

THE POLITICAL SIDE OF THE ZIMRI-COZBI AFFAIR

MAX SICHERMAN

At the start of Numbers 25, the Israelites commit fornication with local Moabite women who lure them into idolatry and cultic sacrifices to their deity Baal Peor (v. 1). These women may have been cultic prostitutes, who were commonly found at pagan temples in Canaan, Assyria, Babylonia, and elsewhere. Copulation with them was considered part of the worship of that particular god or goddess. Orgies such as these were commonplace agricultural rituals, the female symbolizing fertility and procreation.

Though the Moabites did sin with the Israelites, it was in fact the Israelites who actively committed the sin, forgetting their morals and joining the orgies. Moses demanded that the sinners at Peor be held accountable for their actions, and 24,000 Israelites were either hanged or died in the ensuing plague (v. 7).¹ Most of the dead were from the tribe of Simeon, who were 37,100 less (59,300 to 22,200) in the census taken in Numbers 26 compared to the census taken at the beginning of Numbers 1.

However, there was a more worrisome level to this immoral lapse by the Israelites. As Moses and Aaron were reduced to *weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting* (v. 6) a Simeonite prince consorted with a Midianite princess.² Aaron's grandson, Phinehas son of Eleazar, followed the guilty pair into the man's tent, where he *pierced them both* (v. 6). The man is identified as Zimri the son of Sallu *leader of a father's house of the Simeonites* (v. 14) and the woman as Cozbi daughter of Zur, one of five Midianite chieftains (vv. 10-15).³

Based on the geographic location of the Israelite camp and status of internal Israelite politics, the fact that Zimri was from Simeon and Cozbi was from Midian is no coincidence. The Israelite camp formed a square, with three tribes

on each side, guarding the inner area where the Tabernacle stood. On the southern flank were three tribes headed by Reuben in the center, with Gad to its west and Simeon to its east (2:10-16, 10:18-20).⁴ Since the Midianites

Max Sicherman graduated from Yeshiva University in New York and is currently working in Washington D.C. in counter-terrorism and attending graduate school for a Master of Arts Degree in History at George Washington University.

were to the east and southeast of the Israelite camp, the connection between Simeon and Midian fits geographically. Thus, the attempted liaison between a prince of Simeon and a princess of Midian could have farther-reaching effects than a act of immorality. Had the union endured, Israel's security and unity would have been gravely endangered.

In that period as in others, royal marriages were often used as a way to contract and consolidate treaties,⁵ or even to lull an enemy into a false sense of security. Had the relationship of Zimri and Cozbi become a lasting one, Israel's southeastern flank could be open to attack. Phinehas' action destroyed any chance of such an alliance, and by the killing of the Midianite princess ensured that Midian and Israel would be at odds.

Zimri's union to Cozbi not only would have endangered Israel's security but also would have threatened its unity. He saw an opportunity to cement his power and seized the opportunity, at the same time showing contempt for Moses and rejection of his authority. This was a very dangerous precedent, for other tribes who might want to claim authority for themselves could copy Zimri's act of rebellion. This, in turn, could lead to the disintegration of a united Israel. Realizing the implications of the situation, Phinehas put a swift end to it.

The Lord ordered the Israelites to take vengeance on the Midianites, so it is no wonder after the war that Moses expostulates, *'You have spared every female! Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord's community was struck by the plague'* (31:15-16).

Therefore, in conclusion, the union between Zimri, prince of Simeon and Cozbi, princess of Midian, was no mere act of lust. Had this union endured it would have had three devastating effects. First, a Simeonite-Midianite alliance would have made Israel's southern flank vulnerable to attack. Secondly, it would have caused disunity within Israel, with Moses' supreme authority being severely tested. Third, the relationship between God and the Israelites would have been severely impaired. Phinehas prevented these consequences. For his bravery and zealotry, he was granted amnesty from the wrath of Zimri's blood relatives, and was forever inscribed in the Torah as a hero of Israel.⁶ The *Covenant of Peace* he was given by God (25:13) is literal, for he kept Israel at peace, unified and preserved.

