

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twentieth Week - Monday

BAAL-PEOR

"So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of Yahweh was aroused against Israel. Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before Yahweh, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of Yahweh may turn away from Israel.' . . . And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel" (Numbers 25:3-8).

We have already seen that Balaam concluded that if the Israelites could be seduced from their allegiance to their Divine king, then the protection that rendered them invincible would be withdrawn and they would be easily subdued by their enemies. He had made this revelation known to the king of Moab before his own departure, and it shows forth the character of Balaam that he could form such a device just after he had poured forth eloquent blessings upon the people whose ruin he now devises. This advice was purely gratuitous on Balaam's part, for his business with Moab was ended; he had been unable to curse Israel and had incurred instead the anger, rather than the honors, of the king of Moab.

Balaam seems to have retired among the neighboring people of Midian, close allies with Moab, until he should behold the results of the course he had just suggested, and in which he seems to have induced the Midianites to cooperate. This was, in effect, that the women of Midian should seduce the Israelites to take part in the obscene rites of Baal-Peor. It is not to be supposed that they recognized distinctly the grounds on which this course would expose the Hebrew host to the displeasure of their God. In their minds Jehovah was no doubt a true God of the Hebrews, but Baal-Peor was no less a true god of theirs; and whatever wrath Jehovah might manifest against his people would not be because he claimed exclusive and universal worship but because he would be jealous over his people giving *their* worship to a rival god--a worship that he alone had a right to claim from them.

The policy followed was most successful. As the Hebrews lay encamped in the plains of

Moab, ignorant and unsuspecting of the bad feeling of the Moabites and Midianites toward them, a friendly interchange gradually sprang up between the kindred nations. The daughters of Moab and Midian came to visit the women of Israel, and thus they fell under the notice of the men. The men of Israel amused themselves and gratified their curiosity by visiting the town and villages in the vicinity. Dazzled and bewildered by magnificent and seductive appliances of vice, which in their simple wandering life they had not encountered, they were prevailed upon by the idolaters of Moab and Midian to take part in the riotous and lustful orgies of their gods.

It does not appear to us that the men of Israel meant to renounce their faith in Jehovah or adopt a belief in Baal-Peor. What they did was to participate in the licentious acts by which his devoted followers professed to honor him. "They joined themselves to Baal-Peor," or "bound themselves with his badge," for it was the custom in ancient times for every idol to have some specific badge or ensign by which his votaries were known. This created a necessity for a severe and exemplary visitation of the Divine displeasure.

No miracle for this purpose was needed. The corruption was not general, and the faithful were sufficient to enforce the decision of the Lord. The man of rank and authority, the "heads of the people" who had participated in this abomination, were ordered to be put to death. The direction to "hang them up in the sun" does not mean that they were put to death by hanging, but that after they had been slain by the sword or stoning their bodies should be exposed to public view until sundown. And with this being done, Moses gave the word that the different judges be dispersed among the tribes to execute the Lord's judgment upon all the offenders within their jurisdiction. This was done, and no fewer than twenty-four thousand men fell under the sword of justice.

While this was being done, and while the people were mourning before the tabernacle, an act of high-handed daring was publicly conducted by one of the chiefs of Simeon. He flagrantly brought to his tent one of the "fair idolatresses" by whom all this mischief had been caused. It so kindled the zealous wrath and indignation of Phinehas, the son of the high priest, that he followed them into the tent and thrust his javelin through them both with one stroke. For this he was commended. He had executed the judgment which had been passed on such offenders.

Moses was later ordered to wage war against the Midianites (chap. 31). He accordingly sent out a force of twelve thousand men, one thousand from each tribe, who attacked some of their cities and put to death a portion of its male population. They returned with numerous prisoners (women and children) and a large booty of cattle, asses, and sheep. The Hebrews had an undoubted right, even apart from the divine command, to attack the people of Midian; for the Midianites had treacherously endeavored to turn Israel from their allegiance to God and thus remove the principles of all their union, prosperity, and peace, and ultimately to become an easy conquest for themselves.

A more difficult point is the command of Moses that the adult females and the male children

among the prisoners should be put to death. We are pained by the recital of such horrors and rejoice that such usages have passed away. But a close examination will enable us to see that the principles laid down supply an adequate excuse for a course which Moses himself must have regarded as distressing.

It is clear Moses had no satisfaction in the task. On the contrary, he appears to have been strongly upset when he beheld the array of prisoners; for he uttered a rebuke, which shows that he would have wished that whatever severity needed to be exercised should have been finished in the furious haste of the battle than that it should be left, as it were, for his execution in cold blood.

But the prisoners were now upon his hands, and in view of the recent hazards and the present condition of the nation he had to dispose of them. It may be asked, What was to be done with them? Should they be sent home unharmed or should they be welcomed on an equal footing to the hospitality of Israel? Either way it follows that the youthful sons of the Midianite warriors would soon have grown up to be a sword in the bosom of the still feeble nation of Israel, and might possibly lead to the hazards and hardships of another conflict. And with respect to the women, it was their wickedness that led Israel to sin and which had given occasion for the recent war in the first place. Their seductive arts, if practiced again upon the Israelites, might prove too much for the infant state to tolerate.

Now if it is right to wage war at all, it is not only right to wage it in such a manner as shall accomplish its objective, but it would be wrong to wage it any other manner. The nature of war is the infliction of suffering in order to bring about an ulterior good. Standing in the age and country that Moses did and amid the circumstances by which he was surrounded, it will be a bold thing for anyone to say that Moses, as a man entrusted with the welfare of a nation, acted wrongly in putting the prisoners to death. That he acted only from a strong sense of duty, everyone who has studied his character must know. And who among us in this current age is better able than he to judge what this duty entailed?