

PHINEHAS: HERO OR VIGILANTE?

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Aside from a genealogical reference (Ex. 6:25), Numbers 25 is the introduction to Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron. Of all of the introductions to a person in the Torah, the introduction of Phinehas is possibly the most memorable. In Phinehas' brief story we are given a scenario that is startling, shocking, gruesome, and, perhaps, heroic. There really is no delicate way to put it: Phinehas skewered a man and a woman with a spike-like weapon while the couple was apparently engaged in sexual congress.

Just after completing the story of Israel's encounter with the non-Israelite prophet Balaam and his glowing prediction of Israel's glory, the reader is jarred with the contrasting scene of the Israelites engaging in idolatrous sexual activity with Moabite women. Quickly, we are then told that God asks Moses to impale the ringleaders, which will result in turning away God's wrath. Subsequently, Moses instructs Israel's officials to kill anyone attached to the idolatrous activity.

The story shifts abruptly with the following turn of events: An Israelite man takes a Midianite (not Moabite) woman home [*vayakrev el echav . . . el ha-kubah*] in everyone's sight. Phinehas, after leaving an assembly at the Tent of Meeting where people are weeping,¹ stabs them both. A plague that killed 24,000 people ends. Then we learn that it is because of Phinehas that not only were the Israelites saved but also that he and his descendants are to be rewarded for all time with the priesthood.

This story of Phinehas is a fascinating one, especially given the fact that it usually induces some sort of reaction, whether it is in the form of emotion or perplexity. Some are uncertain as to exactly how these events unfolded, how to feel about Phinehas – whether he is a "good guy" or a "bad guy" – and how to feel about God (that is, God's morality; how God metes out justice). Undoubtedly, many questions emerge from just these 18 verses, ranging from theological, to ethical, to sociological. Without examining the critical theories of authorship, this paper will examine three theological and ethi-

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cal questions, which it is hoped will help to bring greater understanding of this curious story.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF GOD'S PUNISHMENT(S)?

First, it is clear that Israel committed a grave sin involving idolatry, improper sexual conduct, and intermarriage.² What is unclear is what Israel's punishment is for this sin. It is certain that God demands that the ringleaders [*roshei ha-am* -- lit.: heads of the people] be impaled as expiation of that sin. However, we are also told that there is a plague. It seems that the plague is considered part of the punishment for this sin, because once Phinehas acts out of violent zeal the plague is subdued. This is odd, for even if one wants to say that Phinehas' act to slay ringleaders was clearly the observance of God's command, and that he is the exactor of the punishment, what is to account for the 24,000 dead from the plague? Thus, there is now a question accentuated by this slight confusion over the punishment: What does God want exactly when these people sin? In other words, what makes God happy again, once they have transgressed?

In his commentary to this chapter of the Torah, Samson Raphael Hirsch contrasts the 24,000 people who die from this plague with the 3,000 who die after worshipping the Golden Calf. This simple comparison highlights the fact that the punishment here is much more severe than that for the sin of the Golden Calf, which is often understood to be the greatest known idolatrous transgression. Moreover, it is more plausible that the entire 3,000 killed because of the Golden Calf were in some way responsible for the mass transgression, whereas in this story it seems unlikely that the entire 24,000 were involved with the particular sins of idolatry, improper sex, and intermarriage. Another relevant question is underscored by this comparison: How does the potential death of thousands of innocent people make expiation for God? According to many, the public execution of the head offenders may be reasonable as a legitimate form of expiation, but a plague that kills 24,000 people, including the potentially innocent, hardly seems reasonable.

In every generation, history witnesses the death of legions of innocent people because of the wicked and sinful. These foregoing questions about God's punishment and what qualifies as compensation to God for sins only serve to emphasize the basic philosophical problems inherent in theodicy.³ In

fact, Numbers 25 clarifies that the philosophical problems of theodicy were just as pertinent thousands of years ago as they are today. Unfortunately, the answers were just as unsatisfactory then as they are now. However, it may be helpful at this point to discuss briefly what the idea of God's wrath, plague, and punishment was among the ancient peoples of the Bible.

For our biblical ancestors, God's wrath, plague, and punishment were all synonymous, as they represent the one and the same thing: An independent entity known as "*ha-mashchit* [the Destroyer]" acts out God's punishments and inflicts plagues.⁴ Rashi explains that this Destroyer took the form of the Angel of Death.⁵ Actually, God's wrath or Destroyer may take several forms, including natural disasters such as earthquakes or plagues. Because it is a distinct entity, once it is let loose the Destroyer acts without distinguishing between good and bad or innocent and guilty; it is an amoral force that simply destroys what is in the path that it was set upon. As the Midrash says in the *Mechilta, Parshah Bo*: "Once leave has been given to the Destroyer to do injury, it no longer discriminates between the innocent and guilty."

From what the Tanakh describes, there is nothing one can do to avoid the Destroyer except: (1) completely remove oneself from that place in order to escape, as Noah did in Genesis and as Moses and Aaron were instructed to do in Numbers 16:26; or (2) ritual intercession. As for ritual intercession, there seem to be three basic forms that stay the hand of the Destroyer. One is incense, specifically Aaron's incense, as recounted in Numbers 17:12-13.⁶ Another is sacrifice. Such sacrifices are described in II Samuel 24:15-25, where David gives offerings in Jerusalem. The third involves blood, and is described in Exodus 12:23: *For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer [ha-mashchit] enter and smite your home.*

There are a few possibilities as to why God's wrath was turned away in the story of Phinehas, a couple of which seem to relate to the ritual intercessions described above. (1) The blood of the slain couple satisfied the Destroyer. (2)

As actually said in the text, the passion and zeal shown by Phinehas served as expiation for God. (3) God orders impalement (v. 4), and it could be the ac-

tual impalement of the couple with Phinehas' weapon (a sort of sacrifice) that served as expiation. Nonetheless, whatever form of expiation brought about the cessation of the plague, it would be a novel and unique form of expiation in the Tanakh.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MOSES AS INTERMEDIARY?

Moses is undoubtedly the prophet and leader *par excellence* in the Torah and in the history of the Israelites and the Jewish people. More often than not, as shown time and again, he exemplifies the character of what a leader should be. One of the most challenging aspects of his leadership is that he has to act as intermediary between human beings (with all of their imperfections and blunders) and God. No one else has that same challenge as leader and intermediary, though some have had a lesser experience of being intermediary between a higher authority figure and those of lower status.

Comparing what God demanded in verse 4 to what Moses actually did in verse 5, we can see that Moses made a bold innovation, thus behaving questionably in his role as intermediary. God plainly tells Moses to impale the ringleaders, while Moses clearly relays a completely different message to Israel's officials [*shoftei Yisrael*]: '*Slay those men who are attached to Baal-peor.*'⁷ This is indeed an act of initiative on the part of Moses. He seems to try to spare as many innocent as possible. It is particularly reminiscent of Genesis 18:22-33, where Abraham appeals for the innocent people of Sodom, and in that instance the Torah implies that what Abraham did was courageous and noble. In Numbers 25, however, we are not told that Moses argues with God nor does he appeal for the innocent. Rather, he simply changes what God says. We are also not told whether what Moses did was good or not. Before Moses' change in policy can take effect, the story of Phinehas suddenly begins. The questions remain: Why did Moses change God's demand? Did Moses overstep his bounds as a prophet and leader? Was his change of God's demand the right thing to do as the intermediary? If it was the right thing to do, does that mean that God is wrong in some way?

Paradoxically, although Moses is involved in verses 6 onward, he is passive and very different from the Moses that just took the initiative to change God's words in verse 5. The Moses, or the leader, presented in verse 6 is a passive witness, possibly stunned into silence. Hence, another question is: Why?

Moses does nothing and says nothing about what Phinehas did. He does not step in and intervene by stopping him, helping him, praising him or condemning him. Since Phinehas' act was so similar to what God demanded, was it a reminder to Moses that he changed God's words? If so, did Moses assume that he made a mistake by changing what God said?

There are two classical explanations as to why Moses may have been silent and passive throughout the story of Phinehas. Jacob Milgrom cites both, one from Josephus and one from the Midrash.⁸ According to Josephus, what Phinehas did was somewhat controversial, and Moses avoided bringing it up because he did not want to start further debate. This explanation makes Moses out to be a sensitive and conservative leader who would prefer to avoid confrontations. The Midrash (*Sifrei*; also in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* 82a) justifies Moses' inaction because Moses himself had married a Midianite woman (Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest). The Midrash says that when others saw what Phinehas did to this Israelite and the Midianite woman, they asked Moses: "Didn't you yourself take a Midianite woman?" When Moses heard these sorts of questions he became upset and fainted. This Midrash seems to portray Moses as weak and unable to stand up for himself at a critical moment. Both explanations account for his lack of leadership throughout the Phinehas story.

Neither the Torah's narrative voice nor God addresses what Moses does and does not do. For such a noticeable inconsistency in Moses' behavior, there is an unusual silence throughout the Tanakh.

IS PHINEHAS A HERO?

As stated before, Phinehas' extreme act induces some sort of reaction. The Torah itself, with God's statement of reward in verses 10-11, definitely approves of what Phinehas does. Some biblical commentators also condone it, praising him for his zeal to follow God in the face of such profanity.⁹

The most common reaction to Phinehas' act is discomfort. That is, despite the fact that God is content and the sin expiated, Phinehas acted as a vigilante. Not surprisingly, the rabbis of the Talmud distinctly express such a discomfort.¹⁰ They were all too familiar with false prophets and messiahs

claiming to do and say things in the name of God, and they were likely to be concerned with someone attempting to justify vigilante murder as a message from God. In addition, it has been suggested that the reason why the cycle of Torah readings has a break between the *parshiyot* on Phinehas' act and the *parsha* on his reward is to teach that one should never rush to reward extremism.¹¹

There is also an alternative understanding of Phinehas' act, which is related to the previous question on Moses' leadership. It suggests that God's acceptance of Phinehas' extremism is actually a backhanded rebuke of Moses for changing God's demands for expiation. This implies that Phinehas' act is more neutral than extreme and the violent death of the couple is simply a way of making a point to Moses. This interpretation, though, is very problematic because it presumes God to be so petty and cruel as to kill the innocent in order to punish the guilty indirectly.

There is yet another possibility, proposed by Bible scholar Philip Budd, who also implies that Phinehas' act is more neutral than extreme.¹² Budd's theory maintains that the Torah raises the visibility of Phinehas in order to compensate for the leadership vacuum left by the death of Aaron in Numbers 20. The emphasis of the story, according to this theory, would then be to show God's commitment to the priestly leadership despite apparent failures and absences. Budd's theory may account for the attention and reward given to Phinehas, but it does not address the moral question of the act for which he is rewarded.

In his excursus on this chapter, Jacob Milgrom offers another explanation by way of the concept of *kipper*.¹³ Milgrom writes:

Kipper functions to avert the retribution, to nip it in the bud, to terminate it before it is fully exhausted. Two narratives indeed attest to the fact that *kippur* (ransom) stops a plague in its tracks (Num. 17:11-12; II Sam. 24:25).¹⁴

In light of this definition, Milgrom argues that Phinehas' act is *kipper* for the entire community. In other words, Phinehas stabs the sinful couple as an act of compensation to God, and their deaths serve as some sort of sacrifice for the sake of the rest of the community. Furthermore, in doing this Phinehas heroically saves more people from being harmed or killed by God's wrath. Also, according to this theory, it is no coincidence that the status of the

couple is defined as a tribal chieftain and a princess, for the higher the status of the ransomed lives, the more acceptable in the eyes of God.

Milgrom's view definitely stands on firm ground, in light of the possible agenda of the author to enhance the status of Phinehas, and in light of the ancient Near Eastern philosophy of evil. This answer, however, does not address some of the aforementioned theological problems regarding God's punishments. Not many people today believe that sacrifices (especially done in such a crude form) divert God's wrath. If they did believe so, we would have to ask how one knows how many and what type of sacrifices are needed in such cases – and no one would be trusted to have that sort of knowledge. Moreover, this reading implies a message of acceptability regarding a type of human sacrifice for expiation, which would be not be consistent with the primary stances on human sacrifice in the Torah.

CONCLUSION

We will not be able to arrive at a consensus opinion as to whether Phinehas is a hero or vigilante. The story of Phinehas, however, invokes a unique emotional response, striking at each of our individual cores. It raises some of the most central questions of our relationship with God, reward and punishment, and true justice. It also helps us to understand better the worldview of our ancient ancestors and some of the ways that they approached the questions surrounding theodicy. In the end, as we read the story of Phinehas, we cannot help but to continue to wonder if we could or should be like Phinehas and if we were Moses in the same situation, what we would do.

NOTES

1. According to I Chronicles 9:19-20, Phinehas was the chief officer over the guards of the Tent and would probably have been armed with a short-shafted spear, like that which is attached to a bayonet, i.e., not a long javelin.
2. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) pp. 211-218. See esp. "Excursus 61: The Apostasy of Baal-Peor," pp. 476-480. P. 215, n. 5 states that the use of the word *kubah* (v. 8) in reference to the chamber to which the Israelite Zimri

took the Midianite Cozbi probably is a term used for a marriage canopy. Since this is the sample case the text employs in order to describe the general depravity of the Israelites, it is reasonable to assume that there were other cases of such intermarriage.

3. Theodicy is essentially the philosophical study of the role of evil in a world that is created by a God who is taught to be good, omnipotent, and omniscient. The basic question is: If God is good, omnipotent, and omniscient, how is it that evil exists?
4. See Exodus 12:13 and 23 for explicit references to the Destroyer. In a lecture during the semester of Fall 2002, Professor David Frankl at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies made the case that *ha-mashchit* in the Bible is akin to some sort of demon.
5. Rashi on Numbers 17:11, Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 89a.
6. In Numbers 17:13, a fascinating and heroic moment occurs. Aaron literally places himself between the living and the dead as he burns incense in order to fend off the plague/Destroyer.
7. The *shoftei Yisrael* are understood to be the judges, ministers, and administrators that Moses appointed at the advice of Jethro in Exodus 18.
8. Milgrom, p. 214, n. 5.
9. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, David Lieber, ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001) pp. 907-908, 918-919. P. 918, n. 9 notes praise from S.R. Hirsch and Chatam Sofer.
10. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 82a states that although God's law finds what Phinehas did acceptable, the rabbis do not follow that law. The Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 27b says that the rabbis would have excommunicated Phinehas for what he did, had it not been for God's acceptance.
11. *Etz Hayim* (see n. 9; pg. 918) cites this teaching of Moses of Coucy.
12. Philip J. Budd, *World Biblical Commentary Vol. 5: Numbers*. (Waco, Texas: World Books, 1984) p. 275-283. Commenting in pp. 282-283, n. 2, Budd builds off of the theories of J. de Vaulx, M. Noth, F.M. Cross, and C.B. Gray.
13. Milgrom, p. 477, n. 5.
14. *Ibid*. Note that the citations Milgrom uses are the same ones used to portray examples of ritual intercession in order to divert the "Destroyer" mentioned on page 3 of this article.



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