



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Revenge

Numbers 31 plunges us into a shocking biblical scene. In retaliation for a sinful incident, Moses orders the massacre of Midianite men, women and children. How can such violence be part of God's inspired Word? Briefly here, consider the following:

First, biblical attitudes to life and death, sexuality and sin, reward and punishment, reflect a culture far removed from our own 21st century setting. While we are encouraged to 'enter the story,' a certain degree of historical perspective is presumed!

Second, the ancient form of Judaism reflected in this story cannot be equated with contemporary Judaism. Any temptation to cite this text as an indication of Christian superiority over Judaism is offensive to Jews and contrary to Church teaching.

Thirdly, the Word of God offers not a saccharine panacea but a robust invitation to wrestle with the text, uncovering dilemmas that resonate in our own human lives. To be disturbed by the bible is a starting point for deep reflection. Our reflections here will be guided by a contemporary Jewish Torah commentator, Richard Friedman.

Friedman points out that the revenge in Numbers 31 is a response to a ritual crime. Earlier, in chapter 25, the Israelite men succumbed to apostasy as their

flirtation with foreign women led them to embrace the god Baal-peor (25:1-5). This crisis reaches breaking point in an incident described in 25:6-9 where an Israelite man and a Midianite woman flaunt their relationship and enter a kubbah ('tent'), possibly a reference to a cultic area and may even refer to the Tabernacle. In the Torah the punishment for ritual crime, i.e., transgressing sacred boundaries and defiling sacred places/objects, is especially severe.

It is difficult for us to comprehend the hysteria of the response described in these ancient texts, yet even today our own instinctive reactions offer some clue. To take a simple example: as a Catholic, imagine the gasps of a Mass congregation if the consecrated chalice was accidentally knocked over on the altar. (How different to spilling a glass of wine at home!) Multiply this reaction a thousand-fold, minus the benefit of social and psychological developments over millennia, and we have some glimpse into ancient perspectives. Today, as then, sacred symbols and gestures strike a deep chord in the human psyche. No wonder the most volatile, emotive debates in religious communities are often about liturgy!

After adjusting our mindset to the world of the Torah, let's place ourselves inside this biblical story.

Amidst all the violent activity against the Midianites (including a chilling reference to war 'booty' in 31:11), do you notice the one deafening silence? Moses' wife, Zipporah, is a Midianite! Yet the text makes no reference to her or to Moses' father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite priest, whom we met in Exodus 18. Says Friedman:

"The lack of any comment about Moses' thoughts here is the most powerful silence since the near-sacrifice of Isaac in which we are told nothing of Abraham's heart. The Torah's way is to leave these things unspoken, and thus to leave us to ponder them."

Ponder this disturbing silence in the text. Presumably Zipporah was not executed, yet what tensions might surround her presence? Can we imagine the conversations between Moses and Zipporah? How might she be treated in light of these incidents? What is the 'gossip' in the Israelite camp? Where is the name of Jethro in all this? Where lie the loyalties of Moses' and Zipporah's two sons? Do your reflections shed light on other aspects of the narrative? E.g., might Moses' rage (31:14) arise from his own personal pain of juggling the complexities of his public and domestic life? •

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: Friedman's translation.