

NUMBERS

Chapter 25

Baal Worship at Peor

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. 2 These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. 4 And the LORD said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” 5 And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.” 6 And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. 7 When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand 8 and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. 9 Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

25:1–18 It is not until 31:8, 16 that we learn that the principal instigator of Israel’s apostasy was Balaam. Failing to destroy Israel by means of the mantic curse, Balaam seduced Israel by the Canaanite fertility rites of Baal. (CSB)

25:1 *Shittim*. Another name for the region of Israel’s staging for the conquest of Canaan; it was across the Jordan River opposite the ancient city of Jericho (see Jos 2:1). (CSB)

indulge in sexual immorality. Israel’s engagement in the fertility rites of Baal involved not only the evil of sexual immorality. It was also a breach of covenant with the Lord, a worship of the gods of the land (vv. 2–3) and a foretaste of the people’s ruin in the unfolding of their history. (CSB)

whore. Scripture does not mince words in describing unfaithfulness to God. Idolatry here and elsewhere is However, this ugly word is more than a figure of speech when it refers to the worship of a fertility god such as Baal of Peor (v 3). In order to gain a favorable response from Baal, devotees engaged in sexual orgies (vv 6–8). Ter: “The people go to the daughters of Moab to gratify their lust: they are allured to the idols, so that they committed whoredom with the spirit” (ANF 3:636). (TLSB)

25:2 *invited the people*. This enticement came “on Balaam’s advice” (31:16). When this enigmatic and perverse soothsayer was unsuccessful in his attempt to curse the Israelites, he devised a scheme that would undo his blessing. By their worship of Baal, the Israelites would incur God’s wrath and destroy themselves. (TLSB)

25:3 *Baal*. Lit, “lord,” “owner.” The principal Canaanite god often associated with a particular place (here, Peor). Baal manifestations of fertility worship were in many locations. Baal was pictured in Canaanite mythology as a vibrant god riding a bull on the clouds. He often had the horns of a bull on his helmet. He held a club (perhaps representing thunder) in one hand and a spear (perhaps representing lightning) in the other. He was believed to exercise his power each year in the autumn and winter rains, reviving the dry soil and bringing the mysterious life force to animals and the land. Baal worship and other ancient Near Eastern fertility worship did not focus on commandments, sin, forgiveness, or life after death; it was thought instead that Baal guaranteed the dependable cycle of the growing seasons (TLSB)

25:4 *hang kill them in sun.* The special display of the corpses would warn survivors of the consequences of sin. (CSB)

hang them. Lest the bad example of the chiefs lead the whole congregation astray, they were put to death. God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezk 18:32), yet He is a devouring fire when His holy will is flouted (Ezk 33:11; Rm 1:18–32; Eph 5:6). (TLSB)

25:6 *brought a Midianite woman to his family.* The contempt for the holy things and the word of the Lord shown by Zimri (v. 14) and his lover Cozbi (v. 15) is unimaginable. (CSB)

Leaders of their people (vv 14–15). (TLSB)

in the sight. Bold defiance. (TLSB)

weeping. Likely due to repentant sorrow. (TLSB)

25:7–8 Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, leaps into action, in view of the Lord’s command (v 4). (CSB)

25:8 *pierced both of them.* Because Phinehas “was jealous for his God” (v 13), he and his descendants were to serve as high priests, whose foremost function was to make “atonement for the people” (v 13; cf 16:46; Ex 30:10, 15; 40:15; Lv 16:29–34). (TLSB)

the plague. Along with the punishment of the chiefs (v 4), the Lord sent further punishments among the tribes. Cf 11:33; 14:37; 16:46. (TLSB)

25:9 *24,000.* The number of those who died because of the flagrant actions of the people in their worship of Baal exceeded even those who died in the rebellion of Korah and his allies (14,700; see 16:49). Again, the large number of those who died fits well with the immense number of the people stated in the first census (1:46) and the second (26:51). (CSB)

25:1–9 Balaam worms his way into the spiritual lives of Israel and causes them to forsake God for the worship of Baal. The situation is reminiscent of the worship of the golden calf (Ex 32). As at that time, God’s anger against sin causes the death of thousands; yet it saves tens of thousands more. God is a God of both Law and Gospel. He metes out punishment to drive people to repentance but also has compassion on His wayward sons and daughters. • Lord, grant us zeal for Your ways, that we walk and live honorably before You. Amen. (TLSB)

The Zeal of Phinehas

10 And the LORD said to Moses, **11** “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. **12** Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, **13** and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.’” **14** The name of the slain man of Israel, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father's house belonging to the Simeonites. **15** And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi the daughter of Zur, who was the tribal head of a father's house in Midian. **16** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **17** “Harass the Midianites and strike them down, **18** for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor.”

25:11 *He was as jealous with my jealousy.* Cf. Ex 20:4–6. The zeal of Phinehas for the Lord’s honor became the occasion for the Lord’s covenanting with him and his descendants as God’s true priests (see note on Ge 9:9). This son of Eleazar contrasts with the casual wickedness of his uncles, Nadab and Abihu. (CSB)

25:12 *My covenant of peace.* Though Phinehas has acted as a warrior, his covenant shall be for peaceful service in the priesthood. (Cf Ps 106:30–31, where “intervened” is a term for prayer.) Gr Naz: “[Phinehas] was more praised because he prayed for the people when they had transgressed. Let us then also stand and make propitiation, and let the plague be stayed, and let this be counted unto us for righteousness” (NPNF 2 7:471). Phinehas had been appointed a priest as a descendant of Eleazar (cf Lv 10:6) but would now be the high priest. (TLSB)

25:13 *jealous for his God.* Cf v 11. *atonement.* (TLSB)

25:14–15 Emphasizes the important social rank of the sinners, which illustrates the depth of the problem and Phinehas’s boldness in addressing it. (TLSB)

25:17 *harass the Midianites and strike them down.* Because of their active participation in the seduction of the Israelites. Midianites had been in league with Balak from the beginning of the confrontation (see 22:4, 7) and became the objects of a holy war (31:1–24). (CSB)

25:18 *their wives ... beguiled.* Midianites were not simply acting as “neighbors” but intentionally sought to lead Israel into idolatry. (TLSB)

25:10–18 Phinehas strikes on the Lord’s behalf, stopping the idolatrous actions of Zimri and Cozbi. This is a First Commandment issue. God allows no other gods before Him and takes necessary measures to preserve His people. He always gives Himself fully for His people as demonstrated by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us. • Protect us, Lord, from the sin of idolatry. Grant us faithful ministers and leaders who will strengthen our faith by Your Word and Sacraments. Amen. (TLSB)