of idols, and this was no idol, it was a symbol, sanctioned by God, that they could look to in faith and be saved. It was certainly not in the same category as King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue: <<**Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**>> (Daniel 3:7).

#### VI.e Numbers 21:10-20 - The Journey to Moab

Israel’s passage east of the Dead Sea, around the territory of Moab and through the land of the Amorites, is summarised here. Many of the places cannot be precisely located, but the general route is clear. The territory of Moab extended from the

Zered River to the Arnon River on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. The Zered flows into the Dead Sea at its southern end, and the Arnon enters it about halfway up the eastern side.

<sup>10</sup> The Israelites set out, and camped in Oboth. <sup>11</sup> They set out from Oboth, and camped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness bordering Moab towards the sunrise. <sup>12</sup> From there they set out, and camped in the Wadi Zered. <sup>13</sup> From there they set out, and camped on the other side of the Arnon, in the wilderness that extends from the boundary of the Amorites; for the Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites. <sup>14</sup> Wherefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord,

‘Waheb in Suphah and the wadis.  
The Arnon <sup>15</sup> and the slopes of the wadis  
that extend to the seat of Ar,  
and lie along the border of Moab.’

<sup>16</sup> From there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather the people together, and I will give them water.’ <sup>17</sup> Then Israel sang this song:

‘Spring up, O well! – Sing to it! –  
<sup>18</sup> the well that the leaders sank,  
that the nobles of the people dug,  
with the sceptre, with the staff.’

From the wilderness to Mattanah, <sup>19</sup> from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth, <sup>20</sup> and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that overlooks the waste-land.

### Numbers 21:10-20

The Israelites set out, and camped in Oboth. Besides the names of the places Israel passes through on their way towards the Promised Land, brief passages of poetry are also recorded, giving the sense of elation they must have felt.

The Book of the Wars of the Lord was perhaps a collection of ancient songs like the Book of Jashar: *<<And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a*

*whole day*>> (Joshua 10:13), and: <<*He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar*>> (2 Samuel 1:18). Because of the difficulty in understanding these verses, some have suggested that the text may have suffered from a copyist's error. Minor changes to the Hebrew text have been proposed, but none of the suggestions can be verified with any degree of certainty.

Some have used mentions of books like this in the Bible as an argument that the Bible is an incomplete book, and must be supplemented by something like the Book of Mormon. However, the mere mention of a book by the Bible does not mean that the book belongs in our Bibles. There is much ancient literature lost to history that would be interesting and even beneficial to read; but anything in such books inspired and important is recorded in passages like Numbers 21:14-15. In fact, Paul quoted from a pagan poet in Acts 17:28. It certainly does not mean that everything that pagan poet wrote was inspired by God, or that the various Bible translations are incomplete without the full text of what that pagan poet wrote. There are at least three letters that Paul wrote, two to Corinth and one to Laodicea, that have been lost to history. If God had intended them to be available today they would have been preserved for the early church fathers to include them in Scripture.

These verses summarise Israel's journey through the territory of the Amorites, who lived north of the Arnon on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, as is explained more fully in vv.21-30. Verses 16-18 celebrate the finding of an abundant well, a precious resource to these wilderness travellers.

#### VI.f Numbers 21:21-32 - King Sihon Defeated

The Amorites occupied the Transjordan from the Arnon to the Jabbok (v.24), so Israel had to pass through their territory, along the King's Highway (v.22), to reach the northern end of the Dead Sea where they could cross the Jordan. However, Sihon, king of the Amorites, came and fought Israel and was defeated (v.24). As a result, this was the first land that the Israelites settled (v.25).

<sup>21</sup> Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, saying,  
<sup>22</sup> 'Let me pass through your land; we will not turn aside into field or vineyard; we will not drink the water of any well; we will go by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory.'  
<sup>23</sup> But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel to the wilderness; he came to Jahaz, and fought against Israel.

## Numbers 21:21-23

King Sihon of the Amorites. The Amorites had always been a sinful people and God planned to punish them. Yet he had said to Abraham that Israel would spend many years in exile until the time for that punishment was right: **<<And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete>>** (Genesis 15:16).

But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. As was the case with the Edomites, the Amorites would not let Israel pass through their land, even though the Israelites promised it would be of no expense or trouble to the Amorites. The Amorites, of course, had no reason to allow Israel to pass other than good neighbourliness.

Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel. While Edom passively refused, the Amorites actively attacked Israel and king Sihon led the battle. This incident is even more interesting when Deuteronomy 2:30 is considered: **<<But King Sihon of Heshbon was not willing to let us pass through, for the Lord your God had hardened his spirit and made his heart defiant in order to hand him over to you, as he has now done>>**. God hardened the heart of Sihon, so he would provoke the battle, so he would lose, so Israel could gain his land. It was not unrighteous of God to harden the heart of Sihon because Sihon was not originally favourable towards Israel, and God did not give him a hardened heart when he really wanted otherwise. That was not how it happened; in hardening Sihon, the Lord gave him over to the evil his heart desired.

<sup>24</sup> Israel put him to the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites; for the boundary of the Ammonites was strong. <sup>25</sup> Israel took all these towns, and Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. <sup>26</sup> For Heshbon was the city of King Sihon of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and captured all his land as far as the Arnon. <sup>27</sup> Therefore the ballad-singers say,

‘Come to Heshbon, let it be built;  
let the city of Sihon be established.

<sup>28</sup> For fire came out from Heshbon,  
flame from the city of Sihon.  
It devoured Ar of Moab,  
and swallowed up the heights of the Arnon.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> So their posterity perished

from Heshbon to Dibon,

and we laid waste until fire spread to Medeba.’

<sup>31</sup> Thus Israel settled in the land of the Amorites. <sup>32</sup> Moses sent to spy out Jazer; and they captured its villages, and dispossessed the Amorites who were there.

### Numbers 21:24-32

Israel put him to the sword, and took possession of his land. Today, there is a better understanding of God’s favour and mercy to Israel. Before they face the hardened warriors of Canaan, God gave them smaller foes and smaller battles to fight. It can be seen just how foolish the unbelief of the previous generation was.

From the Arnon to the Jabbok. These are two water courses that often defined the borders between the various territories and are frequently mentioned in Scripture, for example: <<*Like fluttering birds, like scattered nestlings, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon*>> (Isaiah 16:2), and in the record of Jacob’s return to Canaan: <<*The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok*>> (Genesis 32:22).

Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites. The land of the Amorites later becomes the possession of Israel; the tribes of Gad and Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh later receive this land: <<*Moses gave to them – to the Gadites and to the Reubenites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph – the kingdom of King Sihon of the Amorites and the kingdom of King Og of Bashan, the land and its towns, with the territories of the surrounding towns*>> (Numbers 32:33).

This old poem celebrates the capture of Moabite territory by Sihon. It is included in Numbers to show that the Israelites could justifiably displace the Amorites from their land, for the Amorites had acquired it from the Moabites by force. It also helps to explain the king of Moab’s anxiety about Israel that drove him to hire Balaam to curse Israel; refer to Numbers Chapters 22-24.

For fire came out from Heshbon, Woe to you, O Moab! The passages of poetry are meant to show what a mighty people the Amorites were, and in contrast, how glorious Israel's victory over them was. Moab had been defeated by Sihon, and Sihon had been defeated by Israel, so what hope has Moab?

Heshbon is modern Hesban; the absence of archæological remains at Hesban from the conquest era suggests that the name may have been moved to that location from another site.

Chemosh was the god of Moab: <<*Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the Lord our God has conquered for our benefit?*>> (Judges 11:24).

#### VI.g Numbers 21:33-35 - King Og Defeated

This is reported more fully in Deuteronomy 3:1-11. This large area in northern Transjordan was later settled by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. These victories scare the Moabites and reassure the Israelites that they will indeed be able to conquer Canaan.

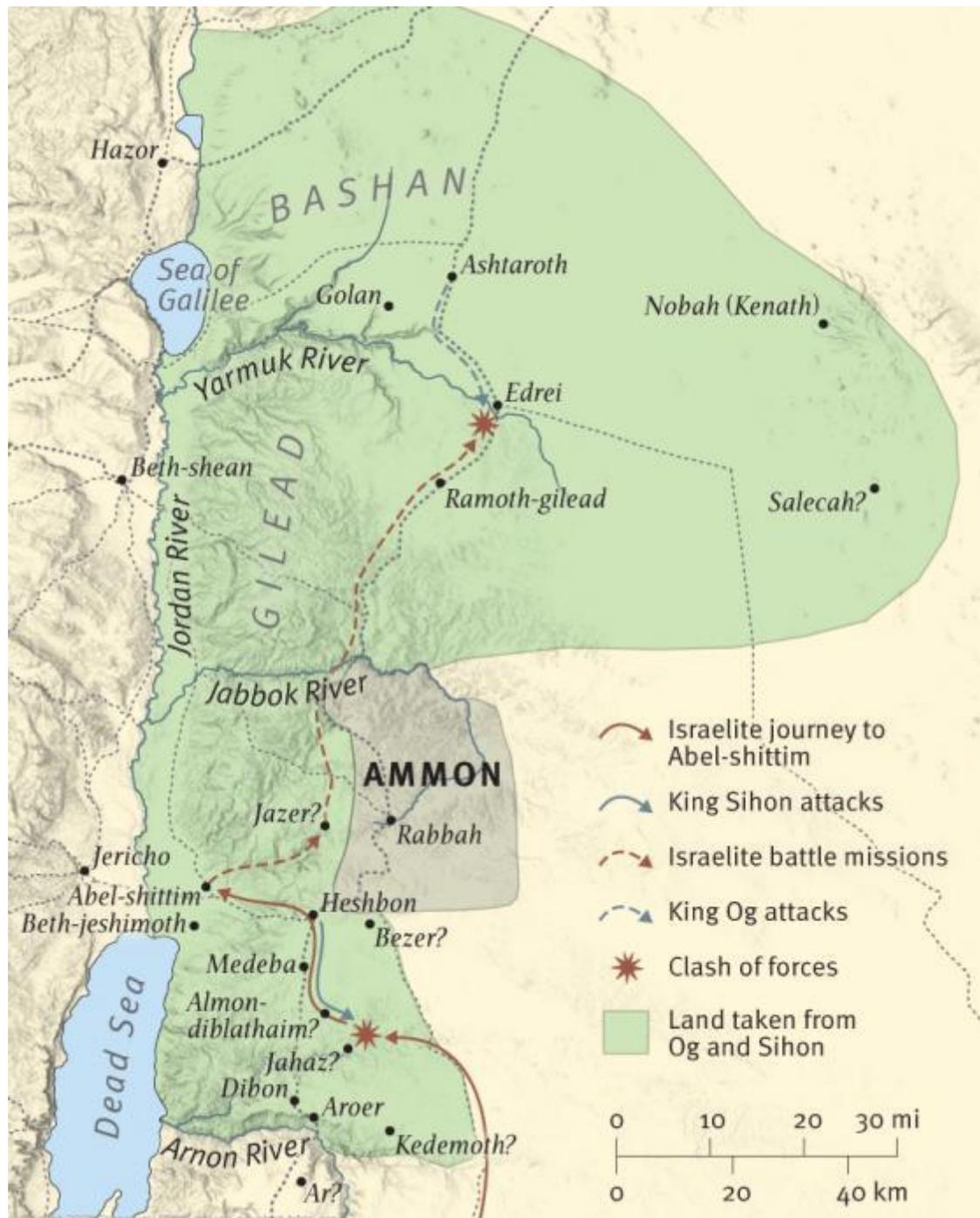
<sup>33</sup> Then they turned and went up the road to Bashan; and King Og of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. <sup>34</sup> But the Lord said to Moses, 'Do not be afraid of him; for I have given him into your hand, with all his people, and all his land. You shall do to him as you did to King Sihon of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon.' <sup>35</sup> So they killed him, his sons, and all his people, until there was no survivor left; and they took possession of his land.

#### Numbers 21:33-35

King Og of Bashan came out against them. This was another battle that Israel did not provoke. Yet, Israel was more than up to the challenge, and sees God win another glorious victory, as he had against Amalek nearly forty years previously: <<*And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.'* And Moses built an altar and called it, *The Lord is my banner*>> (Exodus 17:13-15).

They took possession of his land. This land also becomes part of Israel, and a portion of the inheritance of the Transjordan tribes. The new generation of the children of Israel are making wonderful progress to the Promised Land, and experiencing victory after victory. Yet their challenges are not over, as the subsequent chapters will show.

## Israel Defeats Og and Sihon



As with Edom and Moab, the Israelites asked permission to pass through the territory of King Sihon, but he refused. When Sihon attacked the Israelites at Jahaz, the Israelites defeated him and captured his land. Later, Moses dispatched troops to capture Jazer, and then they turned north and were met by King Og's forces. They defeated Og's forces and took control of his land as well.