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The Defeat of Sihon of Heshbon

21: 21-32

The defeat of Sihon of Heshbon DIG: How do you see God's plan unfolding in Sihon's attack on Isra'el? How do the events here compare to those in Numbers 20:14-21? How do you account for such different outcomes this time around?

REFLECT: When confronted by opponents, are you more likely to "fight" or "flee?" Why? What does that say about you? Is it always right to fight? To retreat? How can Isra'el's encounter with Edom and Sihon help you to sort out a proper response?

Woe to you, Mo'ab! You are destroyed, people of Chemosh, the God of the Moabites!

Suddenly the tempo of the march has picked up, **Isra'el** is on the march, poetry is recited, songs are sung, and progress is being made. There is a sense of something building, some heightened expectations, some glorious good news around the corner. That will come with the great oracles of blessing and promise spoken by the pagan prophet **Balaam (Numbers Chapters 22-23)**.⁴³⁴ Probably still drawing from **the Book of the Wars of the LORD (to see link click [Dj](#) - The Book of the Wars of the LORD)**, the Torah goes on to recount two battles with **the Amorites**. The first was **Sihon of Heshbon** who ruled part of **the** former **territory** of **Mo'ab** and all of **Ammon**. The second was the infamous **Og, king of Bashan** who held **the territory** of **Bashan** and **Gilead** (see [Dl](#) - **The Defeat of Og of Basham**).



The request (21:21-23): The Amorites, unlike the Edomites, were not related to the Israelites. But as in the case of their approach to Edom (see [De - The Resistance of Edom](#)), Isra'el first requested a rite of passage. Moving northward along the eastern (wilderness) edge of Mo'ab, Moses sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, with this message: "Let me pass through your land. We won't turn aside into fields or vineyards, and we won't drink any water from the wells. We will go along the King's Highway until we have left your territory." The language of the request was very similar to what he had said to the king of Edom. And the response of Sihon, king of the Amorites, was the same as Edom's . . . a show of force to block the path of the Israelites.⁴³⁵ But God hardened his heart and Sihon would not allow Isra'el to pass through his territory. Instead, Sihon mustered all his people and went out into the wilderness to fight Isra'el. On reaching Jahaz, south of Pisgah, he fought Isra'el.

The victory (21:24-25): When Sihon tried to meet Isra'el with a show of force, he suffered an overwhelming defeat. Isra'el defeated him by force of arms and took control of his land to the wadi and the stream of Arnon, but only as far as the people of 'Amon, because the territory of the people of 'Amon was well defended and they were not conquered.⁴³⁶ Thus, the Amorites were conquered, but the Ammonites were not conquered because they, like the Moabites, were relatives of Isra'el (see the commentary on [Genesis Fb - Let's Get Our Father to Drink Wine, and then Lie with](#)

Him to Preserve Our Family Line). Isra'el took all these cities - Isra'el lived in all the cities of the Amorites, the main city occupied was Heshbon, and all its smaller surrounding suburbs.

The victory song (21:26-30): This poem is similar to the short quotation from **The Book of the Wars of the LORD** in **Numbers 21:14-15**. Both are verse units cited from outside the story of the Torah. Both poems make several geographical references; both specifically mention **Mo'ab**, **'Ar** and **Arnon**. For these reasons and because of their close proximity, it seems likely that both are from the same source.⁴³⁷

Sihon had previously defeated **Mo'ab**. **The king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Mo'ab and conquered all his land above the wadi and stream of Arnon**. Therefore, **Balak, the king of the Moabites**, was a vassal under **Sihon, king of the Amorites**. Yet, **the Moabites** became a real problem for **Isra'el** (see **Dm - The Story of Balaam**). After defeating **Sihon** in battle, **his kingdom** was **Isra'el's** by right of conquest. However, because **the Moabites**, like **the Edomites**, were relatives of **Isra'el**, **ADONAI** would not allow **Isra'el** to continue to take **his territory** below **the Aaron** (see **Deuteronomy Ar - Events in Mo'av**). Still, it was this victory that terrified **the Moabites**. **Their** deductive reasoning was clear: **Sihon** had defeated **Mo'ab**; **Isra'el** had defeated **Sihon**; **Mo'ab** was next, and **their** defeat seemed imminent. Thus, **Balak, king of Mo'ab**, wished to transfer the battle arena from the field of **men** to the realm of **the gods**.⁴³⁸ **This is why the storytellers say:** This was originally an **Amorite** victory song over **Mo'ab**. But now it was a victory song sung by **the Israelites** for **their** victory over **the Ammorites**. The poem is carefully crafted in chiasitic form.

A. Come to the city of Heshbon. Let it be rebuilt! Let Sichon's city be restored! The poem begins with a summons to **rebuild Heshbon**, the **city of Sihon** and **the Amorites**, but the main body of the poem is a taunt song against **the hapless Moabites**. It describes how **Mo'ab** was subjugated by **the Amorites**.

B. The armies of **Sihon** are metaphorically referred to as **fire** that went **out** from **Heshbon** to consume many **cities of Mo'ab** down **to the wadi and stream of Arnon** to the south. **For fire burst out of Heshbon** and **conquered Mo'ab**, like **a flame** the city of **Sihon**.

C. It consumed **'Ar**, another key city of **Mo'ab**, the **lords of Arnon's high places** (possibly the city of Bamoth, which means *high places*). **Arnon** was the original northern border of **Mo'ab**. **The Moabites** had conquered north of **Arnon**, but then **they** had been driven back to **their** original border by **Sihon**;

and now that **territory** had been taken by **Isra'el**.

D. Woe to you, Mo'ab! You are destroyed, people of Chemosh, the national God of the Moabites (First Kings 11:7 and 33, Second Kings 23:13; and Jeremiah 48:46)! The **god Chemosh**, was also honored by **the Ammonites (Judges 11:24)**. The "Taunt Song of Heshbon," was originally an **Amorite** song celebrating their earlier victory over **Mo'ab**; thus the phrase: **why the storytellers say**. Since this was a song originally used against **the Moabites**, whom **the Amorites** had recently conquered, its reuse here by **Isra'el** against **Mo'ab** must have been particularly galling to **the Moabites**. Indeed, it must have served as the final "nail in the coffin," and the reason why **King Balak** of **Mo'ab** was so desperately afraid of **Isra'el** that **he** sought out a professional cursing service in the form of **Balaam** (see [Do - Balaam's Dilemma](#)). In any ancient taunt song such as this, more was at stake than the reputation of the armies or the kings who participated in the battle. Ultimately, the outcome of a war in the ancient Near East was evaluated in terms of victories or defeats of the country's respective gods.⁴³⁹ Therefore, the implication of **Isra'el's** impending victory over **Mo'ab** was that **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** was superior to **Chemosh**.

C. Chemosh let his sons be fugitives and his daughters' captives. Sadly, the worship of **Chemosh** of **Mo'ab** was brought into the borders of **Jerusalem** in the tenth century BC, where the once-wise **Solomon** built a temple to **Chemosh** on the hill opposite that upon which **the Temple of YHVH** was built earlier in **his** reign (see [the Life of Solomon Bx - Solomon's Wives](#)). The seeds of idolatry were planted in **the City of David** where **ADONAI** was to have been worshiped exclusively.⁴⁴⁰

B. Isra'el isn't mentioned until now. For that reason, it seems that the song was originally an **Amorite** taunt against **the Moabites**, which **Isra'el** simply reused for **their** own purposes with a few small modifications. Though you, feeble **Moabites**, and your **god** too, could not resist **Sihon**, we **Israelites**, by the help of our **God**, have victoriously **shot them down to the Arnon**.

A. Heshbon is destroyed, all the way to Dibon-gad (32:34 and 33:45). The poem evidently concludes by listing the **cities** captured by **Isra'el**. **We even laid waste to Nofach, which extends as far as Meidva.** If the **Moabites** thought that **Sihon** was bad,

they hadn't seen anything yet. There lies the taunt: "If you thought **Sihon** was tough, look out, **Moabites**, because we just wiped **them** out." The poem reveals in **Isra'el's** complete and total victory over **Sihon**. **They** had taken all of **his territory**, the whole **Meidva** plateau. The victory over **Sihon** was the first conquest of **the Promised Land**.

The prophet Jeremiah some 700 years later again adopted this very same taunt song as a prophecy of judgment against **Mo'ab** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah D1 - The Punishment and Restoration of Mo'ab](#)). Over the years, **Mo'ab** gained more strength and proved to be a menace to **Isra'el** (see [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)). **But afterwards**, **ADONAI** says: **I will bring back the exiles of Amon (Jeremiah 49:6)**. Interestingly enough, however, **Jeremiah**, in one Hebrew phrase, also predicts the ultimate restoration of the **Moabite** nation in the last days by **the Lord Himself**, as **He** turns **them** toward **Himself** (see the commentary on [Revelation Fk - Gentiles in the Messianic Kingdom: Mo'ab](#)).⁴⁴¹

The result (21:31-32): Thus, Isra'el lived in the land of the Amorites. Moshe sent men to spy out Ja'zer; they captured its suburb towns and drove out the Amorites who were there. This conquest secured **Isra'el** from any further attacks from the south or from the east. These concluding verses are a dramatic mark of accomplishment. After forty years of **wilderness** wanderings in the Desert of Sinai, now, at last, **the children of Isra'el** had entered **the land of the Amorites . . . the land** that would become **theirs**.⁴⁴² Finally, **the sin of the Amorites** had been judged (see the commentary on [Genesis Eg - I am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land](#)).

Sihon went with **his** forces against **Isra'el**, out of **his** own borders, without provocation, and, as a result, ran upon **his** own ruin. The enemies of **God's** Church often perish because they think they are wise in their own eyes. Wicked men do their utmost to protect themselves and their possessions against the judgments of **God**; but all in vain, when the day comes on which **they** must fall. **ADONAI** gave **Isra'el** success, while **Moses** was with them, that **he** might see the beginning of the glorious work, though **he** would not live to see it finished. We must prepare ourselves for fresh conflicts and enemies. We must make no peace or truce with the powers of darkness, nor even entertain them; nor should we expect any pause in our spiritual battle (see the commentary on [Ephesians Bv - Walk by the Ruach, and Not the Desires of the Flesh](#)). But, trusting in **the Lord**, and obeying **His** commands, **we shall be more than conquerors**, either in this world or the next, **through Yeshua Messiah (Romans 8:39)**.⁴⁴³