

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger ..." John 6:35

NUMBERS 22-24

CHAPTER 21 (cont.)

The flow of events in the previous study gave us a breathtaking panorama of the Redemption story: the Law of the Red Heifer; the breakdown of the old leadership, with the death of both Miriam and Aaron, and the judgment that Moses will not enter the Promised Land either.

Then we read in 21:4 that "the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way....," which led to the famous Bronze Serpent incident—the bronze serpent on a pole was held up by Moses, which led to the people (as a whole) to say to Moses: "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you ...". For Israel, this repentance is a monumental turning point.

We can also see how these stories profoundly point to the Messiah and the pivotal change that takes place when He comes. From here we need to focus on the rest of the chapter, and not simply skip to the next big event, because it holds some amazing truths.

v.10 "Now the children of Israel moved on and camped in Oboth... 11 And they journeyed and camped at Ije-abarim in the wilderness... towards the place of sunrise... 12 From there they moved and camped in the Valley of Zered..." Boring? Not at all! Let's have a closer look at this journey:

1st camp: *Oboth* = "waterskins" (from root word, אב אב = "Father".)

2nd camp: *Ije-abarim* = "ruins of Abarim" (Abarim is to pass by, put away)
'...in the wilderness' – *midbar* – from root meaning to "speak" "pronounce"
... toward the place of sunrise'

3rd camp: *Valley of Zered* – A valley with a river flowing into it; from a root meaning to be exuberant in growth.

Can you see how this gives us a beautiful picture of what happens when we look upon Him who bore our sins on the tree, repent, and are born anew? We become a 'new creation', leave the ruins of our old lives behind as we 'pronounce' - 'confess with our mouth' that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead..."¹; from there we move toward His light, receive the rivers of living water that flow from Him, and our lives begin to prosper with exuberant new growth—spiritual growth.

This leads to a special poetic section from v. 14-20. 14: *Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD: From there they went to Beer, which is the well where the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together, and I will give them water." Then Israel sang this song:*²

"Come up, O well, call out to it (lit. answer to it as a choir)
Well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated,
Through a lawgiver with their staffs. A gift from the Wilderness —
The gift went to the valley, And from the valley to the heights,

¹ Rom. 10:9

² I have used the Jewish Chumash translation because it translates the place names into their meaning: e.g. Mattanah = "gift of Jehovah"; Nahaliel = "torrents of God"; Bamoth = "high places" or "great high place"; Pisgah = "cleft" (from a root meaning "consider".)

And from the heights to the valley in the field of Moab,
At the top of the peak, overlooking the surface of the wilderness.

Now, as Israel looks down from a high place upon the field of Moab³, they call out in song to the well to spring up (they *sing* to it). The song expresses an understanding of the gift the well has been to them as they travelled through the wilderness – through the highs and lows, and now to the heights, where they now look down on Moab and *consider* where they have come from. Israel sang a song just once before, which was led by Miriam after they had crossed the Red Sea. Considering Miriam's connection with water (Miriam's well), that we saw in the previous study, this is quite intriguing.

Israel has reached a high point in their spiritual growth, but their destination is still ahead of them – they have not yet crossed the Jordan. Before this chapter finishes they defeat the Amorites—a Canaanite tribe; "Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land". The Amorites represent the "sins of the tongue" (gossip, slander, lies etc.)—interestingly they are defeated by the 'edge of the sword', which speaks of the Word of God.

The weekly Torah Portion, which began with chapter 19 (the law of the Red Heifer), finishes with the first verse of chapter 22: *Then the children of Israel moved, and camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho*. Were their carnal desires (Moab) now quelled? We shall see – that test is still ahead of them, and the enemy of their souls is still intent on defeating them.

CHAPTER 22 – Balak and Balaam

As we said, the division of Torah portions includes verse 1 of this chapter, which seems to make sense – but why do the chapter divisions include the verse in chapter 22? This indicates that it is important to see the next phase of Israel's journey as a continuation of, or even concurrent with, what went before. The story of Balak and Balaam covers a full three chapters, which makes it highly significant. It begins with a bewildering sequence of events, which raises many questions.

Israel is now encamped in the plains of Moab with the Jordan in sight, and Balak, the King of Moab⁴, considered what Israel had done to the Amorites: "Moab became very frightened of the people because it was numerous and Moab was distressed in the face of the children of Israel." Fearing they would be the next victims, Balak enlisted the help of the neighbouring Midianites and sent messengers to hire the services of a well-known seer named Balaam⁵ to curse Israel, flattering him by saying "For I know that whomever you bless will be blessed and whomever you curse will be accursed" – words clearly reminiscent of God's words of blessing to Abraham in Gen. 12:2-3. The wording used here also brings us back to the beginning of the book of Exodus:

And he [Pharaoh] said to his people, "Look, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we.... And they were in dread of the children of Israel. (Ex. 1:9,12)

It had become clear that Israel's strength came from a supernatural source, so Balak derived a plan to use supernatural force to defeat them. Balaam was not an Israelite, but it seems he was in communication with their God, and even called Him "the LORD my God" (Num. 22:18). However, throughout the narrative the reader is never really sure where Balaam's loyalties lie.

The world of antiquity set great store in the power of blessings and curses. Balaam was a professional in this area. He was far more intelligent than those who sought his services; he

³ Moab represents carnal desires. It was a nation descended from the firstborn son of Lot; born of an incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:37).

⁴ Balak = "devastator"

⁵ Balaam = "not of the people". Balaam is said to be a descendant of Laban from whom he learned the mysteries of the occult.

knew very well his own limitations and he had a very clear notion of Hashem and His unlimited power.⁶

Read 22:2-21 – What gives us a hint that Balaam is not being straight with God?

The Rabbis see in this an example of human responsibility and the doctrine of free will. Balaam was tested by having to choose between God's command and his personal desires. God's first "No" should have been enough, but Balaam did not want to take No for an answer. Whilst Balaam acknowledged Israel's God, he did not seek to add the qualities of His character to this recognition. He had a prophetic gift which could have been used for good, but he chose to use it for his own gain. Since God knew Balaam had in his heart to accept the tempting offer of riches and fame, God allowed him to do so. (see James 1:13-14) As the sages say: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." We saw this in Egypt also, when God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God gives us every opportunity and encouragement to make righteous choices, but when He speaks and we do not listen, He lets us reap the consequence of our choices.

Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel – 22:22-35

Then follows the most humorous story in the whole Torah! Balaam was renowned as the greatest prophet of his day, but here we see his own donkey seeing the angel, and even speaking, but not Balaam himself? God humbles the proud and lifts up the humble – in this case a faithful donkey! The words from the donkey are very revealing of Balaam's true character (v.28-30). God's anger expressed by the angel in verses 32-33, is a warning to Balaam to remain faithful – or else!

Q. Why would God reverse His earlier instructions, and then become angry when Balaam went?

Note the emphasis of the number three in the incident with the donkey and the angel.⁷ Many things are repeated three times in the Bible—each time is very intentional and significant, and draws us to pause and look more deeply. "The number three is used in the Torah to mediate between two opposing or contradictory values. The third value mediates, reconciles, and connects the two. Three is the number of truth."⁸ Have we ever heard of a talking donkey that has spiritual vision? The Bible does not usually step into fantasy. Perhaps what we have here is a fable, which commonly uses animals to portray a moral truth—so what is this telling us beyond what we actually read?

Notably, various verses designate the donkey as feminine. The feminine aspect, I believe, points to the spirit in man. So we see here that the spirit of Balaam is fully aware that he should not be going this way, but Balaam's will is intent on going, and he ignores and tries to shut down his spirit (and the spirit of God within him) – reading verses 27-35 with this in mind is quite enlightening.

Q. Have you ever tried to shut down your spirit and found blockages along the way?

At this point Balaam understood that confession of sin was his only recourse to divine mercy; the angel would then have no right to kill him.

⁶ Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, p266

⁷ Balaam struck his donkey three times (28 & 32) and the angel blocked Balaam's path three times (23-26, 33).

⁸ <http://www.betemunah.org/three.html>

CHAPTER 23 – The Prophecies of Balaam - 23:1-10

Balak takes Balaam to the heights of Baal – where the Moabite idol of Baal was located - but Balaam can only utter what God puts into his mouth: He cannot curse God's people, not because they are sinless, but because they are His chosen people—He betrothed Himself to them.

... How can I curse what God has not cursed? How can I bring anger if God is not angry?

For from its early rocks do I see it and from its hills do I peer at it

Behold! it is a nation that will dwell in solitude

and not be reckoned among the nations,

Who has counted the dust of Jacob and the number of the seed of Israel?

May my soul die the death of the upright and may my end be like his.⁹ (23:7-10)

Balak then takes Balaam to another vantage point, where he could not see all of Israel's immense numbers - *Then he took up his oracle and said: "Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor!"*¹⁰

"God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent.

Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.

"He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel.

The LORD his God is with him, **And the shout of a King is among them.**

God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox.

"For there is no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel.

It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!'

Look, a people rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion;

It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain." (23:19-24)

The word translated as "shout" is *teru'ah* (תרועה), the same word commonly used to describe a trumpet blast. The trumpet blast of the king almost certainly alludes to the trumpet of Messiah. He is the coming king (see 1 Thess. 4:16). The Targum¹¹ translates this verse to say, "The trumpets of King Messiah resound among them." The Chasidic commentary explains that Balaam was referring to the blast of the horn taken from Isaac's ram which will serve as the shofar of the final redemption and herald the coming of the Messiah (This view is related to Rosh Hashanah, Feast of Trumpets).

This word is a testimony to the completeness of God's justification of His people. Even though Israel had acted so poorly during their wilderness journey that Moses, the meekest man upon the face of the earth, used the expression, "You have been rebellious against YHWH from the day that I knew you," the judgment of God here is totally opposite to this.

Then Balak said to Balaam, "Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there." So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor¹², that overlooks the wasteland. (23:27-28)

⁹ He was killed when Moses sent the Israelites against the Midianites (Num. 31). According to the Talmud, Balaam died at age 33-34. The *Mishnah* designates him as one who will not have a share in the World to Come.

¹⁰ Zippor, father of Balak, was the king of Moab at the time of the exodus

¹¹ The Targum contained paraphrases, explanations and expansions of the Jewish scriptures that a rabbi would give in the common language of the listeners,

¹² Baal Peor, a false god worshipped in Moab, corresponds to Baal.

CHAPTER 24 - Balaam's Third Oracle

1 Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness. 2 And Balaam raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him. 3 Then he took up his oracle and said: "The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, 4 The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!
Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river,
like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters.
Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water.
Their king will be greater than Agag¹³; their kingdom will be exalted.
It is God Who brought him out of Egypt; ...
He will devour hostile nations and break their bones in pieces;...
Those who bless you are blessed and those who curse you are cursed.

These three oracles only go to prove God's firm, unwavering love for His people. We could also see them as coming from the tri-unity of God. The plans and purposes God has for Israel will stand, despite every effort of the enemy to destroy them. God has used the evil intent of Balak and Balaam to bring forth the firmness of His purpose concerning His beloved people.

On each occasion Balak took Balaam to a different vantage point, each representing a different test of their endurance – to see if they could withstand the curse coming from each idol. But the vision Balaam sees is through God's eyes. He looks at the people and sees their beauty in the vision of the Almighty—not as they are in the natural. The LORD ultimately sees Israel through the covering atonement of Christ's shed blood. You will notice it is a threefold blessing.

Balaam's Fourth and Final Oracle - 24:17-24

Finally, in frustration, Balak dismissed Balaam from his service. After his dismissal God gave Balaam a final prophecy for Israel's future – "Behold I will show you what this people will do to your people in the End of Days":

"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near;
A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel... (Num. 24:17)

The famous Jewish sage, *Ramban*, held that these words concern the future King Messiah, son of David, who will rescue Israel. He maintained that they could not apply to King David himself. It is also worthy of note that the early "church fathers" attributed a messianic sense to Numbers 24:17, associating the star of Balaam's prophecy with that which the wise men from the East followed to Bethlehem. Origen (ca. 185–254) contended it probable that the Magi (also from the East) were familiar with Balaam's prophecies and the text regarding the star.

This final oracle from Balaam goes on to spell out the destruction of all Israel's enemies.

God's choice of Balaam to speak words of blessing over Israel is significant in itself—and the words he speaks are some of the loveliest words ever spoken over Israel. Had these words come from Moses, might they have been taken as favoritism? From the beginning of Exodus to the end of Numbers, not a word is spoken in praise of Israel – except by Balaam – and how

¹³ The usual title of the Amalekite kings.

profoundly beautiful they are—words that God clearly wanted recorded for posterity came from the mouth of a scoundrel.

The way in which Balaam acted contrary to God's will is somewhat difficult to discern. It is as if his true heart motives are kept veiled throughout this narrative—the reader does not see his true colours. Balaam is referred to time and time again in the Bible — by Moses in Numbers 31, and Deuteronomy; Joshua; Nehemiah and by the prophet Micah.¹⁴

What is later revealed to Israel is: "The 'LORD your God would not listen to Balaam, but turned the curse into a blessing for you the LORD your God loves you." (Deut. 23:5) Bear in mind that a God who truly loved his people was a totally foreign concept in the cultural time and environment in which Israel lived. Gods were to be feared and appeased – they didn't love. Here we see Israel's God, not simply loving them, but blocking the enemy's curses – through no merit of their own. We need to keep in mind also that the people of Israel were oblivious of what transpired between Balak and Balaam. No Israelite was present at any point in the events. They could not have known how God intervened to turn curses into blessings.

Balaam in rabbinic literature is one of the archetype villains. He was a powerful man whose prophecy and closeness with God gave him potential to do much good. However, he chose to use those gifts towards evil. Because of his heavenly abilities that were perverted towards wrongdoing, he is considered the prime example of corruption. Balaam's infamy continues into the New Testament:

Jude 11 *Alas for them, (godless men who have slipped in among you) because they have followed the way of Cain; **they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error;***

2 Peter 2:15-16 *They (false teachers) have **forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam** the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet.*

Revelation 2:12-14 Letter to church at Pergamos: *You sit where Satan's seat is ... You have there **some that hold the doctrine of Balaam** who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication.*

In each of the above scriptures we see that those who are compared with Balaam had embedded themselves into the Church, and were intent on leading the people astray. No doubt they would have appeared to be legitimate believers to many – like Balaam, their true colours were hidden!

The reality of Balaam's character is epitomized by his 'final solution' to the Jewish problem: Entice them into sexual perversion and idolatry and they will melt into the 'world' and cease to be a threat. This is the subject of the following chapter.

This story is very relevant to us as individuals, and to the Church in general – especially to the time we now live in. The Church is in a critical time in her history and the enemy is very much at work seeking to stop believers rising into their full victory and destiny. Jesus made clear statements in the gospels, that leading up to His return many will be deceived by false teachers.

¹⁴ Num. 31:16; Deut. 23:5; Josh. 24:9-10; Neh. 13:2; Mic. 6:5;