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‘The Case of the Missing Thousand’: Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians 10:8 – A New Proposal

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Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 10:8, Paul says that 23,000 died in the incident of Baal Peor. However, Numbers 25:9 states that 24,000 died. ‘The case of the missing thousand’ has long preoccupied the minds of interpreters down the centuries. Most conservative interpreters have attempted to harmonize Paul and Numbers arguing either that Paul rounded down the number or that Numbers rounded it up. The problem here is that both are round numbers, and in any case poses the question as to how Numbers/Paul knew that the number ought to be rounded up/down. Other commentators have assumed that Paul made a mistake and recorded 23,000 from Numbers 26:62, where the 23,000 was the number of the Levites in the census. This creates the additional difficulty as to whether Paul’s memory really was so poor, and if so whether he or his secretary did not check and correct the draft. Thus, Gordon Fee concludes that the infamous ‘case of the missing thousand’ has no ‘entirely satisfactory solution’.

This new proposal may help solve ‘the case of the missing thousand’. I shall argue that Paul was not referring to a plague, that is, a disease sent by God but rather to a slaughter by the sword carried out by men, with Paul linking the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents together. This reading comes from a deduction implicit in Numbers 25:4-5 where Moses instructed the judges to slay the Israelites involved in idolatry, and linguistic and thematic links with Exodus 32. In this reading, Paul stood within interpretative traditions that existed in early Judaism. I shall first survey the treatment of Numbers 25:1-9 in some early Jewish texts before turning to 1 Corinthians 10:8.

Numbers 25:1-9 in Early Judaism

1. Septuagint

The Septuagint, the old Greek translation of the Old Testament, (c280–250 BC) follows the Hebrew Text reasonably closely. For our purposes what

matters is the way the text was read in the Second Temple period rather than the translation techniques of the translator. Verses 1-3 state that Israel desecrated itself and committed sexual immorality with the Moabite women. These Moabite women then called the Israelite men to sacrifices to their idols, and the Israelites ate food offered to the Moabite idols, and joined in the worship of idols. Thus, Israel yoked himself to Baal Peor. This heinous idolatry resulted in God's anger. The text thus stresses that sexual immorality here led to idolatry and profanation and resulted in God's anger.

In Numbers 25:4-5 the LXX records God's command and Moses's direction—'And the Lord said to Moses, "Take all the princes of the people, and make them examples of judgement before the Lord in the face of the sun, and the fierce anger of the Lord shall be turned away from Israel" and Moses said to the tribes of Israel, 'Each one must kill his friend who is consecrated to Baal Peor'.

In verse 4, God commanded Moses that the chiefs of the tribes are to be 'made an example', (*paradeigmatison*), presumably by hanging them before God in the sun, so that God's wrath may be turned away from Israel. This was because of Israel's sin in committing sexual immorality in the context of the idolatrous worship of Baal Peor. In verse 5, Moses then interpreted (or perhaps softened this command from God) as meaning that each of the tribes of Israel (as opposed to the judges in the Hebrew Text) should kill those of their own household involved the worship of Baal Peor. The reader is left wondering whether this punishment was carried out.

Verses 6-8 record the brazen act of immorality on the part of an Israelite and Midianite woman (identified in verses 14f as Zimri, a ruler of Simeon, and Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a ruler of Ommoth, senior tribe of Midian) which led to Phinehas, son of Eleazer and a Levitical priest, killing the man and woman. One could indeed assume that Phinehas's action was in response to the commands of verses 4 and 5, especially since God commended Phinehas's zeal in verses 10-13, and gave him a covenant of peace and an eternal priesthood. Given this, one can deduce that others may well have followed Phinehas in executing those involved with Baal Peor. Indeed, in Numbers 31:6 Phinehas led the 12,000 men from Israel into battle against Midian, which suggests that one could read back Phinehas's zeal in chapter 25 as the basis for imitation.

Consequently there was a ‘plague’ in verses 8f which kills 24,000, (*hoi tethnekotes en te plege tessares kai eikosi chiliades*). This could be read either as the executions carried out by the tribes, or as a disease which was a direct judgement from God, an ‘act of God’. The time period in which these 24,000 die is left unspecified. Most early Jewish readers would assume that the ‘plague’ of verses 8f would refer to the tribes’ executions by the sword given that ‘to plague’ (*plesso*) was used of the killing of Zimri and Cobzi by Phinehas’s javelin (vv. 14, 15). In God’s instruction to Moses (vv. 16-18) that Israel must ‘plague’ the Midianites by killing them.

Thus the Septuagint here can be read as recording an incident of sexual immorality linked with idolatry leading to the killing of 24,000 by the sword because of God’s terrible wrath.

2. Philo

The great Alexandrian Jewish scholar Philo (c.15BC–50AD) referred to the Baal Peor incident in a number of places. Most importantly, in *De Vita Moses* 1.55 (300-304), Philo gave a consecutive commentary on Numbers 25.1-9. He started by presenting Balak as taking the advice that he has previously described Balaam as giving, that the Midianite maidens should entice the Israelite men sexually and then should lead them into idolatry. Philo then presented the Israelite men as being seduced and perverted into impiety. After this, Phinehas boldly and virtuously killed a man and woman together.

Philo then described the impact of Phinehas’s action—This example (*to paradeigma*) being observed by some who were zealous for continence and godliness they copied it (*emimesanto*) at the command of Moses.

Here the godly Israelites both copied Phinehas’s example and were encouraged to execute the idolaters at Moses’s command, in an allusion here to Numbers 25:5. Philo stated that this gruesome task was accomplished without showing pity even to family members. He then added that 24,000 (*tetrakischilious*) perished on one day (*mia hemera*).

For Philo, Moses’s command, the example of Phinehas, and the ‘plague’ that kills 24,000 was linked. The ‘plague’ was seen as the slaughter of the idolaters.

Here it is important to note is that judgement was by the sword of men, not a direct pestilence sent by God.

3. Josephus

The Jewish historian Josephus (c 37AD–95AD) has an account that is in many ways similar to that of Philo, though longer. Balaam gave advice to Balak that was followed and the Midianite women enticed the Israelite men into idolatry by offering themselves sexually to the Israelite men. Josephus then included a long speech of self-justification by Zimri resulting in general confusion within Israelite ranks which was then broken by Phinehas's brave action.

As with Philo, Phinehas's action inspired others to act—

Thereupon all the young men who aspired to make a display of heroism and a love of honour, imitating (*mimetai*). The deed of Phineas [Phinehas], slew those who were found guilty of the same crimes as Zambrias [Zimri]. Thus, through their valiancy, perished many of the transgressors (*paranomesanton*).

Josephus gave no number of those killed by the sword. However, this slaughter was not for Josephus the only judgement resulting in death at Baal Peor. There followed a disease sent by God—all (the rest) were destroyed by a pestilence, (*loimo*), God having launched this malady (*noson*) upon them.

Josephus thus interpreted the 'plague' of Numbers 25:8f as both a killing in imitation of Phinehas and a disease sent by God upon those idolaters and their accomplices. This disease resulted in 14,000 deaths, which implies that Josephus thinks that 10,000 died of slaughter executed by those men who imitated Phinehas and 14,000 of a heaven-sent disease to make up a total of 24,000 who died by 'plague' in accord with Numbers 25:9.

In Josephus, there were two judgements at Baal Peor—one was human slaughter by the sword, the other a disease and a direct judgement from God.

4. Targumim

All the Targumim (the Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament) have expansions upon Numbers 25:1-9, with the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan being

the longest and Onqelos being the shortest. The Targumim are generally dated in their final form as coming from the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Yet they may preserve early material. In the case of Numbers 25, the portrait of Phinehas coheres with that of Philo, Josephus and other early works. The Targumim on Numbers 25 may therefore preserve some early traditions.

Common to all of them is an interpretation of Numbers 25:4 where the chiefs were to meet as a Sanhedrin to discuss and agree upon a judgement on the idolaters. Pseudo- Jonathan states—

Then the Lord said to Moses: ‘Take all the chiefs of the people and appoint them judges, and let them give capital judgements for the people who go astray after Peor. You shall crucify them on wood before the Memra [the Word] of the Lord against the sun in the early morning and with the sinking of the sun you shall lower them and bury them.’

Here the chiefs were not be judged as in the Hebrew Text but rather were to act as judges. Those found guilty by the court were to be executed and buried on the same day in obedience to Deuteronomy 21:22f. This then led to Moses’s command (v. 5) to execute the idolaters which the Targum implies was carried out. Then follows an account of Phinehas’s action, and in Pseudo-Jonathan twelve miracles which accompany it. After this, 24,000 die in the plague. In Pseudo-Jonathan, God sent the plague in response to Zimri’s sin. Phinehas’s act stopped the ‘plague’, which here was a direct pestilence from God.

Thus, the Targumim, like Josephus, saw two distinct judgements taking place. First, a human court of the chiefs of Israel executed judgement upon the idolaters, and secondly, there was a disease, sent by God.

5. Sipre Numbers and the Talmud of the Land of Israel

Both Sipre Numbers (a rabbinic commentary on Numbers) and the Talmud of the Land of Israel, (a rabbinic commentary produced in Palestine upon the Mishnah; the great rabbinic law code of c.200–220AD), have interesting discussions on Numbers 25. Again, the question of dating poses problems with regard to their use for New Testament research. Sipre is generally dated c.250–350AD and the Talmud c.400AD. Yet, given that they stand within a continuum of biblical interpretation on Numbers 25 in early Judaism, and that

the rabbinic discussions have parallels in early works, both Sipre and the Talmud may preserve some earlier traditions. Further, there is a heuristic value in trying to understand rabbinic exegesis since both Paul and the later rabbis inhabit similar thought worlds and revere and interpret the same biblical text. Sipre quotes Numbers 25:5 and then comments: He [Moses] said to them ‘Call into session the heads of the people as judges, and let them crucify those who sin in the sun.’

Again, the chiefs were to act as judges and execute the idolaters. The judges duly announced the death sentence. However, the tribe of Simeon then came to Zimri saying that while he can live in peace, they have been condemned to death (presumably because Simeon was particularly involved in the idolatry). Zimri then collected 24,000 of his tribe and went to Cozbi asking her to submit to him sexually, and after reassuring her that he was head of the tribe, he brought her into his tent in order to have sex with her. Phinehas was dismayed that no man from Judah or Dan would kill Zimri for his brazen action. He, a man from the tribe of Levi, decided to take action and killed Zimri and Cozbi. There then follows a list of the twelve miracles. With regard to the sixth miracles, Sipre states—‘And sixth, that an angel came and destroyed the people.’

Here 24,000 (presumably the same 24,000 from Simeon) were destroyed by a direct pestilence sent by an angel in order to stop them attacking Phinehas who had killed one of their kinsmen. In Sipre while the judges did pass a death sentence, it does not seem to be carried out. Phinehas acted on his own in killing Zimri and Cozbi, and 24,000 died of the plague (suggesting here that Sipre thinks it is a pestilence sent by God). Despite the protests of the tribe of Simeon to the tribe of Levi that Phinehas wanted to destroy the whole of the tribe of Simeon (possibly alluding to a slaughter subsequent to the killing of Zimri), God commended the zeal of this priest in satisfying God’s wrath.

The picture in the Talmud is similar but with distinctive elements. The Talmud discusses the number of the judges involved in deciding on those involved with Baal Peor and how many were slaughtered—

The Heads of the thousands are six hundred. Heads of hundreds are six thousand. Heads of troops of fifty are twelve thousand. Heads of troops

of ten are sixty thousand. It thus turns out that the judges of Israel [heads of all units] are 78,600. He said to them, ‘Each of you kill two.’ So 157,200 turned out to be put to death.

The initial number seems to be calculated from the census of the total number of Israel of 603,550 in Numbers 1:47;2:32 or 601,730 in Numbers 26:51, duly rounded down to 600,000 and then broken down into units. However, what is most interesting for our purposes is that a number was given for those slain by the judges. What matters is not the exact number but the fact that a number was given. It suggests that there was a tradition in rabbinic sources which did propose a number for the slaughter of the idolaters of Baal Peor. Thus, the Talmud gives two different numbers for the dead of Baal Peor, one for those killed by the judges and one for those killed by disease.

This is not to argue that the 157,200 given as the number of the dead preserves an early tradition, rather that it seems to have been logical to think about how many were slain by the judges. If so, then it is historically plausible to argue that a deduction about the number of the slain, a number distinct from the 24,000 of Numbers 25:9, could well be present in a first century text.

6. Summary of Early Jewish Interpretation of Numbers 25:1-9

There seem to be a number of elements in the interpretation of Numbers 25:1-9 in early Judaism.

1. There was a stress upon the judgement as resulting in human killing. The judgement of God was seen in the slaughter of the idolaters by other Israelites either in imitation of Phinehas or on the orders of the judges. In the Septuagint and in Philo the human slaying was equated with the ‘plague’.

2. A deduction in the Targumim and rabbinic sources from Numbers 25:5 was that the judges did meet to execute punishment upon the idolaters. This punishment was carried out either explicitly in the Talmud or implicitly in the Targumim.

3. Phinehas was commended for his courage and zeal. In Philo and Josephus, Phinehas’s act led to imitation.

4. At least two sources (Josephus and the Talmud) gave a number for those slain by the sword, a number different from 24,000.

This is the historical and literary interpretative context for Paul's use of Numbers 25:1-9 in 1 Corinthians 10:8. We shall now consider how Paul stood within this tradition in reference to the 'case of the missing thousand'.

Numbers 25:1-9 and Exodus 32:28 in 1 Corinthians 10:8

The Context of 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

In 1 Corinthians 10:8 Paul alluded to the Baal Peor incident of Numbers 25:1-9. It occurs within Paul's use of the wilderness traditions in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. This passage forms part of Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in chapters 8-10.

In 10:6-11 Paul focussed on four incidents of Israel's sin in the wilderness. A second person plural imperative in verses 7 and 10 (*mede idolatrai ginesthe*) and (*mede gonguzete*) is contrasted by first person plural hortatory present subjunctives in verses 8 and 9 (*mede porneuomen* and *mede ekpeirazomen*). Stanley Porter has argued that Paul uses hortatory present subjunctives to tackle moral issues in 1 Corinthians, but what is unusual here is the shift to the first person. This suggests that Paul was becoming more inclusive as he moves to his most important and wide-ranging commands as regards behaviour. Thus, as David Pao believes, Paul set the general framework of conditions of idolatry and grumbling in verses 7 and 10 and moves on to focus upon specific behaviours in verses 8 and 9.

Paul's hortatory subjunctive (*mede porneuomen*) makes his concern clear. The Corinthians must not commit sexual immorality. Idolatry and sexual immorality were linked in second Temple Judaism and probably in the practices of the Corinthian idol cults. The message is clear, the Corinthians' participation in the idol feasts risked involvement in cultic sexual immorality and punishment by God.

23,000: Three Options

From where then does the number 23,000 come? There are three options:—

1. The first option is that Paul deliberately took 23,000 as the number of the slain because it was the number of Levites given in Numbers 26:62. Since

Numbers 26: 62 records 23,000 as the number of the Levites over a month old, Paul may have deduced that 23,000 Levites went out and killed one person each, hence, 23,000 fell on one day, with presumably another 1,000 dying later. While Paul is distinctive here in stating that 23,000 fell, we have seen that the later Talmud enshrines a deduction as to the number of the slain.

This option is open to the objection that since Numbers records among the 23,000 those over a month old, this implies some babies in the total, and Paul could not have thought that babies were among those wielding the sword! Yet, in terms of strict logic the 23,000 simply states that all the Levites were over one month old, it does not logically imply that any were babies or children.

2. This option is the most radical. Paul was not referring to the Baal Peor incident at all. He was referring to the Golden Calf incident alone. In terms of structure it would mean seeing the passage as including four imperatives and three incidents/punishments, with Paul referring to the Golden calf incident twice in verses 7 and 8.

This possibility leads to consideration of an intriguing textual variant in Exodus 32:28 LXX. Three different textual traditions have 23,000 not 3,000 as the number of the dead. Two Greek minuscules, 129 (11th–12th centuries), and 76 (13th century), the Coptic Boharic tradition from the 9–10th centuries and the old pre-Jerome Latin codices 103, 104 from the 5th and 6th centuries have 23,000. This suggests that this textual tradition of 23,000 at least goes back to the fourth century given that the Latin codices would have been derived from a Greek manuscript. It is not necessary to argue that 23,000 was in the original Old Greek text for our purposes. If the 23,000 number was extant in a first century manuscript then this could be from where Paul gets his 23,000 number.

3. The third option is that Paul links both the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents together. Both B. J. Koet and David Garland argue that Paul combines the 3,000 of Exodus 32:28 and the 20,000 of Numbers 25:9. Here it is interesting to note that Philo in Spec. 3. 22 (126) has 24,000 as the number dying by the swords of the Levites in the Golden Calf incident. Philo then seems to import the number of the dead from Number 25 into his account of the Golden Calf incident. It suggests at the least that a first century exegete was capable of linking the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents together.

If Paul combined the number of the dead of the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents together, this would mean that Paul, like Philo, saw the ‘plague’ as a metaphor for slaughter by the sword. It would be a harmonization with Numbers 25:9 but unlike previous harmonization attempts, it would have historical and exegetical evidence behind it.

EVALUATION OF THE OPTIONS

Which option is most likely? The first option, while possible, is unlikely since it is difficult to understand why Paul would use the 23,000 living Levites of Numbers 26:62 as the number of the dead Israelite idolaters without any further explanation. His reasoning would be mysterious to any reader of the letter. The second option is also unlikely given the structure of 10:7-10 of four imperatives referring to four linked incidents. Further, it solves the ‘case of the missing thousand’ by creating an even greater difficulty, if Paul refers to the Golden Calf incident then 23,000 is the wrong number for the Golden Calf incident by 20,000! There would be an extra 20,000 to account for. While Paul could be relying upon the Septuagintal variant tradition, the implication is that Paul would be wrong to rely upon the erroneous variant tradition.

The third option seems the most likely. Koet has argued that Paul’s precise wording echoes Exodus 32:28. In LXX it states—‘And the sons of Levi did as Moses spoke to them, and there fell of the people on that day 3,000 men (*epesan ek tou laou en ekeine te hemera eis trischilious andras*).

The text refers to the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident when the Levites rallied to Moses’ cause and killed 3,000 of the idolaters who fell on one day. Paul words the punishment at Baal Peor in the following way—23,000 thousand fell in a single day (*epesan mia hemera eikosi treis chiliades*).

Paul’s wording seems to deliberately echo Exodus 32: 28 with its stress on falling and a single/one day. Exodus 32:28 is more likely than Numbers 25:9 LXX as the source of Paul’s wording since Numbers 25:9 talks about people not falling but dying (*tethnekotes*) from the ‘plague’, and if Paul had wanted to focus simply on Numbers 25:9 it is likely that his wording would have reflected that. If Paul was alluding to the Golden Calf incident then Paul reference’s to ‘one day’ would take on extra significance. As Brevard Childs comments in reference to Exodus 32:28, “‘Today’ marks a decisive moment in the life of the

tribe, and as in Psalm 2:7, it designates the act of special ordination. At the cost of son and brother the Levites have won their position as blessed of the Lord.’

Both Exodus LXX and Paul stressed the punishment as happening on one day, and both used *pipto* to describe the deaths of the idolaters. The thematic links between the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents are many: idolatry (Exod. 32:4; Num. 25: 1-3;20), food offered to idols (Exod. 32:6, Num. 25:2), sexual immorality (Exod. 32:6, Num. 25:1), God’s wrath (Exod. 32; 10, Num. 25:3f), a slaughter (Exod. 32:28, Num. 25:3f), the action of Levites/a Levite (Exod. 32:28; Num. 25:7), a blessing upon the Levites/a Levite (Exod. 32:29; Num. 25:12f), and a ‘plague’ (Exod. 32:35; Num. 25:8f).

Therefore, it is likely that Paul was not referring to the 24,000 deaths by a disease. Rather, as Koet argues, it seems that Paul deliberately linked the judgement of Baal Peor with that of the Golden Calf. If Paul had wanted to indicate that the 23,000 died by a disease sent by God he would most probably have used some other expression. This is confirmed by verse 10 where Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to grumble and alluded to the punishment of a heaven-sent disease when the destroyer, a heaven-sent destroying angel, destroyed the Israelites. Clearly, Paul was able to make clear if he believed that a judgement was a disease that is a direct ‘act of God’ rather than a human act commanded by God.

If this is the case, then Paul was focusing in this verse on 23,000 who are slaughtered by men on one day, alluding both to the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents, rather than the 24,000 who died by a direct God-sent disease. The 3,000 of Paul’s 23,000 alluded back to those killed in the Golden Calf incident by the Levites while the 20,000 of Paul’s 23,000 would refer to 20,000 deaths by the sword of the 24,000 deaths in the Baal Peor incident. No doubt Paul believed that 24,000 died in total at Baal Peor but this was not Paul’s point. Paul’s purpose was to stress the thematic links between the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incident. It is also possible that Paul was drawing upon the tradition enshrined in Philo and Josephus of the imitation of Phinehas. If this is so, then the Levites imitated their kinsman’s example in killing the idolaters.

My proposal outlined above would place Paul within early Jewish interpretative traditions. Since he alluded to the Golden Calf incident here,

Paul may have implied that the Levites executed the idolaters of Baal Peor on the orders of the judges of the tribes just as the Levites executed the idolaters of the Golden Calf incident on the orders of Moses. In terms of Paul's method it would be a quasi-midrash on the Golden Calf incident, a way of linking different texts which shared the same theme together. Wayne Meeks believes that in 1 Corinthians 10:7, Exodus 32:8 was quoted *verbatim* because it was the midrashic basis of the whole passage. Indeed, in early Judaism, the Golden Calf incident was of seminal importance: it was a second fall, the root of all subsequent idolatry of the people of God (including the Baal Peor incident).

The Implications for the Corinthian Church

The implications for the Corinthians are startling. Attendance at idol feasts risked involvement in cultic sexual immorality. Sexual immorality risked a God-authorized punishment by the appointed leaders within the people of God. Discipline in cases of sexual immorality has been present as a theme in chapter 5, when Paul had already passed sentence upon the man who committed sexual immorality with his stepmother, (5:1-5), and had urged the church to execute church discipline (5:12-13), alluding to Exodus traditions. This suggests that the same concern for discipline in cases of sexual immorality may be present in 10:8.

For the Corinthians, it implied that just as punishment was executed upon the idolatrous and sexually immoral in the wilderness, so Paul would zealously impose church discipline upon those who were involved in the sexual immorality of the idol cults. The Corinthians were to imitate Paul in shunning idolatry and sexual immorality and possibly join Paul in imposing judgement on the 'knowers' who were involved in the idol cults and were sexual immoral. This is supported by Paul's concluding exhortation that the Corinthians were to imitate him as he imitates Christ in 11:1.

Remaining Issues

The above discussion leaves three remaining issues to consider. First, would Paul use an existing interpretative tradition here? The probable answer is 'yes' given Paul's identification of the following rock with Christ in 10:4 where Paul interprets the Old Testament narrative of God providing Israel with water from a physical rock through existing interpretative traditions.

Second, would the Corinthian church have understood Paul’s meaning here if he was employing an existing interpretative tradition? Again, the answer is ‘yes’ given that Paul’s entire use of the wilderness rebellion in this passage is pretty dense and implies that he had taught the Corinthians earlier or that the Corinthians were familiar with the wilderness stories.

Third, did Paul know of the Phinehas traditions? In the Old Testament and early Judaism, Phinehas was a famous exemplar of zeal—a zeal which reflects God’s zeal. The concept of zeal, both godly and human, was present in Paul. In 10:22 Christ’s jealous anger was aroused at the Corinthians’ participation in pagan feasts. In Galatians 1:14 Paul was extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions, in Philippians 3:6 his zeal was seen in persecuting the church and in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul was zealous with a godly zeal for the Corinthians. Given these texts, it is likely that Paul would have been familiar with the tradition of Phinehas’s exemplary zeal.

Conclusion

Paul stood within the interpretative traditions of early Judaism. In common with the tradition, he deduced that God’s and Moses’s instructions of Numbers 25:4-5 were carried out. Paul also drew upon verbal and thematic links with the Golden Calf incident and the tradition of the imitation of Phinehas. What is distinctive to Paul is the 23,000 as the number of those slain and his application of the text to the Corinthian church.

Therefore, Paul did not make a mistake nor did he harmonize the 24,000 of Numbers 25:9 with the 23,000 of 1 Corinthians 10:8. Paul was not referring to a God-sent disease, but rather focused upon a slaughter by men, linking the Golden Calf and Baal Peor incidents together. ‘The case of the missing thousand’ may now be considered closed.

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ENDNOTES

1. So John Calvin, see his *1 Corinthians*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries trans. J. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 208-209.
2. Other harmonistic solutions which have been suggested include the suggestion that 23,000 fell on one day and 1,000 on the next day, and that Paul attempted to avoid

exaggeration by knocking off 1000, see the discussion in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to The Corinthians: A Commentary on The Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Wm. B. Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 2000), pp. 739-40; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 462.

3. See for instance, C. K Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; 2nd ed; London: A & C Black, 1994 reprint), p. 225; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on The First Epistle to The Corinthians* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, [1975]), p.168. I suppose it is possible that Paul wrote 24,000 but a scribe erroneously copied 23,000, but there are only a few minor textual variants (81 pc vgmss syh), which look suspiciously like harmonization attempts, to indicate this. See B. & K. Aland *et al.* eds. *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edn., (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), fn. 486.
4. For correction of drafts of first century letters see E. Randolph Richard *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 91-93, 152-154.
5. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 reprint), p. 456.
6. It is new in the sense that no one has argued for it in any detail. The idea itself is present in B. J. Koet, "The OT Background to 1 Cor.10:7-8," in R. Beiringer (ed.) *The Corinthian Correspondence* (BETL 225, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), pp. 612-13, and in Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 462-63.
7. Contra Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 456; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 462.
8. By 'early Judaism' I mean the period from 300BC–500AD. When I refer to the '2nd Temple' period I mean 300BC–70AD.
9. By the Septuagint (LXX) I mean merely the translation of the Pentateuch probably executed in Egypt, rather than the entire Greek translation of the whole OT.
10. My translation. See also the translation by Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (10th printing; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2003).
11. For a discussion on the translation techniques of these verses see John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers* (Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series, 46; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), pp. 421-22.
12. LSJ has a semantic range of six terms for *plege*. 1. Blow or strike. 2. Stroke of lightning. 3. Stroke or impression on the ears. 4. Impact of bodies, atoms. 5. Beat

- of the pulse. 6. A metaphor for a blow or stroke of calamity or a heaven-sent disease. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* 1996 (9th ed; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 1417. BDAG has 1. A sudden hard stroke with some instrument cf. 2 Cor 6:5. 2. Wound caused by a blow cf. Acts 16; 33, 3. A sudden calamity, cf. Rev. 9:18; 20; 11:6; 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18 revised and edited by Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edn., (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 825.
13. Numbers 14:37 LXX reports the death of the spies by a plague from the Lord where it does seem to be a disease, yet it does seem to be a killing by men in Moses’s report of Baal Peor in 31:16(cf. 26:1).
 14. The LXX like the Hebrew Text refers to the Baal Peor incident in Psalm 105 LXX (106): 28-31, where it uses ptosis (falling or destruction, and thrausis, slaughter or destruction to describe the judgement, most probable referring to killing by men directed by God cf. 2 Kgdms LXX 17:9. Phinehas’s act is here imputed as righteousness to him.
 15. Mos.1 55. (300-304), Mut.18 (106-108), Leg.3.86 (242), Somn.1.15 (.88-91), Ebr.17. (72).
 16. Translation by F. H. Colson *Philo Volume VI*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MS.: Harvard University Press, 1984 reprint).
 17. See also 1 Macc. 2:26 where Mattathias burns with zeal for the Law, by killing the Jew who offer a pagan sacrifice just as Phinehas killed Zimri, and 1 Macc 2:54 Mattathias exhorts the Jews to remember Phinehas, cf. 4 Macc 18:12.
 18. A.J. 4.6.1. (100)-13. (158). Translation by H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus* Volume I, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MS.: Harvard University Press, 1978 reprint). See also the article by W. C. Van Unnik “Josephus’s Account of The Story of Israel’s Sin with Alien Women in The Country of Midian (Numbers 25:1ff),” in *Travels in The World of The Old Testament: Studies Presented to Professor M. A. Beek on The Occasion of His 65th birthday* (ed. M. S. H. G. Heerma van Voss, Ph. H. J. Houwink ten Cate and N. A. van Uchelen; Studia Semitica Neerlandica, nr. 16; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), pp. 241-61.
 19. A.J.4.6.12. (154).
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. This suggests that Josephus saw ‘plague’ as an all-encompassing term here that included human killing by the sword and disease. However, Louis Feldman suggests that Josephus may have been working from the Hebrew Text and mistaken twenty

- for ten. See *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary* Volume 3, Judean Antiquities 1-4, translation and commentary by Louis H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 384, fn. 445.
22. For a discussion of Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus on Phinehas see Louis H. Feldman, "The Portrait of Phinehas by Philo, Pseudo-Philo and Josephus", in *JQR* 92(2002): 315-345.
 23. See Sir 45:23f. and L.A.B.28:1-5; 46:4; 47:1-3; 48:1f. Note the parallels between Tg. Ps-J. Num.. 25:8, 12 and L.A.B. 48:1 where in both Phinehas is saved from the anger of some Israelites at Zimri's killing, and Phinehas is considered to be like Elijah in that he does not die. L.A.B. focuses on Phinehas with regard to Numbers 25 and has no wider discussion. See also Martin McNamara's arguments that Tg. Neof Numbers 21 & 24 has parallels in Philo, Josephus, Qumran, and L.A.B. consequently, Neofiti Numbers preserves early traditions. Martin McNamara, "Early Exegesis the Palestinian Targum (Neofiti) Numbers Chapter 21," *SNTSU* 16 (1991): 127-49 and 'Early Exegesis the Palestinian Targum (Neofiti 1) Numbers Chapter 24' *PIBA* 16 (1993): 57-69. If the Tg Num. 24 preserves early traditions then it is likely that Tg Num. 25, which continues the story, also contains early traditions.
 24. Tg.Ps-J Num. 25:4. Translation by E. G. Clarke, Martin McNamara, gen. ed., *Targum Neofiti-Numbers: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan-Numbers* (The Aramaic Bible Volume 4; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).
 25. Tg. Ps-J Num. 25:7-9.
 26. Cf Sir 45:23f where Phinehas's zeal results in an eternal covenant being established with him and his descendants.
 27. For other rabbinic sources on Num. 25, see m. Sanh. 9:6, which records that he who has a sexual relationship with an Aramean woman, will incur the beatings of zealots, an allusion to Phinehas and possibly the first century practice of the Zealots. Martin Hengel argues that Phinehas's zeal was a model for imitation in the first century and that the Zealots may have derived their name from 'Phinehas the Zealot', Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into The Jewish Freedom Movement in The Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* trans. D. Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), p. 174. My thanks to Dr. David Instone Brewer for drawing my attention to this book. For other interpretations, see Num.. Rab.10:23; Eccl. Rab. 3:16; b.Sanh.89a-b.
 28. Both describe Phinehas and his miracles in similar terms reflecting a traditional picture of Phinehas. Sipre Num. 131 on Num. 25:1-9; j. Sanh.10:2.
 29. Translation here by Jacob Neusner, *The Components of The Rabbinic Documents*,

- XII, Sifre to Numbers 3, (South Florida Academic Series, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).
30. Cf. L.A.B. 47:1 which also notes the zeal of Pinehas and the angel’s protection of Phinehas by destroying 24,000. This suggests the presence of early traditions here in Sipre.
 31. Translation by J. Neusner *The Talmud of the Land of Israel vol. 31 Sanhedrin and Makkot*, (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
 32. Some witnesses have gonguzomen here, it can probably be attributed to an assimilation to the previous verse, see Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 471.
 33. Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in The Greek New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (Volume 1, Studies in New Testament Greek, New York: Peter Land, 1989), pp. 329-30.
 34. David Pao, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme*, (New Studies in Biblical Theology, Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 156.
 35. Cf. the 2nd Temple texts above and Wis 14:12; T .Reu. 4:6. For the NT see Acts 15:29; Rev 2:14; 20. For Graeco-Roman culture see Juvenal Satires 6.314-341 and the discussion in Bruce W. Winter *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Culture and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 94.
 36. I owe this suggestion to a private e-mail with Dr. Desmond Alexander, my thanks to him to drawing my attention to this possibility.
 37. See for instance 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor.3:1-18; Gal. 4; 25; 2 Tim. 3:8.
 38. The textual variants are recorded in J. W. Wevers, (ed.), *Exodus* (Septuaginta, 2, 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) on Exod. 32:28. It is possible but unlikely that this textual variant is due to a Christian scribe harmonizing Exod. 32:28 with 1 Cor.10:8. There are some differences between Paul’s wording and the LXX which would be unlikely if a Christian scribe was deliberately harmonizing the text. In addition, there is no early Christian tradition that Paul in 1 Cor. 10:8 is referring to Exod. 32:28 not Num. 25:9. Wevers argues that the replacement of eis by eikosi is probably the origin of the 23,000 in Exod. 32:28, J. W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (Society of Biblical literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series, 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 535.
 39. My thanks to Dr. Peter Head for these suggestions regarding the textual possibilities.
 40. Koet, “OT Background,” p. 611, Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 462-63.
 41. Philo does know the ‘right’ number of 3,000 as the number of the dead from the Golden Calf incidents, see Mos. 2.32. (172-174), Ebr. 15. (67).

42. So Koet, "OT Background," p. 611, and Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 462-63.
43. No Hebrew copy has 23,000 as the number of the dead of the Golden Calf incident.
44. Koet, "The OT Background," Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 462-63.
45. My translation.
46. Translation from NRSV.
47. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (The Old Testament Library, Louisville: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 571.
48. For the use of *pipto* is used in the LXX in reference to falling to the ground after being slain by the sword see Josh. 8:25; Judg. 4:16.
49. See Gen. 26:8 LXX where Isaac's 'playing' with Rebecca has a clear sexual connotation, t. Sotah 6.6 on Gen. 21:9 connects 'playing' with idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed, and Philo Mos. 2.31.(162) links the Golden Calf with all sorts of vices. Ex 32:6 LXX, which Paul quotes in 1 Cor 10:7, records eating sacrificial food, as does Num. 25:2 LXX.
50. Koet, "OT Background," p. 611.
51. This may refer either to Num.. 14 or 16.
52. This thematic linking of different passages was a common in rabbinic exegesis; see Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Biblical and Theological Classics Library 5; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 34-35.
53. By quasi-midrash I mean Paul employs a form of rabbinic exegetical technique, not that 1 Cor. 10 is a systematic midrash or that his interpretation can be identified with that of the later Midrashim, the commentaries on the OT.
54. Wayne Meeks, "'And Rose up to Play': Midrash and Paraenesis in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22," *JSNT* 16 (1982): 64-78, 69.
55. For idolatry in the wilderness period, and especially the Golden Calf incident see Exod.. 32:1-35; 34:14-17; Num.. 25:1-3; 31:16; Deut. 9:12-21; 32:1-43; Josh 22:17; Neh. 9:18; Ps. 105 LXX (106):19-28; Ezek. 20:1-24; Hos. 9:10; Wis. 11:15-16; Acts 7:39-41; Rom. 1:23; 1 Cor. 10:6-11; 2 Cor. 3:7-11; Rev. 2:14-15; 1 QS I.0-15?; CD I.15-20?; Philo, Mos I.298-304;II. 161-173; Josephus, A.J.4.126-158; L.A.B. 12:1-10; 47:1-2; m.Meg.4:10; m. Sanh. 10:3.
56. This would imply that Paul's exhortation to imitation is parallel to the tradition of the imitation of Phinehas.
57. For Paul's use of the following rock tradition, see Peter Enns "The 'Moveable Well' in 1 Cor. 10:4: An Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text," *BBR* 6 (1996): 23-38. Even if most of our sources for the tradition of a following rock/well are late and fanciful, an early interpretative tradition is there in L.A.B.10:17; 11:15. Greg K. Beale, "Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong

- Texts? Revisiting the Debate Seventeen Years Later in the Light of Peter Enns’ Book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*,” *Them.* 32.1 (2006): 18-43, 32-34 argues that the rock that follows in 1 Cor. is not a physical rock but Christ who is identified as the divine rock who provides Israel’s needs. Either way Paul is here drawing upon earlier interpretative traditions.
58. It is also possible that the letter carrier could explain the nature of Paul’s allusion. Peter Head has argued for Paul’s use of letter carriers to explain the meaning in Paul letters to his churches, Peter Head, *Letter Carriers in The Pauline Tradition* (Cambridge: NT Seminar Paper, unpublished 2004).
 59. Exod.. 6;25; Num.. 25:7-13; Josh 22:13-33; Judg 20;28; 1 Chron. 6;4; 50; 9:20; Ezra 7:5; 8:2; 33; Ps. 105 LXX (106) 30-31; Sir 45:23f; 1 Macc. 2:26; 2:54 ; 4 Macc. 18:12; Philo Mos.1.55; Josephus A.J.4.6.12.; L.A.B.28:1-5; 46:4; 47:1-3; 48:1f; Tg. Ps-J Num. 25:7-13; m. Sanh. 9:6; Sipre Num. 131 on Num. 25:1-9; j. Sanh.10:2. See also the discussion in K. Erik Thoeness, *Godly Jealousy: A Theology of Intolerant Love* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2005), pp. 141-61.
 60. Cf. Rom. 10:2, 19; 11:11, 14; 1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1, 12; 2 Cor. 7:7, 11; 9:2.