

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 14

NUMBERS – PART TWO

Chapters 22 - 36

I. Balaam and Balak.

Starting with Chapter 22, we have a rather detailed story concerning the Israelites interactions with the Moabites. The Israelites had no original intentions of warring with the Moabites. Nevertheless, Balak, king of the Moabites feared Israeli war. Remember the Israelites had just wiped out two other local kings (Og and Sihon).

Rather than try to confront Israel on the battleground, Balak opted for some supernatural help. We need to remember that Balak did not have our faith or view of history. He was just some local middle eastern king some 1500 years before Christ who had just seen/heard that a bunch of people (Jews) had fled Egypt some time ago, managed to live through 40 years in the wilderness, and whipped a couple of other local kings pretty soundly. So Balak, being a primitive and superstitious fellow, decided to get some intervention in the form of curses upon Israel.

Balak sends some fellows to Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) to hire the current state of the art in cursing. His name was Balaam. Balaam comes from the Hebrew *balah* meaning "devourer" or "destroyer." The name was appropriate for fellow who made his living traveling around and calling down supernatural curses on folks. We read that this was likely a family tradition - - like father like son. Balaam's dad was named Beor, from the Hebrew *ba-ar*, meaning to "burn off", "eat off", or "destroy." Even then, the acorn did not fall far from the tree!

When Balak's messengers reach Balaam, they offer Balaam big bucks to come curse the Israelites. Balaam runs his checks on the situation and refuses the offer. Balaam explains that God does not want him to go.

The messengers come a second time to try and hire the destroyer to come curse Israel. This time, after checking with God, Balaam gets word that he can go, but can only pronounce what God gives him to say. This seems to satisfy the messengers and off Balaam goes.

Balaam heads for Moab on Balaam's long trust-worthy donkey. While on the way, Balaam must have been doing some money calculations or other projections of an ungodly fashion, for an angel of the Lord stands in the road before the donkey. The angel has sword drawn and is ready to use the sword when the insightful donkey decides to leave the roadway. Balaam, the visionary, is unable to see the angel and does not understand why the donkey has left the road. While going ballistic over the uncontrollable donkey, the angel makes a second appearance. This second time death is averted only because the donkey moves close enough to a wall with a resultant scraping of Balaam's leg/foot.

Again Balaam gets angry with the donkey because again Balaam does not see the angel. A third time the angel appears and this time the only recourse for the donkey is to lie down and go nowhere at all. Balaam is now beyond furious. Balaam screams at his donkey "If I had a sword " The donkey then answers Balaam! With that answer, the Lord then opens Balaam's eyes to see the angel and Balaam understands. God uses this time to refocus on the importance that Balaam better be saying

what God tells him to say, as opposed to merely reciting the curses wanted by Balaam's employer, Balak.

Once Balaam finally arrives on the scene, he converses with Balak over the big need for cursing. Balaam then sets about to work. He has seven altars built with seven bulls and seven rams offered in sacrifice. Balaam then goes off to read the signs and come up with his pronouncement.

An important side note here. Balaam is not a "prophet" as the Hebrew language uses that word ("*neviya*"). Nor is Balaam a "seer" ("*chozer*"). Balaam is a "soothsayer" ("*hacosem*"). Soothsaying was akin to witchcraft and was prohibited by God for his people. Archaeology tells us these fellows would frequently divine their answers by examining the livers of sacrificed animals. The text is unclear what Balaam was reading, but very clear on the result of the reading!

Balaam produces his first oracle concerning the Israelites. The oracle is not a curse, but a blessing. Balak hears the blessing and is upset. Balak clarifies to Balaam that Balaam is to be paid for CURSING the Jews, not BLESSING them. Balak then gives Balaam a second chance.

The second time (and in fact a third time!) Balaam blessed rather than curses the Jews. Not leaving well enough alone, Balak gives the Destroyer a fourth time to show how he got his name and curse the Jews. This fourth oracle is a blessing of the highest order.

The fourth blessing is Messianic in its content. It goes beyond what was going to happen with the Jewish troops present there and talks about a star that will arise in the

future signaling a kingship that will basically eliminate Israel's enemies once and for all. The star that rose over Bethlehem 1500 years later would signal the entrance of that king into the world.

Balak is not a satisfied customer, and Balak refuses to pay Balaam. Balaam headed for the house, and Balak went to work on plan B.

Plan B (an idea that was perhaps suggested by Balaam) was to seduce the Jews into assimilating with the Moabites. The Moabite women begin seducing the Jews into sexual immorality with a good deal of success.

Needless to say, the assimilation of God's holy people into sin was not part of God's plan. God stops it with the plague of death upon those involved. The Moab/Midian plan B becomes a dead end (in more ways than one).

- II. Shortly after the Balak episode, Moses appoints Joshua as his successor (Nu. 27:12ff). Moses then rennumbers the people, recites the festivals to be honored by the Jews, and then God tells Moses to go destroy the Midianites for their involvement in the seduction ploy concocted by the Balak and the Midianites. That destruction takes place in Numbers chapter 31.
- III. The land is divided up at the end of Numbers. The division gives the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the half tribe of Manasseh land on the east side of the Jordan. Cities of refuge are explained as is the idea of property distribution to come within the Promised Land proper. With that, Numbers draws to a close.