

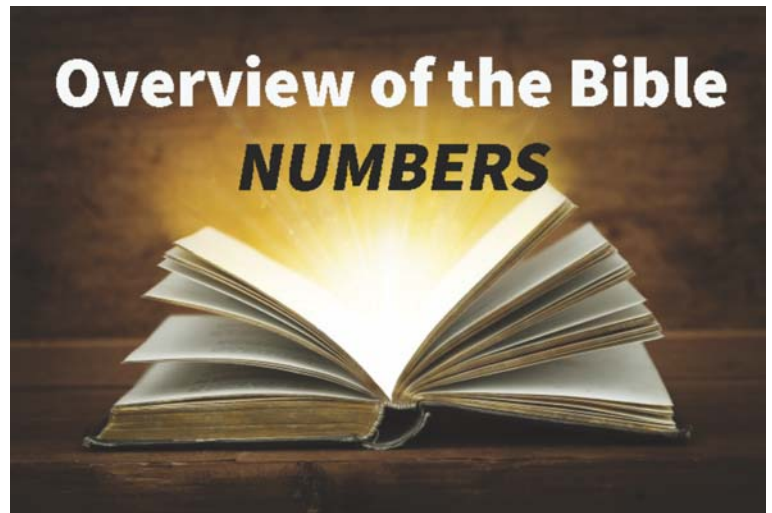
NUMBERS:

Balaam the Diviner

Numbers 22-24 – Lesson 33

Wednesday, February 24, 2021

This particular section of Numbers is among the best known of the whole book; The Israelites' reputation precedes them. Causing panic in Balak, Moab's head of state. It is not evident why Balak's father, Zippor is frequently named, especially in ch. 22 (22:2,4,10,16, 23:18), but could there be an intended comparison between Balak, whose father is Zippor, leading Moab, and Moses, whose wife is Zipporah, leading Israel?



Israel, when in distress, yearned for a return to Egypt. But where can the Moabites go? Where is their security? Military resistance is a risky option. A person inundated in fear can only speak in hyperbole. For Balak, the Israelites are so numerous as to "*cover the face on the earth*" (22:5). In so speaking about the Israelites, his concerns parallel those of the Pharaoh of the oppression/exodus (Ex. 1:9-10).

In such a crisis perhaps one's trump card is magic. To that end, Balak sends an urgent message to Balaam who lives a considerable distance from Moab, a Pethor, south of Carchemish on the Euphrates.

Balaam's job, should he decide to accept it, is simple enough. He is to pronounce a curse on the Israelites that will immobilize them, making them especially vulnerable to defeat by Balak. To make the offer as tempting as possible, Balak throws in an almost irresistible honorarium (22:7, 17). Behind this approach is the idea that religious power can be purchased, that it is a commodity, a marketable item. In the time of the apostles, Simon the magician thought that the power of the Spirit for one's life could be bought for cash, as if it were an item on a menu. And really good diviners do not come cheap.

Balaam eventually accepts Balak's offer, and he goes to Moab on the back of a donkey to await Balak's palm leaves and hosannas. It may surprise the reader that Balaam first rejects the offer because God told him to (22:12). But when the delegations return the second time with a much more generous offer, Balaam seems to fudge a bit (22:19). In 22:20 God gives Balaam the green light to go with the messengers, only to be angry two verses later with Balaam for going (22:22)! Maybe it is not clear to Balaam that when God gives permission, that is not necessarily the same thing as God giving sanction. The episode about Balaam's donkey (22:21-35) seems humorous to everyone except Balaam from precipitous action against his beast of burden. Confronted by the divine, Balaam can only fall on his face (22:31), as Joshua later would do before the angel of the Lord. Balaam also says, "*I have sinned,*" a confession that parallels the people's confession in the preceding chapter, "*We have sinned*" (21:7).

Balaam does not appear in any way shocked by his donkey's capacity for human speech. As Robert Alter puts it, "*Balaam in his wrath hardly seems to notice the miraculous gift of speech as though he were accustomed to having daily domestic wrangles with his donkey's.*"

The closest parallel to Balaam's donkey is the serpent that seduces Eve (Genesis 3). Numbers 22 and Genesis 3 are the only two narratives in the OT in which an animal communicates in human speech. The parallels between the two chapters do not stop there. Both the donkey's and the serpents' first spoken word is a question, but the purpose of the serpent's deceptive question is to create confusion. In Genesis 3 the movement is from blessing

to curse; in Numbers 22-24 the movement is from the curse to blessing. Balaam's words to Balak, "*Even if Balak gave me his palace... I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad/evil*" (Num. 24:13), recall the prominence of the tree of the "*knowledge of good and bad/evil*" in Genesis 2-3.

The rest of the story involves Balak and Balaam together, with the latter delivering orally four oracles: 23:7-10; 23:18-24; 24:3-9; 24:15-24. These four messages are called "*discourse[s]*." The Hebrew word for this is *masal*, and it may provide another connecting link with the previous unit in Numbers, the song sung by the *moselim* (21:27). The first three oracles Balaam gives in response to Balak's request, and the fourth he delivers spontaneously. Perhaps we should see a correspondence between three scenes involving Balaam and the donkey (22:21-23, 24-25, 26-28), each resulting in increasing discomfort for Balaam, and the three scenes involving Balaam and Balak (23:1-12, 13-26; 23:27-24:14), each resulting in increasing discomfort for Balak, as the seer's prophecies of Israel's future become more lavish. The donkey's question to Balaam, "*What have I done to you?*" (22:28), is the reverse of Balak's question to Balaam, "*What have you done to me?*" (23:11).

What Balak hears from Balaam is precisely the opposite of what he had hoped to hear. These were words of blessing, not curse. There are two equally miraculous events in this story, and both have to do with talking.

What is the relationship of this story to the larger context of Numbers? Two items seem apparent. In the first place, Moses once again is conspicuously absent from these three chapters.

Work Cited

Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook On The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 345-350.