

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 15

Chapters 25

Israel Plays Harlot with Baal

Num 25:1 While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. **25:2** For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. **25:3** So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.

The camp of the Nation of Israel had been stationary for many days at a place called “Shittim.” It was here that the nation retreated after the victorious battles with the two kings of the Amorites (Sihon and Og) where it had defeated all their people and took control of their land. “Shittim” sat on the east side of the Jordan River in the plains of Moab about 10 miles from Jericho which sat on the west side of the Jordan. The Hebrew word means *thorns or acacia grove*. In determining the possible location of “Shittim” we discover an interesting fact – it is on the east side of the Jordan River but south of the Jabbok River. Balaam lived only a few miles north of the Jabbok River. Interestingly enough, that is where they were camped when the whole episode with Balak took place. First, it meant that Balaam had to pass the camp of Israel on his way to meet with Balak. Second, it meant that when Balak took Balaam to the peaks of three mountains to show Balaam the extent of the Nation of Israel, in each case, Balaam and Balak looked to the north to view the nation camped along the south side of the Jabbok River. Third, the camp of the Nation of Israel was outside the boundary line of the land of the Moabites with the Jabbok being the northern boundary line.

Moses says, **“While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.”** The word “harlot” is not used in the American language as often as it was in earlier centuries; today, we use the word *prostitute*. However, we think of a money transaction for sexual favors when we consider the words harlot or prostitute but that was not the case when the word “harlot” was introduced into the original English translations. At that time, it simply meant *an unchaste woman*. Two centuries before the first English translations, it had a totally different meaning, it meant *a vagabond, man of no fixed occupation, idle rogue, tramp, vagrant, rascal, scoundrel*. By the time of Wycliff and Tyndale, “harlot” meant *the unchaste woman who was a vagabond, tramp, vagrant, rascal, scoundrel*. In other words, they were sexually free. We would like to assume that these would be relationships between men and women only because Moses indicates that the trouble was with the “daughters of Moab,” but that cannot be faithfully determined. Why? Moses did not use the Hebrew word for *man*. He used the Hebrew word *am* and it is translated most often as *people or peoples* in the Old Testament Scriptures. Therefore, the door is left open for women to have committed these evil acts with the “daughters of Moab.” Verse 2 actually confirms that Moses was right in using the word “people” when he says, **“For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.”** So now we see that Moses’ use of the word “harlot” should

not indicate a sexual relationship at all with the “daughters of Moab;” rather, the “daughters of Moab” were active evangelists for the worship of their god – *Baal*. As such, many of the Israelites, male and female, accepted their offer to eat and worship with the daughters of Moab, in their religion. It is an extremely dangerous notion to think that attending the worship service of a religion that does not adhere to the one true God is acceptable to Him. Had this occurred 40 years earlier, we might have assumed that the Israelites who came out of Egypt would have been susceptible to such temptations, but not this group. Only a few, the oldest between the ages of 38 and 57, might have remembered a little of the life in Egypt, and been tempted, but even they should have had an aversion to such practices because of all they had lived through with Moses and the LORD over the past 40 years. Perhaps, those who had never been outside the wilderness adventure would have been tempted; they knew only one kind of worship and, as with some, it might have gotten old and a new kind of worship was enticing. At any rate, the “daughters of Moab” invited the people of Israel to worship with them and the invitation was accepted – they became worshipers of *Baal*.

In the story of Balaam and Balak we were introduced to *Baal* as a god to be worshiped for the first time in the records of the Holy Writ. However, that does not mean that it was the beginning of the worship of *Baal*; the practice was fairly old by that time. What does that mean and why has it not been brought forward in the Scripture before? Here we must face a few stark realizations about the world of Moses’ day. First, all we know about the world and God thus far has been penned by Moses under the direction of the Holy Spirit; therefore, from our perspective, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are from the world according to the LORD through Moses. To take a snapshot of the magnitude of the world at that time, when the first census of the nation of Israel was taken 40 years before, there were 603,550 men able to use the sword in battle, not including their wives, children and elderly who could not fight, nor did it include the Levites. Forty years later, all those 603,550 men and everyone twenty years of age or older have died and been buried in the wilderness. In their place, Moses is leading the new group which the next chapter in Numbers will tell us is 601,730 men, not including their wives, children and elderly who could not fight nor did it include the Levites. Adding those together and focusing only on the fighting men because we do not know the count of the women, children and elderly, we see that Moses had been the leader of 1,205,280 warriors in a 40-year span as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. With that as the case, we must ask the question, how many Egyptians still lived in Egypt? How many Babylonians still lived in Babylon, how many Assyrians in Assyria, Cushites in Cush, Putites in Put, Aramians in Padan Aram, or for that matter, people of the rest of the world in the world? At the tower of Babel, 18 family units with 18 different dialects departed from Babylon to inhabit the world and that was 952 years before the start of the conquest of the Promised Land after the 40 years at Mount Sinai. With the souls of 1,205,280 fighting men overlapping in just a 40-year period at Mount Sinai, how many souls overlapped in the rest of the world in 952 years? It took just 470 years for Jacob’s family to grow from 70 men and boys to that astounding number. Remember also that the original 18 families they had been populating the world for 952 years when Jacob moved his Shemite descendant family to Egypt. It was just one small family unit among all the families of the world at that time. Who can count the number of them all? Only God knows!

That brings us to our next point about the word *Baal*. It means *master, lord or possessor* and throughout the world the name *Baal* was used in some form or fashion to refer to the lord of the people, whether or not feared, dreaded, worshiped or adored.

From the days of Jacob and Joseph and the following 470 years, the budding nation of Israel was protected from the practices of the idol worship of *Baal* in the rest of the world as well as in Canaan Land because of her stay in Egypt albeit, being in Egypt did not immunize the Israelites from the threat of the worship of false gods because Egypt practiced the worship of many varied gods of this and that.

What do we know about *Baal*?

First of all, as we have said, the name *Baal* means *master, lord or possessor*. In this form it is a Canaanite name from the Phoenician region of Tyre and Sidon.

Second, the name *Baal* has several different forms other than the one used by the Canaanites. Anywhere it is found, in any form, it refers to some kind of *lord* of the people. Other forms in Scripture include, *Ba'al, Baali, Belu, Bel, Beel, Baalim* besides the original *Baal* as recorded by Moses in this book.

The *Baal* mentioned in this passage, in its narrow sense, was worshiped throughout the world by other names such as *Zeus (Greek), Jupiter (Roman), Molech or Moloch (Semite), Milcom (Ammonite), Bel (Babylonian), and Marduk or Merodach (Assyrian)*.

Third, every location that had a place to worship *Baal*, by whatever name it was called, usually had a location attached to the name. Examples would be *Baal-Zur (Baal of Tyre), Baal-hermon (Baal of Hermon), Baal-Lebanon (Baal of Lebanon), Baal-Tarz (Baal of Tarsus)*. All the locations where “*Baal*” was worshiped collectively were called the *Baalim* (“*im*” gives the name a plural meaning).¹⁵

Fourth, worship of *Baal* was not uniform across the nations. Each community had its own customs as far as worship and understood characteristics of *Baal* were concerned. As such, another name was often attached by a community of worshipers to identify its particular slant of *Baal*. For instance, we find, *Bel-Merodach (the Lord Merodach or Bel is Merodach in Babylon), Baal-Melkarth (in Tyre), Baal-gad (Baal is good luck - in the north of Palestine), Baal-Shemaim, (Baal is heaven or lord of heaven), Baalzebub (Lord of flies), Baal-Hamman (Lord of heat), Pene-Baal (the face or reflection of Baal)*.

The practice of the worship of *Baal* varied extensively from place to place. Altars for the worship of *Baal* were set in many places, some on the mountains as we see in this lesson at *Baal Peor* and later, after the Nation of Israel had control of the Promised Land, *Baal* was worshiped

¹⁵ Judges 2:11, 10:10, 1 Kings 18:18, Jeremiah 2:23, Hosea 2:17

in the streets of the cities including Jerusalem.¹⁶ They could be found on the roofs of houses¹⁷ and images carved on stone throughout the nation with Bethel as an example.¹⁸ In some locations priest and prophets by the hundreds would minister to Baal and wore special uniforms in their duties.¹⁹ The actual offerings ranged from the simple presentation of incense or burnt offerings to human sacrifice.²⁰ It is said that in some locations the priest would work themselves into a lather, dance hysterically and cut themselves with knives.²¹

Fifth, and extremely startling to most Christians, the word *Baal* was a common and accepted word used across the world and by the Nation of Israel for many years past this point in the Bible. For example, King David named one of his sons *Merib-baal* and another *Beel-iade*.²² David's best friend, Johnathan, the son of King Saul, used the same names for two of his children. Later, Daniel will be given a new name in Babylon, *Bel-shazzar*. Those were good examples, but a bad example can be found in the name of *Jeze-bel*. The mention of Jezebel leads us to our final point.

Sixth, the point of all this clarification at this point in the lesson is to show examples that the word *Baal*, in any of its forms, always meant *lord* but it was not always used in an evil way. It was the Hebrew word that meant *lord* and if a person held that position or title, it was attached to the name and not seen to be wrong in any way. Therefore, it is important for the Bible student to always look to the context of the passage being studied to determine its proper interpretation. We do not read Hebrew; therefore, we do not come across this problem often because our English translators have made proper adjustments in our text. When a novice Bible student begins to study from the Hebrew, he will find great shock and awe when he realizes that in many places in the Old Testament our True God is called "Baali" because He is the *LORD and Possessor*. But do not confused it with the English word "LORD" (in all caps). That title always means *Jehovah*.

Even though our God, the Nation of Israel's God, is sometimes called *Baal* or specifically "Baali" in the Hebrew, that will come to an end in the future as recorded during the ministry of Hosea. Hosea details the miserable shape of Israel in her relationship with the LORD and other gods. That terminology will change one day, but it has not to date. In just a small excerpt from the LORD's message to Israel about the future through Hosea we see the following.

Hosea 2:15 "Then I will give her her vineyards from there, And the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ **"And it will come about in that day," declares the LORD, "That you will call Me Ishi And will no longer call Me Baali.** ¹⁷ **"For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, So that they will be mentioned by their names no more.** ¹⁸ "In that day I will also make a covenant for them With the beasts of the field, The birds of the sky, And the creeping things of the ground. And I will

¹⁶ Jeremiah 11:13

¹⁷ Jeremiah 32:29

¹⁸ 2 Kings 10:26-27

¹⁹ 1 Kings 18:19, 2 Kings 10:19, 2 Kings 10:22

²⁰ Jeremiah 7:9, 19:5

²¹ 1 Kings 18:26-28

²² 1 Chronicles 8:31, 9:40, 14:7

abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, And will make them lie down in safety.”

“Ishi” means *my husband or my man*; “Baali” means *my lord*. Isaiah, ministering at the same time as Hosea, explained the future change in the relationship between God and Israel when he said the following.

Isaiah 54:4 "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; Neither feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; But you will forget the shame of your youth, And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. ⁵ **For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the LORD of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, Who is called the God of all the earth.** ⁶ "For the LORD has called you, Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, Even like a wife of *one's* youth when she is rejected," Says your God.

Israel had been in the miserable shape of unfaithfulness many times since the departure from Egypt. We would like to think that she would have come to her senses and become a faithful follower of the LORD Who chose her, especially since the 40-year wandering was over, but she did not, as Moses records here in Numbers. He said, **“So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.”** Here we find the Nation of Israel just one year out of its 40-year exile, and unfettered from its unfaithfulness, freed to continue on to the Promised Land, but back in the same old mess with a new generation lured into sin like its parents were who were buried in the arid sand of Mount Sinai. What will their God do now to them?

Execution of Leaders Associated with Baal

Num 25:4 The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ^{25:5} So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor."

What was the punishment for worshiping this *Baal* of the mountain “of Peor” in the land of the Moabites? Death! “... in broad daylight.”

Phinehas Kills Zimri and Cozbi

Num 25:6 Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ^{25:7} When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, ^{25:8a} and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body.

Was not Moses married to a Midianite woman? Yes. Were not Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, as well as Jethro’s son, Moses’ brother-in-law, both Midianites, invited to join the nation

on its path to the Promised Land? Yes. Why then was this young Israelite denied his desire for this Midianite woman?

The context of the passage gives the insight. We must remember that when Balak sent an envoy to hire Balaam it was a mixture of Moabites and Midianites on both occasions. The two groups were both cousins of Israel but also of each other. However, not all Midianites were of the same religious fabric as those related to Moses. This group of Midianites was in full association with the Moabites and their worship of Baal. Therefore, we can safely assume that this Midianite woman was a worshiper of Baal. She had won the heart of this Israelite man and because of their affection, we can safely assume that he had won her heart too. The plague of the LORD was raging through the camp, not a supernatural plague as seen in Egypt 40 years before, but a God-made plague declared by Him and fulfilled by His faithful servants on earth.

In the case of this couple, the grandson of Aaron (the first high priest who had already died a few months before) picked up the spear and dispensed justice.

24,000 Baal Worshipers of Israel Die

Num 25:8b So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked. **25:9** Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

The plague was over – 24,000 dead. Men and women and at least one Midianite.

The LORD Stopped the Death Because of Phinehas

Num 25:10 Then **the LORD spoke to Moses**, saying, **25:11** "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. **25:12** "Therefore say, 'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; **25:13** and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel.'"

Why did the plague end? It was because of one faithful man of God - Phinehas. He had won the heart of the LORD, proved himself faithful and his actions granted the male descendants of his family service in Israel's priesthood. The deaths of the two with the spear were reckoned by the LORD as an **"atonement for the sons of Israel."** It was not the death of a bull or a ram on the Brazen Altar, it was the death of a pair of sinners in a tent seeking refuge. It was not blood sprinkled on the horns of the altar, it was blood spilt on the dirt of the ground. It was in response to a direct order from the LORD in how to rectify that specific rebellion. It was not done in the streets in broad daylight; it was done in the darkness of a tent where the couple had retreated.

Names of Midianite Woman and Son of Israel

Num 25:14 Now the name of the slain man of Israel who was slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father's household among the Simeonites. **25:15** The name of the Midianite woman who was slain was Cozbi the daughter of Zur, who was head of the people of a father's household in Midian.

Moses then gives the names of the son of Israel and the Midianite woman. The son was Zimri of the tribe of Simeon. The word we do not want to stumble over is “leader.” The Hebrew word is *nasi* and it means *one lifted up, a chief, a prince*. He was **“a leader of a father’s household.”** In other words, he was an important man in the tribe of Simeon. For all practical purposes, he was royalty in that tribe. Others would look to him as an example and be influenced by his actions. The woman he entertained was “Cozbi.” As with Zimri, Moses gives her heritage. She was the daughter of the **“head of the people of a father’s household in Midian.”** The Hebrew word for “head” is *rosh* and it means *captain or chief*. She, too, was from the royalty of Midian. But she was a liar – that is what her name, *Cozbi*, means in the Hebrew language. Let us remember the opening words of this chapter:

Num 25:1 While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. **25:2** For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

For Cozbi’s name to be recorded in the eternal record of the Scripture, she had to have had a major role in evangelizing the Israelites to worship her Baal. In so doing, she led the people into a lie; in so doing, she captured the attention of one of the young princes of the tribe of Simeon; in so doing, she was caught in the path of the anger of the LORD; in so doing, she wept with her newfound beau as death was raging around them. Whether or not her actual name was *Cozbi* makes no difference; it is the name Moses gave her for this record. Surely that was not her real name among the Midianites. What father would intentionally name his baby daughter *liar*. Yet, for whatever her original name might have been, for all time, with her leadership position among the daughters of Moab, she will be forever known as *liar*. For that, Phinehas **“took a spear in his hand, and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body.”**²³ One couple embraced, one spear in hand, one thrust through two bodies, two nations represented, two royals dead, one liar’s unintended consequence.

Be Hostile to the Midianites

Num 25:16 Then **the LORD spoke to Moses**, saying, **25:17** "Be hostile to the Midianites and strike them; **25:18** for they have been hostile to you with their tricks, with which they have deceived you in the affair of Peor and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister who was slain on the day of the plague because of Peor."

The LORD’s anger had been soothed by the righteous warfare of Phinehas. Simeon’s tribe lost only 24,000 people. We will discuss why we believe that the majority, if not all, of the deaths in this plague were in the tribe of Simeon when we discuss the census that Moses called for in chapter 26. With Israel handled, the LORD turned His eye toward Midian. He warned the Nation of Israel about them because of their “tricks” of deception. The LORD’s order is for Israel to “be hostile to the Midianites and strike them.” “Hostile” means *to be an adversary*. To

²³ Numbers 25:7-8

“strike” means *to attack them in war*. Moses does not record if the nation of Israel retaliated immediately against the Midianites or just kept them at a distance from the whole camp, and the nation prepared to fight if need be. To be prepared to fight, Moses needed an accounting of the LORD’s army.

Second Census

Num 26:1 Then it came about after the plague, that **the LORD spoke to Moses** and to Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying, ^{26:2} "Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' households, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel." ^{26:3} So Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, ^{26:4} "*Take a census of the people* from twenty years old and upward, as the LORD has commanded Moses." Now the sons of Israel who came out of the land of Egypt *were*:

The camp of the Nation of Israel is on the east side of the Jordan because it is “in the plains of Moab” just a few miles from Jericho which rested on the west side of the Jordan. It was time for a census of all those 20 years of age and older who could “go out to war in Israel.” How many were left within each tribe?