

What was Baal Peor in the Bible?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Baal-Peor.html>

Baal Peor, or the Baal of Peor, was a local deity worshiped by the Moabites. When the Israelites, following Moses to the Promised Land, were in the vicinity of Peor, some of them fell into idolatry and worshiped Baal Peor. As a result of their sin, the men of Israel were judged by God.

The story of Baal Peor starts when Balaak, the king of the Moabites, hired Balaam, a prophet-for-hire, to curse Israel. Balaak had seen the progress and might of Israel and was trying to do something that would stop them. Balaam took the money but was unable to curse Israel because the Lord would not allow him to do so. Balaam then met with the king of Moab and went through the motions of receiving a word from God; each time (seven times total) he ended up blessing Israel instead of cursing them (Numbers 23-24). At the time of the third oracle, Balaam and Balaak were observing the Israelite camp from a place called Peor (Numbers 23:28). By the end of the seventh try, Balaak finally got the message that Balaam would not curse Israel for him.

In Numbers 25, we find that the women of Moab began to seduce the men of Israel to sexual sin and to sacrifice to their gods. Since the gods of the pagans were often fertility gods, the “worship” often involved sexual acts. The incident is recorded in Numbers 25:1-3: “While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord’s anger burned against them.” As a judgment against the Israelites’ sin, God sent a plague among the people (verse 9).

According to Numbers 31:16, the women did this on the advice of Balaam. It appears that, since he could not curse Israel, he found another way to fulfill the wishes of Balaak, who was paying him. Balaam knew that, if the Israelite men could be seduced into idol worship, that God Himself would curse them.

The word peor simply means “opening” and is the name of the place (a mountain or a spot on a mountain) from which Balaak and Balaam observed the camp of Israel. The meaning of the word may or may not be significant to the naming of the place. (Perhaps there was a cave opening there or some kind of mountain pass, or perhaps the place was called Peor for some other reason.)

The word baal is simply the word for “lord,” “master,” or “ruler.” Baal became a technical or semi-technical name for the gods of the Canaanites. There was not just one god named Baal, but there were many Baals (many Canaanite “lords”). That is why Numbers 25:3 in the NIV does not use “Baal Peor” as if it were a proper name for a god but uses the term more as a description: “the Baal of Peor,” which could also be translated “the Lord of Peor” or “Lord of the Opening.” Peor might refer to the mountain top from which Balaam and Balaak observed Israel, or it could have something to do with the literal meaning of the word peor (opening), which, in the context of Canaanite worship (and the context of Numbers 25), could have a sexual or scatological connotation. Perhaps the top of the mountain was called Peor because that is where the sexual rites took place.

In any case, Baal Peor is really the Baal of Peor or simply the Lord of Peor, which distinguishes this Baal from all the others. This particular god is referred to again in Numbers 25:5. Then Numbers 25:18 speaks of “the Peor incident,” which sounds like Peor is being used as a place name rather than something based on the meaning of the word.

Deuteronomy 4:3 uses Baal Peor as a place name to refer to the incident recorded in Numbers 25 and in the same verse as a designation for the pagan god. “You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did at Baal Peor. The LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor.” Joshua 22:17 speaks of the “sin of Peor,” and Hosea 9:10 uses Baal Peor to refer to the place where this incident happened: “When they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved.” Psalm 106:28 also refers to the Baal of Peor: “They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods.”

So it seems that Peor and Baal Peor are both used as place names to refer to the place where Israel sinned in sexual immorality and in worship of a particular Baal. The Baal in question is referred to as Baal Peor. Perhaps he was already referred to by this name, as he was seen to be in charge of this particular location, or perhaps this is the name that the Israelites gave him after the fact.

In any case, this incident at Baal Peor stands out as the first of many times that Israel fell into immorality and idolatry, and it also serves as a warning to Christians. The Corinthians would have been particularly susceptible to this kind of temptation, as the city of Corinth was filled with idolatry and sexual immorality. The question of eating at idol temples was debated within the congregation. Although he does not mention Baal Peor by name, Paul refers to that incident in 1 Corinthians 10:8: “We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.” In verses 11-14, Paul goes on to say, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No

temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

Many things have changed since Israel’s sin at Baal Peor, but the basic temptations have not. Sexual temptation is ever present in modern societies, and the idols of money, pleasure, fame, and “the good life” also vie to take the place of the One True God in the hearts of many people. Even today, Christians must guard against the sin of Baal Peor.