

מקראות גדולות

The
COMMENTATORS'
BIBLE

THE JPS MIQRA'OT GEDOLOT

NUMBERS במדבר

*With the 1917 and 1985 English translations of
the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH, the questions of Abarbanel,
the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides,
and selections from the Masorah and from the commentaries of
Bekhor Shor, Kimhi, Hizkuni, Gersonides, Abarbanel, and Sforno*

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NJPS ²⁴Ships come from the quarter of Kittim; They subject Asshur, subject Eber. They, too, shall perish forever. ²⁵Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way.

25 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by

RASHI ²⁴ Ships come from the quarter of Kittim. Ships will bring "Kittim"—that is, Romans—in great warships against Assyria. The unusual word for "ships" is found also in Isaiah: "Where no floating vessels can sail and no mighty craft can travel" (Isa. 33:21). **They subject Asshur, subject Eber.** They will subject those who are *b'eber ha-nahar*, on the other side of the (Euphrates) River. **They, too, shall perish forever.** As Daniel explained, "Then, because of the arrogant words that the horn spoke, the beast was killed as I looked on; its body was destroyed and it was consigned to the flames" (Dan. 7:11). [K]

25:1 At Shittim. As the translations recognize, this is a place name. [L] **By whoring**

[K] Rome is the fourth "beast" of Daniel's vision. [L] This is R. Ellezer's opinion on B. Sanh. 106a; R. Joshua thinks our verse means, "Israel settled into idioy."

NAHMANIDES ²⁴ Ships come from the quarter of Kittim. The Romans. **They subject Asshur.** As mentioned in v. 22. **Subject Eber.** Israel. The Romans will subject the exilers and the exiles alike. **They, too, shall perish forever.** The Romans, too, will eventually perish. This completes Balaam's prophecy, for the "Kittim" are the "fourth beast" who will eventually be cut off by the hand of the Messiah: "The beast was killed as I looked on; its body was destroyed and it was consigned to the flames" (Dan. 7:11). It is well known from rabbinic literature that this fourth beast represents Rome. (It is true, as the Sages acknowledge, that the third beast [Dan. 7:6] is Greece, and that the Kittim are descended from the Greeks [Gen. 10:4]; but this is comparable to Canaan being both a generalized name for all the inhabitants of Canaan and the name of a specific people descended from the original Canaan.) Ibn Ezra (in his commentary to Dan. 7:14) got somewhat confused about this, and added Islamic rule into the mix—for fear of them had fallen upon him, and he could not imagine that such a large and powerful kingdom would not also be numbered among the kingdoms in Daniel's vision. But he was arguing out of ignorance. The four kingdoms that Daniel saw immediately succeeded each other, each one overcoming its predecessor and seizing power from it. By the same token, each of them kept Israel enslaved—first the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans, who will keep us enslaved until the end time, for their kingdom will not be cut short except by the Redeemer himself. Our exile will last as long as this line of four kingdoms does. But though other kingdoms arise during this period as well, the text does not count them and Daniel did not see them. He had no need to see them in order to understand redemption. Both in the past and still today there have been many great kingdoms besides those of Rome and Ishmael—India, Ethiopia, the Holy Roman Empire, the Mongols, and all the rest. But, as is well known, it was the Romans who exiled us most recently (in the days of Vespasian and Titus), not the Ishmaelites, so whether we live under Ishmael or anywhere "from India to Nubia" (Esther 1:1), we live in the Roman exile until their memory is blotted out and we are redeemed from them. For all we know, the Ishmaelite empire may perish before the days of the Messiah. But with regard to our exile and redemption, it is the "fourth beast" that counts. Anyone who understands Daniel's visions will find it all explained there. [N] In any case, the tradition of our Sages is true, and requires no confirmation.

25 Then Balaam set out on his journey back home. OJPS translates more literally here, but NJPS understands the sense correctly; see my comment to 25:18.

[N] We omit some further details given by Nahmanides of Daniel's visions, about Alexander the Great and the like.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **25 Then Balaam set out on his journey back home.** You may be wondering why this whole episode of Balaam's prophecy is recounted in the Torah at all, given that he was a diviner; but it is there to show with what great care God watches over Israel: "My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted against you, and how Balaam son of Beor responded to him. Recall your passage from Shittim to Gilgal—and you will recognize the gracious acts of the LORD" (Mic. 6:5). Remember too that Moses did not simply hear about these things and then write them down; God told him all about Balaam and Balak—otherwise it would not be written in the Torah (Gersonides).

25:1 The people profaned themselves. Rather, "the people began"—they had no intention at first of committing idolatry; they

OJPS ²⁴But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, and they shall afflict Asshur, and shall afflict Eber, and he also shall come to destruction.

²⁵And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place; and Balak also went his way.

25 And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with

RASHBAM ²⁴ Ships. As in "Where ... no mighty craft can travel" (Isa. 33:21). The word refers to battleships.

IBN EZRA ²⁴ Ships. The translations understand the first word as "ships" based on the word in "Where no floating vessels can sail and no mighty craft can travel" (Isa. 33:21). But others relate it to the homonym in "Wildcats shall meet hyenas" (Isa. 34:14). In this case, the invaders are likened to wildcats because everyone is filled with terror at their approach. **From the quarter of Kittim.** The text literally says "from the hand of the Kittim," but this is an idiom for their "place": "alongside the Jordan" (13:29); "there shall be an area for you outside the camp" (Deut. 23:13). Kittim are Ionians, that is, Greeks: "The descendants of Javan: [S] Elishah and Tarshish, the Kittim and the Dodanim" (Gen. 10:4). This would seem to be an allusion to "the kingdom of Greece" (Dan. 11:2). As I have already explained in my comment to Dan. 2:39, this kingdom is identical with the Kittim; they are definitely the third beast. [T] **They subject Asshur, subject Eber.** Having stated that Asshur would capture Kain, he now adds that a time would come when Asshur would be made captive in its turn. "Eber" refers to the "Hebrews" whom Asshur had captured, that is, the Kenites, who dwelt with Israel. As is well known, Onkelos takes our phrase to refer to the "other side" (*eber*) of the Euphrates. But the text never uses this word in that way without adding "of the river." **They, too.** Literally "he, too," but the reference is to "the Kittim," which is a collective noun (see again Gen. 10:4).

25 Then Balaam set out. Rather, he "rose up" (OJPS). Remember that he had been lying "prostrate" (v. 16), in a dream state.

25:1 Israel was staying at Shittim. "They encamped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim, in the

[S] ין (j-v-n, Javan) is simply a variation of the i-o-n of "Ionian." [T] See Daniel 7.

וַיָּצִיאוּ מִיַּד כְּתִימִים
וַעֲנוּ אֲשׁוּר וְעַגְרֵי עֲבָר
וְגַם־הָיָה עָרֵי אֲבָד:
וַיִּקְּמוּ בַלְעָם וַיִּלְךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְמִקְמוֹ וְגַם־
בָּלַק הָלַךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ: פ

כַּה וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֵׂטִים וַיַּחֲל

NJPS whoring with the Moabite women, ²who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. ³Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the LORD was incensed with Israel.

⁴The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the LORD, so that the LORD's wrath may turn away from Israel." ⁵So Moses said to Israel's officials, "Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor."

RASHI with the Moabite women. This was a plan devised by Balaam; see my comment to 24:14.

2 And worshiped that god. When the man got aroused and said to the Moabite woman, "Give in to me," she would take an idol of Peor out of her bosom and say, "Worship this."

3 Baal-peor. This idol was called "Peor" because in order to worship it one would *po'er*, "uncover," one's anus before it and bring forth excrement. That is the ritual by which this idol was worshiped. **The LORD was incensed with Israel.** He sent a plague among them.

4 Take all the ringleaders. Rather, "Take all the chiefs of the people" (OJPS) to judge those who had worshiped Peor. **Have them publicly impaled.** Those who had worshiped. The Hebrew word does not mean simply that they were killed by being impaled but that their bodies were then hung up (see OJPS) and displayed. We learn this from the story where the Gibeonites "impale" seven of Saul's descendants—for Rizpah (mother of two of them) covered and protected the bodies. [MJ] The punishment for idol worship is in fact stoning, but the bodies of those who are stoned are always publicly displayed in this way. The Hebrew literally says that they are to be hung "in face of the sun" (see OJPS), but this idiom means "publicly, for all to see." As a midrash tells us, the sun revealed the sinners. The clouds would part above each sinner and the sun would shine upon him.

5 Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor. Since "men" is plural, we learn that each of the Israelite judges was to kill two men. According to [MJ] See 2 Sam. 21:1-14.

NAHMANIDES 25:1 Whoring with the Moabite women. Rashi rightfully blames this event on Balaam. It was not that the Moabite women were promiscuous; their husbands, and the Moabite leaders, told them to do this, along with some of the elders of Midian as well, for the Midianites were involved in this "affair of Peor" (v. 18). Their intent was to seduce the Israelites into the worship of Baal-peor, so Balaam might very well have been involved. He was certainly their greatest counselor, and was intent on doing harm to Israel to the best of his ability, as we understand when we learn that God "refused to heed Balaam" (Deut. 23:5)—which is why he was killed. But the straightforward sense of our verse says nothing at this point about Balaam's involvement. Only later does the text intimate that this took place "at the bidding of Balaam" (31:16). As with the mention of the Midianites and the "affair of Peor," we learn only when it is time to take revenge that this incident had nothing to do with the natural sexual impulses of youth, and everything to do with this sinister scheme to promote idolatry. As I explained in my comment to 24:14, that verse too does not have anything to do with this incident. It may of course be that Balaam's telling Balak that it would be fruitless to oppose Israel militarily at this point is what led him to develop this plan. But since Balaam fully intended to curse the Israelites had God not "turned the curse into a blessing" (Deut. 23:6), he certainly deserved to be killed. For the hireling and the one who hired him are both punished.

5 Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor. See Rashi's comment. But I do not understand how the guilty—God forbid!—could amount to more than 150,000, over a quarter of all the Israelites. Even a single capital case cannot be tried without a Sanhedrin of 23 members. But even if each group of 23 were to kill two men (rather than each individual judge), this would

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS simply wanted to go whoring. But it ended up in idolatry, just as Exod. 34:16 had warned (Sforno). **The Moabite women.** Really they were Midianite women who disguised themselves as Moabites. Note that Deut. 23:4-7, which condemns the Ammonites and the Moabites, says nothing about this event, and specifically mentions only the *male* Moabites, not the females; moreover, the upshot of the event is that (in v. 17) the Israelites are commanded to attack the Midianites, not the Moabites. Don't forget that Balak had been promised that the Moabites would not have to fear the Israelites until the far future (Abarbanel).

3 Israel attached itself to Baal-peor. Literally, "coupled" itself just to enjoy sex with the "Moabite" women (Abarbanel).

OJPS the daughters of Moab. ²And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. ³And Israel joined himself unto the Baal of Peor; and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. ⁴And the LORD said unto Moses: "Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them up unto the LORD in face of the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵And Moses said unto the judges of Israel: "Slay ye every one his men that have joined themselves unto the Baal of Peor."

הָעַם לְזִנוּת אֱלֹהֵי מוֹאָב: 2 וְהִקְרָאן
לְעַם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכְלֵם הָעַם
וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן: 3 וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל
לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּחְרָאֵף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:
4 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח אֶת־כָּל־
רֹאשֵׁי הָעַם וְהוֹקַע אוֹתָם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה נֶגֶד
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיִשָּׁב הַרְוֵן אֶף־יְהוָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:
5 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרֹגוּ
אִישׁ אֶנְשָׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר:

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + Why did God tell Moses (as the Hebrew of v. 4 actually says), "Take all the heads of the people and have them publicly impaled" (compare OJPS)? Was it really they who were guilty? + If "all the heads of the people" were guilty of "whoring with the Moabite women" (v. 2), why are we told only about Zimri son of Salu, whom Phinehas kills in v. 8? + Why did Moses not impale the chiefs as God had commanded him?

RASHBAM 25:3 The LORD was incensed with Israel. This was evident because a plague began among the people.

4 Have them publicly impaled. Rather, "hanged"; see 2 Sam. 21:6.

IBN EZRA steppes of Moab" (33:49). Everything from this point on takes place in the steppes of Moab, from which they never moved. Even Joshua sends his spies from there: "Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim" (Josh. 2:1).

2 The people ... worshiped that god. "The people" being the Israelites and the Moabite women.

3 Israel attached itself to Baal-peor. The verb comes from the same root as "a yoke of oxen" (1 Sam. 11:7). The Israelite men coupled themselves to the Moabite women, in the service of Baal-peor.

4 Have them publicly impaled. Not "the chiefs of the people" (as OJPS translates the phrase translated "ringleaders" by NJPS), but those who yoked themselves to Baal-peor. For we see that in v. 5 Moses instructs the chiefs to kill those who had yoked themselves to Baal-peor. "Publicly" is literally "in face of the sun" (OJPS); compare "I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun" (2 Sam. 12:11). As the Aramaic translation explains, they were publicly executed.

5 Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor. Those from your tribe. They undoubtedly

NJPS 6Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. 7When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, 8he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both

OJPS 6And, behold, one of the children of Israel came and brought unto his brethren a Midianitish woman in the sight of Moses, and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, while they were weeping at the door of the tent of meeting. 7And when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand. 8And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and thrust both

RASHI B. Sanh. 18a there were 78,000 Israelite judges. [N]

6 Just then one of the Israelites came. The tribe of Simeon gathered before Zimri, who was their chief, and said, "We are being sentenced to death, and you are sitting on your hands!" (See B. Sanh. 82a.) **And brought a Midianite woman over.** It was Cozbi daughter of Zur (v. 15). **In the sight of Moses.** He asked, "Moses, is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you tell me she is forbidden, then who permitted you to marry the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian?" (See again B. Sanh. 82a.) **Who were weeping.** When they saw that Moses had forgotten how to rule on this question and did not know what to say, they burst into tears. In the Golden Calf incident, Moses had stood up to 600,000 men when he "took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it" (Exod. 32:20). But here he found himself powerless—so that Phinehas could come and take the reward he had coming to him.

7 Phinehas ... saw this. He saw what Zimri had done, and he did remember the law. He told Moses, "I received this teaching from you: 'If a Jew has sex with a non-Jewish woman, those who are zealous should attack him.'"

[N] More precisely, 78,600; see Rashi's comment to Exod. 18:21. Most texts of Rashi's comment to our verse say 88,000, but this is clearly an error.

NAHMANIDES still be an enormous slaughter, and there is no trace of such a massacre in the census of ch. 26. Yet we know for certain that all the guilty men died: "You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the LORD your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor" (Deut. 4:3). To say that Moses asked each "man" (singular) to slay "his men" (plural) simply means that each court was to judge its own tribe (or its own unit of 1,000): "I took your tribal leaders, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you: chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens, and officials for your tribes" (Deut. 1:15). [O]

In my view, when "the LORD was incensed with Israel" (v. 3), then (as in 17:11) wrath must have gone forth from the Lord and a plague must have begun. But the Lord in His mercy spoke to Moses as recorded in v. 4, so that the innocent not be swept away along with the guilty. It was just at this moment, with the whole community gathered "at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (v. 6) to do as Moses said, and the plague still raging, that this Simeonite (see v. 14) had the nerve to bring over a Midianite woman—to rebel deliberately against Moses and the judges, and to do so in public. For he was a leader of the Israelites. There must have been many others helping him in this insurrection, or at the very least (as the Sages tell us) his own tribe prompted him to it: "We are being condemned to death, and you are silent!" Moses and the judges began to weep, but "Phinehas stepped forth and intervened, and the plague ceased" (Ps. 106:30). In fact, not a single one of the Israelites was condemned to death by a court. For God told Moses to "have them publicly impaled before the LORD, so that the LORD's wrath may turn away from Israel" (v. 4), but His wrath turned away without this happening. That is why the text does not record that anyone was actually executed by a court. It may be that the midrash simply means that the number who *would* have been killed would have amounted to over 150,000, but that what Phinehas did spared them. This, though, would mean that some of those who had attached themselves to Baal-peor remained alive. But the Holy One destroyed them after the census but before they crossed the Jordan, as explained in Deut. 4:3.

[O] Nahmanides subsequently added: I have since found in Y. Sanhedrin the following: "How many were the judges of Israel? 78,600. Moses told them, 'Each of you kill two.' The total slain therefore amounts to 157,200." The Sages who were of this opinion must therefore conclude that Israel multiplied enormously in between the census of ch. 1 and that of ch. 26.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **6 Brought a Midianite woman over to his companions.** Rather, he "offered" her to them for sex. You will find the root used this way in Gen. 20:4 and Isa. 8:3 (Hizkuni). **Who were weeping.** They were weeping because they did not want to slay their men, as Moses had commanded in v. 5 (Hizkuni).

7 When Phinehas ... saw this. That no one was obeying Moses' command (Hizkuni). **He left the assembly.** He was among those who were weeping (Abarbanel).

8 He ... stabbed both of them. He did not need to worry about becoming unclean, since (as the Sages remind us) he had not yet become a priest at this point (Hizkuni).

וְהָיָה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב
אֶל-אָחִיו אֶת-הַמִּדְיָנִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה
וּלְעֵינֵי כָל-עֲדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָמָּה בְּכִים
פָּתַח אָהֵל מוֹעֵד: וַיִּרְא פִּינְחָס בֶּן-
אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקָּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה
וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶס בְּיָדוֹ: וַיִּבֵּא אַחֲרָיִשׁ-
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-הַקֶּבֶד וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת

RASHBAM 6 Brought a Midianite woman over to his companions. Literally, he "brought her near" them—to prostitute her. Compare "None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness" (Lev. 18:6).

8 Into the chamber. That is, the tent. **Through the belly.** The Hebrew words for

IBN EZRA did this, though the text does not say so explicitly.

6 Brought a Midianite woman over to his companions. Rather, "he introduced her to his family." **The whole Israelite community who were weeping.** In prayer to God.

7 When Phinehas ... saw this. He was among the community in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting. But the entire incident raises a question. [U] Perhaps the answer is that Zimri had already yoked himself to Baal-peor in the presence of witnesses.

8 Into the chamber. That is, "into the tent"; Arabic has a synonym for "tent" related to this Hebrew word, though it is actually slightly different from a "tent." **Stabbed.** "Draw your sword and run me through" (1 Sam. 31:4). **Through the belly.** Rather, "in her chamber"—the tent where she was with Zimri's brothers. But the translations follow another opinion—that this word is related to "Everyone who offers a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep, must give the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach to the priest" (Deut. 18:3). And of course there is the famous midrash about

[U] What entitled Phinehas to execute summary justice on Zimri?

NJPS of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. ⁹Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

RASHI 8 Through the belly. He aimed it precisely through the genitals of both of them. So everyone understood that he had not killed them for nothing. As the midrash in Sanhedrin explains, many miracles were performed for Phinehas in the doing of this deed.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 9 Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand. Apparently all of them were from the tribe of Simeon, from which this Zimri came (see v. 14); you will find that their population dropped between ch. 1 and ch. 26 more than that of any other tribe (Gersonides).

OJPS of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel. ⁹And those that died by the plague were twenty and four thousand.

אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־קִבְתָּהּ
וְתַעֲצֵל הַמִּגַּפָּה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁹וַיְהִי
הַמָּוֶתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים
אֲלֶפֶי: פ

RASHBAM "chamber" and "belly" sound almost the same.

IBN EZRA the 10 miracles that happened to Phinehas, [V] which the text does not happen to mention.

[V] Various midrashim describe these miracles, but we do not have a midrash where their number comes to precisely 10.