

Moses: earth's meekest man

34. The reckoning

John Mitchell

Forbidden by Yahweh to curse Israel, Balaam devises an alternative strategy. He advises Balak to entice Israel into sensuous idolatry. This approach was succeeding until Divine judgement ensued and Phinehas dramatically upheld God's honour. The account is finally settled when Balaam perishes in the defeat of Midian.

HOW LONG the children of Israel stayed in their huge tented camp opposite the city of Jericho after Balaam's prophesyings we are not told. Because of what transpired it could not have been a short stay, for during it there took place a rapprochement between Balak king of the Moabites and Balaam after the former's disappointment over the latter's inability to curse Israel. In fact they realised that at heart they were two of a kind, as their association together had already shown: Balak, a worshipper of Baal in concert with his Midianite neighbours; and Balaam, happy to join in the sacrifices to the same god on the hills surrounding the Israelite camp. Disappointed and still greedy of gain, Balaam switched his allegiance from Yahweh to Baal, and taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols, and by committing acts of sexual immorality practised by the Midianites at their licentious feasts (Num. 25:1,2).¹ The pair had realised that they could not destroy Israel from without, but might easily do so from within. It was a devilish scheme aimed at natural Israel's weakest point, and, sadly, it began to succeed.

Temptation to sin

Not since the worship of the golden calf forty years before, at the beginning of their pilgrimage, had the children of Israel sunk so low, despite Moses' guardianship over them. It was a declension all the more tragic because it took place on the very threshold of the Promised Land they and their fathers had longed for. But there had to be a reckoning if Israel were to enter the land free of both taint and infection.

In a very short time, as a result of Balaam's malign influences, the men of Israel, there being no border between them and the Moabites, had begun to commit whoredom with their women, who in turn invited them to the sacrifices of their gods.

The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baals of Peor—and the Lord's anger burned against them.

He said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD'S fierce anger may turn away from Israel". This command Moses passed on to the judges of Israel, saying, "Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor".²

Even as they set about their grim work, however, an act of gross infidelity and indecency was taking place in the camp by one of its notables. His name was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family, who, even while the whole assembly of Israel were weeping penitently at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, blatantly and before all, brought into his own tent a Midianite woman, daughter of one of their tribal chiefs. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand, followed the man into his tent and despatched them both with one thrust. Nevertheless, a plague from the Lord in retribution for the nation's sins had already broken out and had claimed 24,000 men, and—had it not been for Phinehas' prompt action—would have claimed

-
1. The narrative in this article closely follows the NIV of Numbers 25 and 31.
 2. Death by hanging was not practised in Israel. The guilty were first killed, then displayed. See footnote to Deuteronomy 21:23 in *Speaker's Commentary*, Vol. 1, Part 2, p. 878.

many more. For it, Phinehas received a special commendation and reward.

The Lord said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned My anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for My honour among them, so that in My zeal I did not put an end to them. Therefore tell him I am making My covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for the Israelites".

But there appears to have been far more behind the unsavoury incident of Zimri and his Midianite paramour named Cozbi than meets the eye. The timing of the incident, coincident with a solemn act of repentance on the part of Israel, showed that it was a deliberate attempt to demean the God of Israel and encourage the licentious worship of Baal. Surely it was for this reason that Yahweh said to Moses, "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them, because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor and their sister Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of Peor".

Judgement on Midian

The carrying out of this command became the final commission given to Moses for him to fulfil before his leadership of Israel came to an end. He did it in the full knowledge that he would not cross the Jordan with the people he had so faithfully shepherded for the last forty years, yet he did it as conscientiously and thoroughly as any of the commissions that had gone before.

A levy of one thousand fighting men was imposed on each of the tribes of Israel, and Moses sent them into battle against the Midianites, along with Phinehas, who took with him articles from the sanctuary. The result, in the purpose of God, was the total slaughter of the enemy, including the five kings of Midian, and, in retribution at last, Balaam the turncoat prophet. The Israelites captured the Midianite women and children and took all the Midianite herds, flocks and goods as plunder, and burned their towns and camps.

But Moses was angry with the officers of the Israelite army when they returned from the battle

because they had spared the women alive. "Have you allowed all the women to live?", he asked. "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD'S people". Therefore they also had to be killed, leaving only female children to be spared.

A necessary cleansing

The annihilation of the Midianites, male and female, in this way was not only total punishment, but also necessary for the spiritual and physical welfare of the children of Israel. The very physical taint of these people had to be removed, as was shown by the purification by fire of all the metals taken as plunder, and of all the materials that could not withstand the fire, by water. Even the men who had killed anyone, or who had touched anyone who was killed, had to purify themselves, and stay outside the camp for seven days. Without this cleansing the children of Israel would not have been fit to enter the kingdom of God. Moreover, when the commanders and officers had completed their duties in distributing the spoils among the soldiers, and making appropriate tributes to the priests, they brought an especial offering to the Lord of the golden articles they had acquired, and thankfully reported that, when they had counted the men under their command, not one of them was missing.

So much for the Lord's reckoning against a false prophet. As for the Moabites, idolatrous cousins of the children of Israel, none of them was to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation—perhaps until, in the purpose of God, a Moabite woman named Ruth should declare, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16, NIV). Israel, however, were never allowed to forget the terrible consequences of their encounters with Baal as a result of the influence of Balaam and Balak, and echoes of it sounded throughout both Old and New Testaments. As Micah the prophet said: "O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that ye may know the righteousness of the LORD" (6:5, AV).

[\(To be continued\)](#)