

Balaam and the Moabites
Numbers 22 - 27
February 19, 2012

What does the Bible Mean?

Chapter 21 ended with Israel defeating the Amorites and dwelling in their land. Ammon was in the country east of the Jordan River and generally opposite Jericho.

Chapters 22 to 24 are a story of two characters. First, Balaam, son of Beor from Pethor, an ancient city in upper Mesopotamia near the Euphrates River. Second, Balak, son of Zippor, King of Moab. Balak means "one who lays waste" and Zippor means "a small bird" like a sparrow.

The chapters also deal with Moab. Moab was south of Ammon and east of the Dead Sea. It was a place of concern to Israel from the Exodus until the fall of Jerusalem. According to Genesis 19: 20-38, the ancestor of the Moabites was Moab, son of Lot and the older of his two daughters. Ruth, the subject of the Book of Ruth, was a Moabitess.

The story of Balak and Balaam is intriguing. Balaam is a prophet for hire and a diviner from a far and distant land - some 400 miles from the place of the events recorded here. Balak sends for Balaam to curse the Israelites who had defeated Ammon and whose numbers were a threat to Moab. God deals with Balaam directly and through a talking donkey to proclaim quite the opposite of the requested and expected curse.

Read. Numbers 22: 1-7

The Israelites set out and camped on the plains of Moab. Moab was afraid of the threat of the great number of people and sent representatives to Balaam to curse Israel, "For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed."

Read. Numbers 22: 8-14

Balaam tells the representatives to lodge for the night so he can, "...bring you back the answer the Lord gives me." God asks who the men are. God is reminding Balaam to beware of the company he keeps. Our associates exert subtle influence on us and impact our influence on others. Our decision to follow people should receive careful consideration. God tells Balaam not to go with the men to Balak so Balaam tells them to return to their country, "...for the Lord has refused to let me go with you."

Read. Numbers 22: 15-21

Balak sends an even more prestigious delegation to Balaam. They asked for a curse on Israel again. Balaam answered that even if Balak gave him in essence all he had, he would do nothing "great or small" beyond God's command. He told them to stay overnight while he listened for God's

instructions. God instructs Balaam to go with the men but only to do what he tells him to do and say.

Read. Numbers 22: 22-35

It is difficult to see why God would be angry with Balaam. He had waited for God's instructions. But Balaam, while following the Lord's commands, was blind like we sometimes are. Then, "God opened Balaam's eyes,...." He saw the angel for himself. He saw that he was being hindered in order to help him fully understand God's message and ways.

Read. Numbers 22: 26-40

When Balak and Balaam met, Balak was offended that he could not honor Balaam. Balaam answered that he had come but he has no power to speak. "I must speak only what God puts into my mouth." then they sacrificed together.

The next section is three oracles of Balaam. The oracles are in poetry and are more ancient than the text. They are strikingly parallel to the Deir Alla inscriptions from the 8th Century BC found in Jordan. A prophet named Balaam receives a vision from a council of "Almighty" Gods. The vision in 24: 4 is from "Almighty" God. The oracles here are parallel to the inscriptions in that a curse is changed into a blessing.

Read. Numbers 22: 41 - 23: 7

Balaam asked for seven altars on which seven bulls and rams were to be sacrificed so God's word would come to him. The Lord gave him the word and told him to speak to Balak and the princes of Moab.

Read. Numbers 23: 8-12

- V 9. A people dwelling alone is a people secure under God.
- V 10. The dust of Jacob is the myriads of the Israelites.
- V 10. Righteousness. Beig right with God and man makes it right when man meets death.

Balak protests Balaam's blessing. But, Balaam is a true prophet. He can *only* speak what God puts into his mouth.

Balak is persistent. They go to another place to view the Israelites. Again they make seven sacrifices and Balaam receives the word of the Lord.

Read. Numbers 23: 18-26

- VV 19-20. God is not man. He does not lie or change his mind. He does not speak and then not act. He does not promise and not fulfill. He has blessed. I (Balaam) can not change it.
- V 21. Balaam must bless Israel and he discerns no misfortune for Israel.
- V 23. Israel is not the beneficiary of magic but of the proclamation, "See, what God has done."

- V24. Israel will prevail against its foes.

Balak is disappointed with the continued blessing but Balaam reminds him that he had told him so.

Balak takes Balaam to a third overlook. Again they make sacrifices. Balaam then looked out and the “Spirit of God came upon him” and he uttered a third oracle.

Read. Numbers 24: 3b-13

- V 3b-4. Balaam is a true prophet whose eyes are opened. He hears the words of God (not the Lord as has been used up to not in the text). He falls down (sleeps) but his eyes still see.
- VV 5-6. The encampment of Israel is like gardens with trees. Israel has vitality and it comes from God.
- V 8. Israel shall be victorious over their foes.
- V 9. Here the lion has finished his hunt and rests. No one dares to rouse him.

Again Balak denounces Balaam. Balaam again responds that he warned Balak and could only be true to the words God had given him.

Read. Numbers 24: 14-19

Balaam “saw” as God saw the destruction of the Amalekites, Kenites, Asshur and Eber. It is likely that the future predicted went as far as conquest by the Greeks and Romans. Then Balak and Balaam went their separate ways.

Chapter 26 tells that while the people were encamped in Moab, the Israelite men became sexually immoral with the Moabite women. The women invited the men to worship their gods. Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. Baal of Peor was the local Baal. In Canaan, Baal was the god of fertility but could also be the god of winter rain, storm and chaos. “The Lord's anger burned against them.” The Lord told Moses to tell the leaders to kill the people responsible in broad daylight (the sin was done in the dark of night) so that the Lord's anger would turn away. So Moses issued the command.

In Verse 6, the people were apparently mourning a plague. In front of everyone an Israelite man brought a Midianite woman to his family. Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, was outraged and drove a spear through them both. The plague ended.

The Lord said that the zeal of Phinehas turned his anger away and God would make a lasting covenant with the priests. The Israelite killed was Zimre, leader of the family of Simeon. Because the Midianites had deceived Israel they were to be enemies to be killed.

Chapter 26, records the second census of the people. There were a total of 601,730 plus 23,000 Levites counted. In the first census there were 603,550 counted. The purpose of this census was to form a basis for allocating the land in Canaan. The Levites were not counted in the desert because there was no allocation of land there. “Not one of them was among those counted ... in the Desert of Sinai. For the Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them

was left except for Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and Joshua, son of Nun.”

Chapter 27 begins with some daughters from the tribe of Manasseh telling Moses that their father had died and left no sons. They requested the father's property so his name would not disappear.

Moses sought the Lord's direction and the Lord instructed him to give the inheritance to the daughters.

The Lord went on to establish that a man's inheritance was to pass on even to his nearest relative in the clan if no one else was a survivor.

Read. Numbers 27: 12-23

So Joshua was chosen to succeed Moses.

What does the Bible mean to me?

- Do we do our own or God's bidding? What can ensure that we maintain a deferential relationship with God?
- If you ever opposed God how did you discover your error?
- Is it possible to know God's will every step of the way?
- How does one discover God's will?
- When are our desires most likely to conflict with God's desires?
- How can we avoid situations that backfire on us like they did on Balak?
- What can we do to ensure like Balaam that our “eyes are opened.”
- What enemies (people or things) keep us from doing God' work?
- What cultural practices erode the purity of the Christian faith?
- Why is equality among believers important? Is equality uniformity? Fairness? Special case treatment?
- Do problems arise when there is a successor to our “Moses” like when a pastor is transferred?