

Background to Balaam

Numbers 22:1-6

Slide 1 - Introduction

Very few people study the Book of Numbers; in fact, I suspect fewer people have even read it.

I believe the reason the Book of Numbers is usually ignored is that people think these last three books of the Pentateuch (Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are boring.

But, let's face it; there're some portions of the Pentateuch that are boring, yet that doesn't mean they're irrelevant. In fact, one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible is found in the Book of Numbers.

I'm speaking of the story of Balaam, a "diviner," who was hired to curse Israel by the King of Moab.

The story of Balaam provides us with a case study of a false prophet who sought to curse Israel, but who could only proclaim blessings upon God's people.

And when you read of Balaam arguing with his donkey, how can a person possibly keep from laughing? And best of all, the donkey wins!

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But, before we take up Balaam's story, we need to get "the lay of the land." So, let's review the Book of Numbers.

Numbers begins with the Israelites at Mount Sinai after the giving of the law. The first few chapters talk about a census, tribal arrangements around the Tabernacle when camped, rules given, etc.

Once all this was accomplished, “*the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the covenant law*” and they began to move out to possess the promised land.

When they got to Kadesh Barnea, in the Wilderness of Paran, twelve men, each representing one tribe of Israel, were sent to spy out the land.

After the men returned, they all gave glowing reports of the bounty of the promised land. Yet, ten of them expressed fears concerning the Canaanites, casting doubts about Israel’s ability to conquer the land.

Because of this, the Israelites rebelled against God and refused to attack the Canaanites. This led to God’s judgment upon that first generation who had been delivered from Egyptian bondage.

For 40 years, this first generation of Israelites had to wander about the wilderness until virtually all died. That wandering period, along with the setting down of certain laws, is described in chapters 15-19.

Beginning in chapter 20, the Book of Numbers deals with the second generation as they prepared to enter and possess the land of Canaan, and where the account of Balaam is found.

Along the way they came to the Wilderness of Zin. The same place from where they had come out of Egypt after crossing the Red Sea. It was here, Miriam died and was buried.

Then, since there was no water in this wilderness, the people began to grumble. So, Moses interceded with God on their behalf.

God instructed Moses to “*speak to the rock*” and, by this means, water would be provided for the people to drink.

But, exasperated with his stiff-necked people, Moses angrily struck the rock with his rod, and for this act of irreverence, he was forbidden to enter the promised land.

Around this same time, God told Moses that it was time for Aaron to *“be gathered to his people,”* that is, for Aaron to die.

Then, in the sight of all the congregation, Moses and Aaron ascended Mount Hor where Moses removed Aaron’s priestly garments and placed them on his son Eleazar. Aaron then died.

All these events signal the end of an important chapter in Israel’s history, a chapter which began at the exodus and concluded with the death of that first generation who failed to trust and obey their God.

Then, after the Israelites had mourned for thirty days, in respect for Aaron, they resumed their journey to the promised land.

But when the Canaanite king of Arad heard that the Israelites were approaching, he attacked them. In return, God gave this king and his people into the hands of the Israelites; they were utterly destroyed.

The Israelites sought to pass by Edom by traveling along the coast of the Red Sea, but they became impatient and began to grumble, again.

Because of their attitude, God sent fiery serpents among them as divine judgment, and many died.

Moses, feeling for his people, interceded with God Who instructed him to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole.

When the pole was lifted up for the people to see, everyone bitten, who looked up to the bronze serpent, lived.

The remainder of chapter 21 describes events immediately preceding the introduction of Balaam in chapter 22.

Israel then made its way to Pisgah, located on a ridge near the top of Mount Nebo that provided a panoramic view of the promised land.

It's from Pisgah that Moses viewed the promised land before his death on Mount Nebo.

From here, in order to continue their journey to the promised land, the Israelites need to pass through the land of the Amorites.

They asked Sihon, the king of the Amorites, for permission to pass through his land but he refused. He not only refused, but he assembled an army and waged war against them.

Not appreciating this gesture, the Israelites not only prevailed and took possession of his land, but they captured Jazer, defeating and dispossessing the Amorites who lived there, too.

Then, going by way of Bashan, the Israelites encountered Og, the king of Bashan, who also came out to fight them. Like Sihon, Og was defeated, and the Israelites possessed his land, too.

Now we finally come to Balaam.

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Numbers 22:1-3, "Then the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho. Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites."

It's not difficult to understand why Balak, the king of Moab, felt threatened as the Israelites approached. He had heard of Israel's victory over all who opposed them.

What a sight it must have been to get up one morning, look out your window, and see an innumerable host of Israelites camped nearby! In fact, we're told that the Moabites were "sick with fear."

But why were the Moabites so frightened. They shouldn't have feared for their lives since the Moabites were the offspring of Lot and God had commanded the Israelites not to harm them.

I doubt the Moabites would've been ignorant of the special privileges God had established for them as the descendants of Lot, but it may have been that Balak thought, because the Israelites had slain all the Amorites, they were going to do the same to them.

But, as we look more closely at the words of verses 4, this doesn't appear to be what Balak feared.

Numbers 22:4, *"The Moabites said to the elders of Midian, 'This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.'"*

From the Moabites' own words, their fears were economic. When Balak called attention to the large number of Israelites approaching, he didn't mention war or slaughter.

He only spoke of the Israelites coming near to them and settling down alongside them. He's concerned that the Israelites would consume all the natural resources of the land, leaving nothing for his people.

Because of this, the Moabites feared the presence of the Israelites so much that they were willing to hire Balaam to put a curse on them.

Numbers 22:4b-6, *“So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the Euphrates River, in his native land. Balak said: “A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed.”*”

Their aim was to somehow weaken this great nation by cursing them, thus giving them an advantage so they could defeat them and *“drive them out of the land.”*

Also, probably thinking there would be strength in numbers or, maybe just wanting to spread out the cost of hiring a high-priced “consultant” like Balaam, the Moabites formed an alliance with the Midianites.

Now, the Midianites were also somewhat related to the Israelites in a back-handed fashion. Midian was one of the sons of Abraham, through Keturah, see Genesis 25:1-5.

Also, when Moses fled from Egypt, he settled down in the land of Midian, where he married the daughter of a Midianite priest, Jethro, and had two sons.

So, the Moabites and the Midianites conspired together to recruit a man who had connections with the spiritual underworld. A man who they believed could put a curse put on the Israelites.

As an aside here, Balaam’s name means “devourer” and some linguists add “of the people.” Balak’s name means “devastator.”

Devastator and devourer were joining forces to block Israel’s passage into the promised land.

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No doubt diviners were plentiful in those days, but there seemed to be one man who was “*tops in his field.*” His name was Balaam, and he was from Pethor, a city located along the Euphrates River.

Pethor was not far from the great city of Mari, discovered in 1933, in the Euphrates Valley.

When Mari was discovered, archeologists found a vast number of cuneiform tablets which revealed the existence of a cult of prophets and seers whose activities resembled those of Balaam.

Pethor was located on the banks of the Euphrates River, about 12 miles south of Carchemish, a place where several key historical battles took place.

The distance between Pethor and the plains of Moab would be over 370 miles. It'd take an estimated 20-25 days to get there, hence the four journeys in the story took about 90 days.

The distance may also serve another purpose. This is speculation on my part, but it's possible that Balak wanted a diviner who lived a good distance from Moab, so the diviner would be ignorant of their success.

Now, Balaam knows something of the religion of the Israelites because he frequently refers to their God as “*Yahweh.*”

Nevertheless, it seems he's not well-informed about the nation Israel itself, since he has to be told that Israel has been blessed by “*Yahweh.*”

Balaam seems to be just far enough removed from Canaan to be unaware of factors that were vital to his decision regarding Balak's offer.

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There are many reasons why we can confidently conclude that Balaam wasn't a true prophet; in fact, that he wasn't even a true believer in God.

But for the moment, let's simply say that Balaam was a well-known "diviner," with a reputation for effectively cursing nations.

I don't mean to say that he was a complete fraud, and that his "curses" had no effect on others.

His reputation, and his name, seem to indicate otherwise and, if his "*cursings*" were in vain, why did God forbid him to do so?

I believe that his powers came "from below." He was "connected," but not to the God of Israel. Also, Balak's message to Balaam is informative.

Verses 5b-6, "Balak said: "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed."

Balak doesn't bother to inform Balaam how the Israelites had managed to "*come out of Egypt.*"

He doesn't mention the covenant God made with Abraham, nor does he bother to tell Balaam that the Israelites had destroyed those who opposed them along their way.

He does admit to being outnumbered by the Israelites, and he reveals his plan to defeat the Israelites and drive them out of the land.

When Balak says to Balaam, *“For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed,”* his words bring to mind the words of God in the Abrahamic Covenant. (Genesis 12:1-3).

But remember, it’s neither Balak nor Balaam who bestows “blessings or cursings” on nations. It’s God who blesses and curses. Now, the only question is, *“Will the Moabites and Midianites be blessed or cursed?”*

This will be determined by their response to the nation Israel. Those who bless Israel will be blessed; those who curse Israel will be cursed.

In the light of the Abrahamic Covenant, we see that Balak’s plan to curse Israel is destined to bring a curse upon him and the Moabite nation.

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Conclusion

It’s never more dangerous or foolish than to be for what God is against, and against what God is for.

Balaam was seeking to curse those whom God had blessed. That made Balaam against those whom God was for. In so doing, Balaam found God to be his adversary.

How much better it is for us to have God as our Advocate! As Paul puts it, *“What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”*

Those who would have God as their adversary are those who must someday bow before Him as Lord of all.