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MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Balak – The Phinehas Mystery

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Balak (bah-lahk), and it goes from Numbers 22:2 to Numbers 25:9.

This Torah Portion tells the story of Balak, who hires Balaam to curse Israel. It also tells the story of Balaam’s talking donkey and how Balaam blessed Israel rather than cursing them. The parashah concludes with a story of many Israelite men committing idolatry and fornication with the daughters of Moab and Midian, and then of Phinehas stopping the plague among the people by killing one of the couples who were engaging in pagan worship.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about the mystery of why God was okay with the action taken by Phinehas.

In this parashah we read about how Balak, the king of Moab, hired the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. However, God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel, because God had called Israel blessed. The Angel of the Lord stops Balaam on his way to curse Israel and orders him to speak only the words of the Lord, blessing Israel.

So after Balaam blesses Israel, there’s an incident that occurs seemingly out of nowhere starting in chapter 25. We see Israel committing fornication with pagan women and sacrificing to false gods. In order to find out what happened between Balaam’s blessing of Israel and this event detailing Israel’s idolatry, we have to skip ahead to Numbers 31:16 to get a little more insight:

Numbers 31:16

Behold, these, **on Balaam’s advice**, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord (YHWH) in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord (YHWH).

Since Balaam wasn’t able to curse Israel himself, he advised the Moabites to send their women to

seduce the Israelite men into fornication and idolatry so that Israel would bring a curse upon themselves!

Toward the end of our Torah Portion, we read that Moses and the rest of leadership sat at the entrance to the tent of meeting, weeping about everything that was happening. Then, *right in front of everyone*, an Israelite man engages in pagan worship involving fornication with Midianite woman! At this point, Phinehas acts:

Numbers 25:7-8

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 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.

So Phinehas killed the man and woman who were engaging in this idolatrous act, and this turned back the wrath of God upon the people. At the beginning of next week's Torah Portion, we see that God actually rewards Phinehas for this! Phinehas is given a covenant of peace and a covenant of a perpetual priesthood.

So what's up with this? Why is God happy about what Phinehas did? After all, wasn't Phinehas acting completely outside of the framework that God Himself established to handle matters of capital offense? Remember, the Torah commands that there be judges to rule on these cases, and then a sentence would be properly handed down by them. In the Bible, capital punishment is not to be taken lightly.

However, Phinehas completely bypasses the legal process according to Torah! Without consulting the judges, Phinehas swiftly delivers the death penalty on the couple himself! He alone acts as judge, jury, and executioner. Why does God honor this act? What about due process? What about the legal protocol that God established?

Let's establish some facts that might shed some light on this situation:

1. The Midianite woman was brought to *the tent of meeting* to engage in pagan worship involving fornication. How do we know that? Because Numbers 25:6 says that this occurred in the sight of Moses and the congregation of Israel who were "weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting."
2. Moreover, the text says that Phinehas went into the "chamber" in which he killed them. Most English translations say "tent"; some even say "inner room." In either case, many scholars have suggested that the couple had actually entered the sacred precincts of the Tabernacle to perform this pagan fertility act!
3. According to the Torah, only priests were allowed to come near the sacred precincts. And indeed, they are specifically commanded to put to death any non-priests that come near (Numbers 3:10).

So here is what we might conclude from this. In all other cases of capital punishment, the judges were to be the ones to rule on whether or not a life should be taken. But inside of the Tabernacle, the priests are the judges. Thus, sentencing is committed to their hands because they're the only ones who have jurisdiction. And as the text says, Phinehas was a son of Eleazar, a son of Aaron. A priest.

So not unlike Nadab and Abihu, this couple is met with God's swift wrath for bring profane fire in His presence. God's instrument of judgment, in this case, was Phinehas.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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