



## Numbers - Chapter Twenty Five

### **V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab (continues)**

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty Five

Balaam had delivered his final oracles at Peor. Now, at the foot of the mountain where Balaam had been prophesying, the Israelites start having sexual relationships with the women of Moab and sacrificing to their gods. The juxtaposition could not be starker between the most exuberant visions of Israel's future and their present blatant infidelity to the law and the covenant.

However, this sort of inconsistency was not new. The same thing had happened at Sinai. While Moses was being given instructions on building the tabernacle, the people were making and worshiping the golden calf. And at Kadesh the wonderful prospect of entry to the land was dashed by national unbelief. These earlier episodes are alluded to here, and various details in this apostasy parallel earlier ones, e.g. the plagues, and the consecration of the Levites and priest. What is missing here is the threat to destroy the whole nation or delay the entry to Canaan. God's plan is going to be implemented despite Israel's unfaithfulness. As Deuteronomy 9:5 puts it: *<<It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of those nations that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfil the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob>>*.

#### **V.b Numbers 25:1-18 - Worship of Baal of Peor**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. <sup>2</sup> These invited the people to the

sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. <sup>3</sup> Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel.

### Numbers 25:1-3

Shittim was the final encampment before the Israelites crossed the Jordan: <<*Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there*>> (Joshua 2:1). This is possibly Tell el-Hammam, about 10 miles or 16 km east of Jericho. At this site there are impressive remains from the time of David, including massive outer walls, fortress towers, and a large, sloping embankment.

The people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. The women of Moab, coming among the men of Israel, seduced them to both sexual sin and idolatry, for they bowed down to their gods. The two were commonly connected in perverse forms of idol worship in the ancient world. Sexual relations, sacrifices of their gods and ate echo the terms used in: <<*You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice. And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods*>> (Exodus 34:15-16). The people were breaking the first commandment given after the golden calf apostasy.

In this chapter, the women and their people are sometimes described as Midianites and sometimes as Moabites. This is because the Midianites were a nomadic group, and at this time, were found in large numbers among the Moabites. This insight into the lifestyle of the Moabites provides an interesting perspective on the faithful character of Ruth, from whom would come King David and ultimately Jesus, the Messiah: <<*But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth*>> (Ruth 1:3-4a), and: <<*and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David*>> (Matthew 1:5-6a).

Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor. Baal was the main Canaanite fertility god, whom the people of Israel were constantly tempted to worship.

The Lord's anger was kindled against Israel. Balak could never pay enough money to Balaam to make God curse Israel. In the previous chapter, Balaam tried to curse Israel and could not; but now, they are cursed because of their sin against the

Lord. It is revealed later in the chapter that the anger of the Lord showed itself in a plague that began to strike down thousands among Israel, and seemed as if it would continue until the whole nation was consumed.

What no enemy could ever accomplish against Israel, Israel did to itself through disobedience, as it would continue to do: *<<But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways>> (Judges 2:19), <<Then they will say, “Because they have forsaken the Lord their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, worshipping them and serving them; therefore the Lord has brought this disaster upon them”>> (1 Kings 9:9), <<And I will utter my judgements against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands>> (Jeremiah 1:16).* The same principle works among the people of God today. The mightiest attack of Satan against them can never do as much damage as their own sin and rebellion against the Lord.

Balaam had done his best to curse Israel, but was unsuccessful. Yet, his love for money would not let the matter end without pleasing the man who hired him, the king of Moab. The apostle speaks of Balaam and his love of money, using him as an example of later false prophets: *<<They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness>> (2 Peter 2:15-16).*

Revelation 2:14 makes the connection between Balaam’s unsuccessful attempt to curse Israel and this subsequent idolatry: *<<But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication>>.* Essentially, after his failure to curse Israel, Balaam said to Balak: “I cannot curse these people. But you can get them to curse themselves through enticing them to rebel against their God. Send your prettiest girls among them, and tell them to entice the men of Israel to immorality and idolatry.” And it worked. Balaam, through his wicked counsel to Balak, got what he wanted, but he also ended up dead among the enemies of God: *<<They did battle against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian, in addition to others who were slain by them; and they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword>> (Numbers 31:7-8).* He only enjoyed his money and honour for a short time.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord said to Moses, ‘Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.’ <sup>5</sup> And Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.’

#### Numbers 25:4-5

Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord. God thought it important that the offenders be judged openly; this was not sin to be kept hidden. Open sin had to be dealt with openly. The leaders were to pay the price for their failure to ensure the people conducted themselves correctly.

Impale them in the sun. This most likely refers to the ancient Near Eastern practice of impaling dead bodies on a stick after execution for heinous crimes, as a form of disgrace rather than burying the bodies, and as a public warning to all who would be tempted to engage in such perversion themselves. This is the same concept as the Romans would later use with crucifixion.

The fierce anger of the Lord. Drastic action, i.e. execution, was the only possible way to obliterate the perversion of Baal worship (v.2) and the accompanying prostitution with the daughters of Moab (v.1), and so to assuage the Lord’s fierce but righteous anger.

Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. When sin such as this is tolerated or even approved in a culture, it is a sure sign of decay, and Moses would not accept that decay. He commanded the community to bring the offenders to be judged, to show they would not accept this kind of sin in their midst: <<*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil*>> (Isaiah 1:16).

<sup>6</sup> Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. <sup>7</sup> When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, <sup>8</sup> he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. <sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

### Numbers 25:6-9

Publicly flouting this ban on liaisons with foreign women, a chief's son (v.14) takes a Midianite princess (v.15) into a tent near the tabernacle. Moabites and Midianites had collaborated in hiring Balaam, and evidently in the seduction of Israel also.

Phinehas, the high priest's son, goes after the chief's son and the princess and executes them on the spot, perhaps in the very act of intercourse. This punishment without waiting for a trial corresponds to the Levites' slaughter of the golden calf worshipers in Exodus 32:25-28. In the case of the Levites, this led to their being set apart as the priestly tribe in Exodus 32:29. For his part, Phinehas was rewarded with heading a permanent priestly dynasty (vv.10-13). Phinehas' grandfather Aaron had similarly halted a plague by offering incense (Numbers 16:46-50).

So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Phinehas was probably not the only one to make such a stand for righteousness. However, his was the singular act that stopped the plague. Although the plague was stopped by Phinehas' intervention (its start is hinted at in v.3), still a huge number of Israelites died as a result of the plague. This parallels the plagues at Sinai and Kadesh (Exodus 32:35, and Numbers 14:37 and 16:49).

Nevertheless, those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. This many died in the plague, although Paul puts it at slightly less, showing the number was rounded either up or down: <<***We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day***>> (1 Corinthians 10:8). This must have delighted Balak, king of Moab. He knew that Balaam succeeded in cursing Israel or, rather, in getting them to curse themselves. He would not have to defeat them in battle as they were capable of self-destruction by turning away from God's decrees.

<sup>10</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>11</sup> 'Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. <sup>12</sup> Therefore say, "I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. <sup>13</sup> It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.'"

### Numbers 25:10-13

Phinehas has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. It was not only Phinehas' obedience God noticed. He was also noticed because he was zealous with God's zeal among them. Phinehas was passionate about the

things God was passionate about, and in this respect, he was a man after God's own heart: <<*I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding*>> (Jeremiah 3:15).

It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood. God blessed Phinehas with the promise that he would be the descendant of Aaron through which the priesthood passed. This was fitting, because it was the zeal of Phinehas that made atonement for the Israelites, just as a priest should be the one ministering atonement.

<sup>14</sup> The name of the slain Israelite man, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. <sup>15</sup> The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian.

#### Numbers 25:14-15

Zimri head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. This was no ordinary Israelite but one of its leaders. God will always hold those in leadership to higher account for their actions: <<*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*>> (James 3:1).

<sup>16</sup> The Lord said to Moses, <sup>17</sup> 'Harass the Midianites, and defeat them; <sup>18</sup> for they have harassed you by the trickery with which they deceived you in the affair of Peor, and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister; she was killed on the day of the plague that resulted from Peor.'

#### Numbers 25:16-18

Harass the Midianites, and defeat them. They were to show no tolerance towards that which brought the sin in their midst and turned their hearts away from God. They were to battle against the Midianites every opportunity they had. The ongoing struggle with Midian is reported in Numbers Chapter 31 and Judges Chapters 6-8.