

August 18, 2019 - Num. 31:1–54 - War Against Midian, Distribution of Spoils
Torah Reading: Numbers 31:1–54 - War Against Midian, Distribution of Spoils
Psalm 106:6-12
Haftarah: Ezekiel 25:14-? Isaiah 49:24 – 50:7
Isaiah 40:24

Numbers 31:1-2 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites: afterward shalt thou be gathered unto thy people. "

The background to the war against Midian is in **Numbers 25**.

"And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab." (**Numbers 25:1**)

This led to Israelites joining in with the worship of Baal-Peor. The defining incident was Phinehas's killing of Zimri and Cosbi, a Midianite princess, as they were having sex in their tent.

Moabites and Midianites were somehow in alliance - both were involved, although it seems the Midianites were directing events.

Numbers 25:16-17 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Vex the Midianites, and smite them: For they vex you with their wives, wherewith they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of a prince of Midian, their sister, which was slain in the day of the plague for Peor's sake."

Why not vex the Moabites?

Rashi - But not against the Moabites, for the Moabites were involved in the matter out of fear, since they were afraid of being plundered by them, because all it says is, "do not provoke them into battle" (Deuteronomy 2:9), but the Midianites were angered over a dispute which did not concern them (See Sifrei Mattoth 33). Another interpretation: Because of the two good doves [virtuous proselytes] whom I have [in mind] to bring forth from them, [namely] Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess (I Kings 14:21). - [B.K. 38b]

God had said not to war with Esau or Moab because He had already given their lands to them:

- **Deuteronomy 2:9** - "And the LORD said unto me, Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle: for I will not give thee of their land for a possession; because I have given Ar unto the children of Lot for a possession."

Somehow God considered the Midianites more responsible. Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite, and since Midian was a son of Abraham and Keturah, perhaps they had more knowledge of the true God and were held to a higher account (**Genesis 25:1–**

2). The Midianites were probably a league of separate nomadic sheepherding tribes scattered around the northwestern Arabian Peninsula - so Jethro's tribe might be only loosely linked to the others. Other Midianites had settled down along important trade routes.

Also, Midian and Moab had both been vassals under the power of Sihon of the Amorites, until Israel defeated Sihon, before the Baal-Peor incident:

- **Joshua 13:21-22** - Reuben's inheritance included "all the cities of the plateau and all the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon until Moses killed him and the chiefs of Midian — Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba — the princes of Sihon who lived in the land. The Israelites also killed the diviner Balaam son of Beor along with the others they put to the sword..."

Remember that Joseph had been sold to Midianite traders. Later, Israel was oppressed by Midian for seven years until Gideon defeated Midian's armies. On the other hand, the Kenites were a southern Midianite tribe historically friendly to Israel, like Jethro's tribe.

Perhaps most serious was the fact that the Midianites were harboring Balaam and had heeded his advice on how to seduce Israel to idolatry. (see **Numbers 31:16**)

Balaam convinced Midian and Moab to send their women - thousands of them, their own wives and daughters - perhaps by force - to try to seduce Israelite men. But more probably, they were willing participants - thus bringing the vengeance of God upon them later.

Numbers 31:3 - "And Moses spake unto the people, saying, Arm some of yourselves unto the war, and let them go against the Midianites, and avenge the LORD of Midian."

Rashi - For anyone opposing Israel is reckoned as opposing the Holy One, blessed is He. — [See Mid. Tanchuma Mattoth 3, Num. Rabbah 22:2]

Numbers 31:5 - "So there were delivered out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war."

"delivered" = given over. Rashi - as soon as they heard that Moses' demise was contingent upon the revenge against Midian, they refused to go, until they were given over against their will. — [Sifrei Mattoth 36, Mid. Tanchuma Mattoth 3, Num. Rabbah 22:3]

Numbers 31:6 - "And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand of every tribe, them and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war, with the holy instruments, and the trumpets to blow in his hand."

Why Phinehas?

Rashi - The Holy One, blessed is He, said, "The one who began the mitzvah by killing

Cozbi the daughter of Zur, should finish it" (Mid. Tanchuma Mattoth 3). Another interpretation: He sought the vengeance of Joseph, his maternal grandfather, for it says, "And the Midianites sold him" (Gen. 37:36) (Sifrei Mattoth 34, Sotah 43a).

Also, Phinehas' zeal against the seduction of the idolaters was like Joseph, who made light of his passion and prevailed over it [when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife].

What were the "holy instruments?"

Rashi - The holy Ark (Sifrei Mattoth 34, Num. Rabbah 22:4) and the golden showplate (Mid. Aggadah), since Balaam was with them and through sorcery was able to make the Midianite kings fly, and he flew along with them, he [Phinehas] showed them the showplate on which God's Name was engraved, and they fell down [to earth]. For this reason it says, concerning the Midianite kings, they fell "upon their slain" (verse 8), for they fell from the air on top of those slain. Likewise, it says in the book of Joshua (13:22) in connection with Balaam, "upon (sic) their slain." - [Mid. Tanchuma Mattoth 4]

Numbers 31:7-8 - "And they warred against the Midianites, as the LORD commanded Moses; and they slew all the males. And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; namely, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword."

"All" is not in the text. They killed only those they fought with - not a genocide. There were plenty of Midianites left to attack Israel again 30 years later.

Numbers 31:9 - "And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods." (Again, "all" is in italics - not in the text)

Numbers 31:10 - "And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt, and all their goodly castles, with fire."

Not cities and castles - these were nomadic raiders mostly. Probably more like "encampments."

Rashi - The residences of the priests, knowledgeable in their laws, and the lords.

Wholesale Slaughter

Numbers 31:16 - "And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD."

i.e. these women, who through planned deception tried to sabotage Israel's advance by seducing Israelite men (24,000 of whom had already paid for their role, dying by plague or the sword) were now also to pay for their treachery with their lives.

Women and Children Killed

Numbers 31:17-18 - "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

Women who were virgins in most ancient cultures were distinguished by clothing. i.e. married women would wear veils, etc.

Today, Geneva Convention rules forbid execution of prisoners, and especially women and children. By our standards this is abominable cruelty. What's going on here?

Josephus, writing closer to ancient times, noted not the cruelty but rather the act of mercy in Israel choosing to absorb and support the female virgins, who would become either handmaids or wives:

"The slaughter of all the Midianite women that had prostituted themselves to the lewd Israelites, and the preservation of those that had not been guilty therein; the last of which were no fewer than thirty-two thousand ...and both by the particular command of God, are highly remarkable, and shew that, even in nations otherwise for their wickedness doomed to destruction, the innocent were sometimes providentially taken care of, and delivered from that destruction"

Philo, writing about the same time as Josephus, seems to suspect that the boy children were also spared, despite what the text says:

"And they led away a perfectly incalculable number of prisoners, of whom they chose to slay all the full-grown men and women, the men because they had set the example of wicked counsels and actions, and the women because they had beguiled the youth of the Hebrews, becoming the causes to them of incontinence and impiety, and at the last of death; but they pardoned all the young male children and all the virgins, their tender age procuring them forgiveness."

He possibly was interpreting the Hebrew of "every male among the little ones" as referring to any warrior-age men who might be hiding among the captured children.

Nevertheless, this was what warfare in the ancient near east looked like, and really not until Christian ideas of "just war" theory penetrated cultures were the methods of warfare moderated at all. But "our standards" are relatively new, and often easily discarded, resulting in "collateral damage" to non-combatants.

Starting with the premise that humans have value because they're created in God's image, God has incrementally revealed His purposes, allowing people to voluntarily accept and apply them over the centuries. With the coming of Jesus, the only perfect character and righteous life was seen, and every bit of humane treatment of prisoners, the poor, immigrants and the sick that we appreciate today is due to that influence.

We also have to remember that as Creator, God has sovereignty over every life, and can take it as He sees fit. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," and the wages of sin is death.

God's judgment is called His "strange, alien work" in **Isaiah 28:21**.