

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

* * * ISRAEL'S WILDERNESS WANDERINGS * * *

S.L.H.
Soli Deo Gloria!

OVERVIEW OF NUMBERS 22-24. Three chapters in the Book of Numbers are devoted to Balaam, more than any other subject. Moses referred to Balaam often in Deuteronomy, and Joshua, Nehemiah, and Micah all commented on him. In the N.T., "the way of Balaam" (2Pet2:15), "the error of Balaam" (Jude11), and "the doctrine of Balaam" (Rev2:14) are mentioned. By mere frequency of allusion in the Bible, Balaam must be an important figure.

In Numbers 21:21-35, the Israelites had passed through the Amorite lands of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, who was a "giant" (Heb., Rephaim; cf. Gen15:20; Deut3:11), thoroughly defeating them. As Israel approached Moab (Num22:1), having witnessed their defeat of the Amorites, Balak, the king of Moab, was terrified of the Israelites and their God (Num22:2-4). In desperation, he attempted to hire a strange and enigmatic prophet named Balaam to curse the Israelites; though Balaam desired to do so, the LORD would not allow it. In the end, Balaam counseled Balak to tempt the men of Israel to commit harlotry with Moabite women in order to lure them into worshipping their pagan gods (Num25:1-3; Cp., 1Kgs11:1-4), expecting that this would cause the LORD Himself to curse His people; the Lord Jesus Christ condemns this as "the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev2:14).

CHAPTER 22

BALAK HIRES BALAAM TO CURSE ISRAEL

Having witnessed the Israelites defeat the Amorites (which included giants; Num21:21-35), Balak, king of Moab, attempts to hire the strange and enigmatic prophet Balaam of Mesopotamian to curse the Israelites (cf. Deut23:4).

- [1] "Moab", the people descended from Lot by means of an incestuous relationship with his elder daughter (Gen19:36-37), was located east of the "Jordan" river immediately across from "Jericho". Thus, at end of 40 years of wandering, the Israelites are at the place where Joshua would lead the nation into the Promised Land.
- [2] Israel had defeated Sihon, king of the "Amorites", and Og, king of Bashan (Num21:21-35), who was a giant (cf. Deut3:11).
- [3] Note that at this time the Israelites had become "many" in fulfillment of the promise the LORD made to Abraham (cf. Gen17:4-6; 22:17). When "the many" occurs in Scripture without an explicit referent, it is a covenant descriptor used of the nation of Israel (see the article, WHO ARE THE MANY?). Moab was terrified of Israel (Cp., Josh2:9-11); their encampment of ~2 million people would have been enormous. However, the LORD had not given the land of Moab to

the Israelites, but to the descendants of Lot, and the LORD had specifically commanded Israel not to fight with Moab (cf. Deut2:9).

- [4] The implication is that Balak, "king of the Moabites", was in league with "Midian" (a Semitic people like Moab; cf. Gen25:2; Num22:7; 25:15-18).
- [5] "Balaam" dwelt in "Pethor, which is by the river" (i.e., the Euphrates river); thus, Balaam was from Mesopotamia (Cp., Deut23:4), ~500 miles away. "Balaam" means *devourer of the people*, and "Pethor" means *soothsayer*. Note that the multitude of the Israelites is again emphasized (i.e., "they cover the face of the earth").
- [6] Balak desires to hire Balaam to "curse" the Israelites in order to gain a military advantage over them; his first offer was merely a request, though coming from a king it would have had considerable gravity. Balaam's reputation as a prophet was that "he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed", an attribute of the LORD (Cp., Gen12:3).

The Prophet Balaam. Balaam is a strange and enigmatic figure. He was a renowned magician/soothsayer/diviner (Cp., Num24:1; Josh13:22) of Mesopotamia (i.e., Babylonia) in possession of occultic powers. He may have been part of, or original head, of the Babylonian caste of wise men (i.e., Magi). Having had some sort of experience with JEHOVAH, Balaam appears to have added the God of Israel to his pagan pantheon¹, and he attempted to use his occultic powers to manipulate the LORD as he did with his pagan gods (Cp., Simon the sorcerer; Act8:9-24). However, Scripture makes clear that Balaam's motive was not genuine devotion to the LORD, but filthy lucre (cf. 2Pet2:15; Jude11). Balaam was eventually slain by Joshua and the Israelites when he was found among their enemies (Josh13:21-22).

- [7] The "elders" of "Moab" and "Midian" offered to "reward" Balaam for his use of "divination" against Israel. Note, all uses of "divination" were an "abomination" prohibited by the LORD (cf. Deut18:9-12).
- [8] Balaam initially sought to inquire of the LORD concerning the request of the Moabites and Midianites to curse the Israelites. However, to seek additional revelation from the LORD is unnecessary when He has already clearly spoken relative to this issue; namely, the LORD has blessed Israel (Gen12:2; 22:17; 49:25; cf. v12). The LORD will never condone the cursing of a people He has blessed (Cp., Gen12:3).
- [9] Indeed, "God" communicated directly with Balaam.
- [11] This "people", "who covereth the face of the earth", are the LORD's "peculiar treasure", "above all people", in "covenant" with Him (Exod19:5); Balaam was seemingly ignorant of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

¹ Many are confused by the apparent conversions of pagans such as Balaam or Simon the sorcerer. By definition, pagans believe in many gods, and when they encounter the true and living God (i.e., JEHOVAH or Jesus) they are often inclined to simply add Him to their pantheons. This is not a genuine conversion; for examples of genuine pagan conversions, see 2 Kings 5:15 and 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

- [12] God forbids Balaam to go to Moab, or to "curse" Israel, "for they are blessed". God will not allow anyone to "curse" Israel, whom He has blessed (Gen12:2-3; Cp., Deut23:5).
- [14] Balaam initially appeared as if to obey the LORD's commands. Thus, he understood the LORD's will in the matter.
- [15] Balak enhanced the prestige of his offer.
- [17] Balak's second offer included a "promot[ion]" of Balaam to a position within his court of "great honor". Beyond that, Balaam is encouraged to ask for "whatsoever" he desires.
- [18] Balaam responds to the offer of remuneration (i.e., "give me his house of silver and gold"). However, he again declined the request to curse the Israelites, asserting "I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God". Note, he referred to JEHOVAH as "**my** God", suggesting he had some sort of relationship with Him. How that relationship came about is unknown, although he dwelt in Mesopotamia (Deut23:4), the original home of Abraham (which would have not been completely without a witness to the God of Abraham).
- [19] The LORD had clearly spoken to Balaam on this issue (v12), so additional inquiry was unnecessary. The only thing that had changed was that Balaam had been offered a promotion to do what the LORD had forbid.
- [20] God relented and permitted Balaam to "go with them", but He made clear that as a prophet, "yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do" (Cp., Deut18:20). It is not clear why God would allow Balaam to go, knowing He would not permit him to curse the Israelites; perhaps His intent was to provide a prophetic witness to Balak and the Moabites regarding His covenantal blessing of the children of Israel (however, cf. v22).
- [21] Balaam presumably understood and accepted the LORD's very specific conditions (v20).
- [22] God was **angry** that Balaam went, indicating His desire was for him not to do so. The proper understanding may be that God had permitted Balaam to go, but understanding he could only say what God authorized him to say, and that God would never authorize him to curse the Israelites, He had hoped that Balaam would conclude there could be no purpose in going. In that way, Balaam would be taking some ownership of the decision to refrain from cursing the Israelites. To deter him from going, "the angel of the LORD" physically blocked his path.
- [23] While the angel of the LORD was unseen by Balaam and his two servants, He was seen by the "ass" (Cp., Josh5:13). In this first instance, the ass veered into "the field".
- [24] The angel of the LORD repositioned Himself in a place in which the path went between two "walls", which would make it more difficult for the ass to avoid contact with the angel of the LORD.
- [25] In this second instance, when the ass attempted to avoid the angel of the LORD, it "crushed Balaam's foot against the wall".

- [26] The angel of the LORD again repositioned Himself, this time "in a narrow place", such that there could be no possibility for the ass to avoid him.
- [27] In this third instance, the ass simply collapsed to the ground to avoid contact with the angel of the LORD. Balaam repeatedly "smote the ass" (cf. Prov12:10).
- [28] The "LORD opened the mouth of the ass" in order to rebuke Balaam (Cp., 2Pet2:15-16).
- [29] That Balaam reviled the rebuke of the "ass" is probably an indicator of the rebellion he harbored in his heart; he had no intention of being dissuaded from travelling to see Balak, undoubtedly lured by his offer of reward (cf. 2Pet2:15).
- [30] The "ass" asked Balaam to think deeply about what was happening. She had never before behaved in this apparently disobedient manner, such that to do so now should suggest to Balaam that something unusual was amiss. At this point, Balaam was having a conversation with his "ass", an even more extraordinary event; he should have concluded this was an occasion of divine intervention.
- [31] The "LORD opened the eyes of Balaam" to see into the spiritual world (Cp., 2Kgs6:17). It is interesting to note that it was not stated that the LORD did so for the ass, raising the question as to whether animals have an insight into the spiritual realm that men normally do not?
- [32] The LORD's verbal rebuke of Balaam is that "thy way is perverse before me". The definition of "perverse" is literally *turned aside*, or *distorted from the right* (Cp., 2Pet2:15; Jude11). Note that when the LORD said, "I went out to withstand thee", He identified with the angel of the LORD (i.e., a theophany).
- [33] The refusal of the ass to contact the angel of the LORD had actually saved Balaam's life three times, for which Balaam had repeatedly smote the ass.
- [34] Balaam confesses his sin (Cp., 2Sam12:13), at least against his ass, and offers to return home.
- [35] At this point, the LORD commands Balaam to "Go with the men", but reiterates the condition, "only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak" (Deut18:20; cf. v20 for possible motive on God's part).
- [36] Balaam obeyed the LORD and went to see "Balak" at "Arnon", a city on the very border of Moab (i.e., Balak seemingly travels to meet Balaam at his first entrance into Moab).
- [37] Balak expressed astonishment that Balaam had not come to meet him immediately upon the king's request, especially with the reward and promotion that had been offered (i.e., kings are not accustomed to subjects hesitating to cater to their wishes, though Balaam was not Balak's subject). Nonetheless, Balak assumed that Balaam's presence was an indication of an intent to fulfill the king's wishes.

- [38] Balaam's opening position with the king is that, "The word that God putteth in my mouth, that [**only**] shall I speak" (consistent with Deut18:20). Thus, Balaam acknowledged that God was a higher authority than Balak, king of Moab (Cp., Act5:29). Furthermore, it suggests that prophets received the message they were to communicate by divine dictation (i.e., the very words they were to speak).
- [39] "Kiriath-huzoth" means *city of streets*, but its location (presumably on the border in Moab) is unknown.
- [40] It was likely the entrails of the sacrificed "oxen and sheep" were "sent to Balaam", presumably to be used in his occultic rituals.
- [41] Balaam was brought by Balak to "the high places of Baal". In a practical sense, from there the "utmost" of the Israelites could be viewed in the plain below. However, this was a place devoted to the worship of "Baal"; thus, the confrontation is actually one between JEHOVAH, the God of Israel, and "Baal", a pagan god worshiped by all the peoples of the ancient near east (Cp., Exod12:12; 1Kgs18:20-40).