

The Liberator and the Zealot

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In his recently published book, *The Zealot and the Emancipator: John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and the Struggle for American Freedom*, H.W. Brands contrasts the attitudes of Brown and Lincoln toward slavery, and the methods used by each to end it. In doing so, he makes the case that the terms “liberator” and “zealot” accurately encapsulate the role of each in abolishing slavery.

Lincoln was a statesman and a politician who felt bound by the substance and procedures of constitutional law. As much as he detested slavery and hoped for its demise, he did not believe that the federal government had the right to abolish slavery in individual states. This would violate their sovereignty, which he understood the Constitution to forbid. When Lincoln finally freed the slaves in 1863 by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, he framed it not as a principled abolition of slavery but rather as “a fit and necessary war measure” needed to cripple the logistical capabilities of the Confederate army. For this reason, he somewhat paradoxically freed only the slaves residing in the states that had seceded. Nonetheless, this was a first step toward eliminating slavery altogether, and Lincoln himself saw the proclamation not simply as a war time measure but as a clarion call for freedom for all.

By contrast, John Brown, using religious terminology, described slavery as wickedness and an offense against God, and consequently the effort to eradicate it a divinely ordained mission. As an institution that used violence to achieve its ends, slavery could, if necessary, be countered with violence in order to eradicate it immediately and decisively. Brown never wavered in the belief that his cause and the methods used to achieve them were justified. In his final speech, delivered on November 2, 1859, at his trial for his role in the insurrection at Harper’s Ferry, he proclaimed,

“I believe that to have interfered as I have done—as I have always freely admitted I have done—in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right.” Though in his lifetime Brown emancipated a handful of slaves at most, many see his actions at Harper’s Ferry as the match that sparked the conflagration that was the Civil War and therefore, ultimately, a catalyst for the abolition of slavery.

The contrast between Lincoln and Brown can be useful in understanding the Pinehas narrative in general and his character and actions in particular. Numbers Chapter 25 opens with the Israelites consorting with Midianite women and consequently worshipping the Midianite god Baal Peor. They are described as being joined or coupled with (*vayitzamed*) Baal Peor (25:3); the connection to Baal Peor mirrors the sexual connection with the women, as Ibn Ezra points out. This angers God, who commands Moses, “Take the chieftains of the people and expose them in broad daylight before God, so that God’s anger will be turned back” (25:4). Moses commands Israel’s judges to carry out this divine command. This means that before Pinehas arrives on the scene a divine response to Israel’s sinfulness is being acted upon. Divine law is prevailing. Moses and his lieutenants are operating in the “Lincoln mode.”

This fact is emphasized by the Aramaic Targum Onkelos and others who understand “them” in verse 4 as referring not to the chieftains—who might have been held responsible for not preventing the idolatrous orgy—but to those who had sinned. The chieftains were tasked with judging and executing those found guilty. This reading foregrounds the legal nature of the proceedings.

Suddenly, the scene shifts. Zimri ben Salu, the chieftain of the tribe of Simeon, brings a Midianite woman, Cozbi

daughter of Zur, into the Israelite camp before Moses and the people (25:6). It is clear from verse 8 that this “bringing” involved intercourse with this woman in a tent that was within plain sight. The reaction of the people is to weep (*loc. cit.*). It would seem that the congregation—and Moses—are at a loss as to how to respond to this breathtaking act of sexual provocation and rebellion.

Pinehas now enters the scene, but he does not act immediately. First, he takes in the outrageous behavior of Zimri and the failure of the people to respond. He decides that if no one else will act he will; he therefore arises from the midst of the assembly (25: 7). This is both an indication of intent to act and a declaration that he is separating himself from the passivity of the assembly. How he will act is not yet clear. And then he takes a spear into his hand (*loc. cit.*), and we know that he has decided to inflict violence upon Zimri and his consort. He enters the tent and runs them both through with the spear, making sure to pierce Cozbi’s womb, a horribly punitive reenactment of Zimri’s act of penetration (25:8).

Pinehas operates in the “Brown mode.” He sees Zimri’s act as an outrage and concludes that immediate and dramatic action is needed. There is no divine imperative forthcoming, but Pinehas is confident that it is God’s will that Pinehas avenge His honor.

It is striking that Pinehas does not consider the possibility that in acting without consulting Moses, he, like Zimri, is undermining Moses’s authority. It is to address this problem that the Talmudic sage Shmuel says in Sanhedrin 82a that what Pinehas “saw” before him was the verse, “There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord” (Proverbs 21, 30). Shmuel is alluding to a teaching elsewhere that in some situations God’s honor takes precedence over the dignity of even the greatest sage (Berakhot 19b). Like John Brown, Pinehas sees the moment as one in which acting on behalf of God takes precedence over conventional norms of law and authority.

It is perhaps for this reason that the Torah feels it necessary to include God’s approval of Pinehas’s actions after the fact (Numbers 25: 10–13). No person, not even Moses, was

empowered to place his seal of approval on Pinehas’s extrajudicial act; only God Himself could do this.

We are not Pinehas; we do not hear God’s voice expressing approval of taking the law into our own hands. The very fact that divine assent was required in Pinehas’s case suggests that we should think twice and then twice more before acting outside the law. Reflecting upon the consequences, and the unethical nature, of extrajudicial actions such as John Brown’s—not to mention those taken by individuals in our own time who are acting on the basis of patent lies—should make us wary of acting outside the law, especially when the action will involve violence. The Talmudic sages themselves were uncomfortable with Pinehas’s actions and explained them away. Yet Pinehas is part of our tradition, and his actions highlight tensions with which we continue to grapple.