



Tall el-Hammam that is identified by most scholars as Abel-Shittim.

Skeptics and Bible critics have claimed the Bible contradicts itself about how many fornicating Israelites were killed by the plague at Acacia Grove, (Shittim in Hebrew). One account says 24,000 and another account says 23,000, making the Bible unreliable, they claim. How many were killed at Acacia Grove?

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION:

“When the Israelites dwelt in Shittim they committed adultery with the daughters of Moab. God struck

them with a plague. How many people died in that plague?

(a) Twenty-four thousand (Numbers 25:1 and 9)

(b) Twenty-three thousand (I Corinthians 10:8)”

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES SAY

Let’s look at the relevant scriptures:.

“While the Israelites were camped at Acacia Grove, some of the men defiled themselves by having sexual relations with local Moabite women . . . the plague against the Israelites was stopped, but not before 24,000 people had died”—Numbers 25:1,9 NLT

“Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of the people. Impale them facing the

sun for Yahweh, to deflect his burning anger from Israel.’ Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you will put to death those of his people who have committed themselves to the Baal of Peor’”—Numbers 25:4,5 NJB

“The LORD issued the following command to Moses: ‘Seize all the ringleaders and execute them before the LORD in broad daylight, so his fierce anger will turn away from the people of Israel. So Moses ordered Israel’s judges, ‘Each of you must put to death the men under your authority who have joined in worshipping Baal of Peor’”—Numbers 25:4,5 NLT

“Let us not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell within a single day”—1 Corinthians 10:8 NAB

SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS

“The number mentioned here is slightly different from the account in Numbers 25:9, which states that twenty-four thousand died. This discrepancy can be understood in various ways, such as a rounding of numbers or a focus on those who died in a single day versus the total number.”—Bible Hub Study Bible

“In order to reconcile these statements, it may be observed that perhaps 23,000 fell directly by the plague, and 1,000 were slain by Phinehas and his companions (Grotius); or it may be that the number was between 23,000 and 24,000, and it might be expressed in round numbers by either – Macknight. At all events, Paul has not exceeded the truth. There were at least 23,000 that fell, though there might have been more. The probable supposition is, that the 23,000 fell immediately by the hand of God in the plague, and the other thousand by the judges; and as Paul’s design was particularly to mention the proofs of the immediate divine displeasure, he refers only to those who fell by that, in illustration of his subject”—Barnes Notes on the Bible

CONCLUSION

There are two possible explanations:

(1) The 1,000 difference between the Numbers account and the reference in 1 Corinthians in the number of those killed may be due to rounding. For example, if 23,400-23,600 were killed, the totals rounded off to 23,000 or 24,000 would not reasonably be considered errors.

(2) More likely, however, apparently 23,000 were directly killed by the plague, whereas 1,000 **“leaders of the people”, or “ringleaders”,** were killed by the judges of Israel, impaled and exposed to public view (**Numbers 25:4,5 NJB**).

By looking at the scriptural context objectively, we see there is no real contradiction. Skeptics and critics of the Bible **“spout off criticism” (Proverbs 16:4 NLT)**, oftentimes because they think they have **“valid criticism” (Proverbs 25:12 NLT)** of the Bible. The authenticity of the Bible, however, is so strong that we don’t have to **“ignore criticism” (Proverbs 13:18 NLT)**. In fact, **“honest criticism” (Proverbs 28:23 NLT)** is welcomed, because **“God is true” (Romans 3:4 NLT)**, and **“the word of the Lord remains forever” (1 Peter 1:25)**.