

Numbers 23-24 • Visions of Israel

Introduction

Balaam and his related activities first recorded in Numbers is not only prominently revisited elsewhere in the Old Testament (Josh. 24:9-10; Neh. 13:2; Micah 6:5), but recited in the New Testament by Peter (2 Pe. 2:15), Jude (Jude 11) and Christ (Rev. 2:14). These accounts contain powerful lessons concerning spiritual warfare, apostasy and deception.

In this particular account, we might draw a parallel to something like the American Civil War or even the nations drawn into mutual conflict in the European theater of World War I or II. In these cases, all the opposing sides held to the notion that the same God to whom everyone was appealing was on their side, or in this case, could be induced to their side. It is notable that both Balaam and Balak seek to leverage the One True God of Israel for themselves and, ironically, against Israel. And through this maze of self-contradiction God sovereignly establishes the standard of His truth for all parties involved.

But before God provides a macro correction for the big picture, he first invokes the micro to address the shortcomings of the individuals making their request of Him. As it turns out, errors concerning the big picture where God's people are concerned are often an extension of our own personal spiritual near-sightedness.

^{22:41}Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people.

¹Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here."

²Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a bare hill.

⁴Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar."

⁵Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus." ⁶So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab. ⁷He took up his discourse and said,

"From Aram Balak has brought me,
Moab's king from the mountains of
the East,

'Come curse Jacob for me,
And come, denounce Israel!'

⁸How shall I curse whom God has not
cursed?

And how can I denounce whom the
LORD has not denounced?

[Read 22:41-23:12]

Q: What might be telling about the meaning of these men's names?

A: "Balak" means "wasting" as in emptying something to destroy it, "Balaam" means "swallowing up the people" and is also designated as the son of "Beor", which means "burning" and comes from the root word "to consume" or "burn up". The pedigree being expressed in their names is not a picture of someone simply opposed to the Israelites, but aiming to completely eradicate so as to remove all traces both past and present.

Q: What, exactly, is a "curse", biblically speaking?

A: It is a prayer for divine tragedy to be brought upon another in terms of injury, harm or misfortune.

1. God cursed the serpent and not only lowered its immediate, physical conditions, but its overall future. (Gen. 3:14-15)
2. Noah's curse on Canaan sought to lower his standing to that of "a servant of servants". (Gen. 9:25)
3. Isaac's curse was pronounced on anyone who would themselves curse Jacob and came with a parallel blessing for all who will instead bless the nation born through him. (Gen. 27:29)
4. Goliath invoked a curse "by his gods" upon David. (1 Sam. 17:43)
5. When Jesus cursed the fig tree, it immediately withered. (Mt. 21:19)

Point: The biblical usage of "curse" is not giving someone the "evil eye" or merely wishing them bad luck, but is calling for supernatural intervention, whether to the One True God or to a false god, for the permanent harm of another party. It is a request for a spiritual source to effect a physical result.

Q: Who is the spiritual source for whom Balak will pay Balaam to invoke an action against Israel?

A: In this case, it is not a false God, but the One True God. This is shown by the fact that Balaam calls and encounters "the LORD"—that is, Yahweh.

Point: False prophets don't always represent false gods, but are often found attempting to misrepresent the One True authentic God.

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⁹As I see him from the top of the rocks,
And I look at him from the hills;
Behold, a people who dwells apart,
And will not be reckoned among the nations.

¹⁰Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,
And let my end be like his!"

¹¹Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!"

¹²He replied, "Must I not be careful to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?"

Q: But why is the location of their sacrifice problematic?

A: It is one of the "high places of Baal". The attempt to communicate with the One True God is being made from a place dedicated to a false god.

Q: What is another indication that their attempt is steeped in error where God is concerned?

A: God's requirements have always designated the need for just a single altar; employing seven altars betrays how they blend in their own superstitions and false practices into an overall act of worship. Numbers are often used to create a visual deception which appeals to the flesh.

Application: *The classic telltale working of a false teacher or false prophet is that of a mixture, whether it be laying truth side-by-side with error, or incorporating something legitimate with something false to ultimately produce a counterfeit.*

Q: What is the difference between what Balaam requests Balak to do versus what Balaam will do himself?

A: He requests Balak to remain by these altars on the high place dedicated to the false god Baal while Balaam visits "a bare hill" to go meet with the One True God. (v.3)

Application: *False prophets often practice one thing to keep the attention of their followers while consciously knowing it does not actually work as advertised.*

But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. — 2 Timothy 3:13

Q: How do we know that Balaam's approach of the altars and sacrifices did not work the way he intended?

A: Already knowing in advance what Balaam would request in terms of a curse at Balak's request upon Israel, God immediately turns the situation completely around.

Q: Did God actually give Balaam a prophetic word in the same way that such is recorded by God's Prophets in Scripture?

A: If we carefully examine what was said, it is turning Balaam's own words against to expose him spiritually.

1. (v.7) Balaam begins by stating his original intention to curse Israel.
2. (v.8) He finds he cannot curse someone God cannot curse.
3. (v.9) He recognizes that Israel has been specially set apart from all other nations, therefore occupying a special place in God's divine economy.
4. (v.10) Balaam is so impressed with Israel's relationship to God that he wishes he were one of them.

Point: *God exposes Balaam to the truth already established by His already-given Word and not something new. A false prophet needs the truth of God's Word as much as everyone else.*

Application: *The first vision is a revelation of Israel's divine calling.*

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¹³Then Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place from where you may see them, although you will only see the extreme end of them and will not see all of them; and curse them for me from there."

¹⁴So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ¹⁵And he said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering while I myself meet the LORD over there."

¹⁶Then the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak."

¹⁷He came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the leaders of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"

¹⁸Then he took up his discourse and said,

"Arise, O Balak, and hear;

Give ear to me, O son of Zippor!

¹⁹God 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 it?

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

²⁰Behold, I have received a command to bless;

When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.

²¹He has not observed misfortune in Jacob;

Nor has He seen trouble in Israel;

The LORD his God is with him,

And the shout of a king is among them.

²²God brings them out of Egypt,

He is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

²³For there is no omen against Jacob,

Nor is there any divination against Israel;

At the proper time it shall be said to Jacob

And to Israel, what God has done!

²⁴Behold, a people rises like a lioness,

And as a lion it lifts itself;

It will not lie down until it devours the prey,

And drinks the blood of the slain."

[Read v.13-26]

Q: How does Balak react to Balaam's testimony?

A: He takes Balaam to another high place, what amounts to an attempt at achieving the same thing from a different viewpoint.

Q: How did this affect Balaam's methods?

A: It didn't. He had Balak stand on the high place next to the seven altars while Balaam visited a separate, neutral location for his actual encounter with God.

Q: What do the names of this place mean?

A: "Zophim" means "watchers" and "Pisgah" means "cleft". Together they are describing a position of observation.

Q: To whom is this response from God addressed? How is it different from the first pronouncement?

A: In the previous response, Balaam was speaking for and about himself; here the word Balaam received is directed at Balak personally, but still characterized as Balaam's personal response to the situation. Although divinely inspired, it is Balaam's personal explanation to Balak as to why he must turn down Balak's request a second time.

1. (v.19) God not only does not lie, but always follows through on His Word.
2. (v.20) God's Word in this case is to bless, not curse.
3. (v.21) God's view of Israel sees them in their ultimate spiritual good standing with the Lord.
4. (v.22) They are no longer the slave nation they once were, but through God have become powerful.
5. (v.23) Israel's status with God makes them impervious to the spiritual tools of false gods and false beliefs because they will ultimately prevail through God alone.
6. (v.24) Ultimately Israel will not be the devoured prey but the predator who in turn devours.

Point: God tells Balak through Balaam that from God's point of view, the roles and places of these nations are reversed from Balak's viewpoint.

Q: How does Balak receive this message? How does he act upon it?

A: Since he is not hearing what he so desires most, he would prefer to hear nothing at all.

Point: This is a hallmark not just of deception, but of a hardened heart devoted to a path contrary to God's Word and ways. It's not that God's truth simply does not penetrate or enlighten, but has actually become painful with which to deal.

Application: The second vision is a revelation of God's acceptance of Israel.

²⁵Then Balak said to Balaam, “Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!”

²⁶But Balaam replied to Balak, “Did I not tell you, ‘Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do’?”

²⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there.”

²⁸So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor which overlooks the wasteland.

²⁹Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.”

³⁰Balak did just as Balaam had said, and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

^{24:1}When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek omens but he set his face toward the wilderness. ²And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe; and the Spirit of God came upon him. ³He took up his discourse and said,

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye
is opened;

⁴The oracle of him who hears the
words of God,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes
uncovered,

⁵How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!

⁶Like valleys that stretch out,
Like gardens beside the river,
Like aloes planted by the LORD,
Like cedars beside the waters.

⁷Water will flow from his buckets,
And his seed will be by many waters,
And his king shall be higher than
Agag,

And his kingdom shall be exalted.

⁸God brings him out of Egypt,
He is for him like the horns of the
wild ox.

He will devour the nations who are
his adversaries,
And will crush their bones in pieces,
And shatter them with his arrows.

⁹He couches, he lies down as a lion,
And as a lion, who dares rouse him?
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,
And cursed is everyone who curses
you.”

[Read 23:27-24:9]

Q: What is the location to which Balak takes Balaam to try all of this a third time?

A: A high place called “Peor”, which means “cleft”.

Q: How do we know for sure that this, too, was a place dedicated to the worship of Baal?

A: In Numbers 25:3 it is so associated when the false worship in which Israel engages in is attributed to “Baal of Peor”. It is this place which will be specifically associated in Scripture with the great spiritual apostasy of the Israelites. (Num. 25; 31:16; Josh. 22:17)

Q: But what is different this time where Balaam is personally concerned?

A: “...he did not go as at other times to seek omens...” (v.24:1) He entered into each of the previous two encounters with the intention of not just seeking a curse, but doing so according to his spiritual methods of working. He abandons his agenda and methods this time.

Q: How is this pronouncement different from the previous two?

A: Neither of the two previous pronouncements were qualified like this one, “The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor”. (v.3) They were instead personal, divine revelations concerning Balaam personally, and then Balak personally, focused on God’s view of Israel in contradiction to their own. This is an actual prophetic pronouncement coming from Balaam for the first time.

Point: Note how the previous revelations served to produce the right spiritual attitude in Balaam in his confession so that finally, at this point, he admits he is “the man whose eye is opened” (v.3) and “who hears the words of God” (v.4)

Q: How do we know this to be something different from what came before aside from the fact that it is declared to be an “oracle”?

A: It is specifically identified as a “vision of the Almighty” which comes because of personal humility to the Lord—“Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered”. (v.4)

1. (v.5-6) Although temporarily moving through this world as exemplified by “tents”, God views Israel as firmly planted because of Him.
2. (v.7a) Although at this time they are camped in the wilderness, their spiritual blessings are equated to an abundance of water, a biblical metaphor for the Word of God to come both through the nation and its Seed, the Messiah the Word of God.
3. (v.7b-9A) Israel will prevail over the Canaanites as exemplified by the Amalekites ruled by Agag, a group so corrupt they are destined by God for total destruction and a continual problem throughout Israel’s history. (Ex. 17:8-16) Israel has been brought out of Egypt by God for the purpose of total victory over the nations.
4. (v.9b) God repeats the promise to Israel first given through Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and again through Abraham to Jacob. (Gen. 27:29)

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Point: God will not supply a new Word through someone who has not first submitted to His existing Word.

Application: The third vision is a revelation of God's ultimate earthly plan for Israel.

¹⁰Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these three times! ¹¹Therefore, flee to your place now. I said I would honor you greatly, but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor."

¹²Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying, ¹³'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. What the Lord speaks, that I will speak?' ¹⁴And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come."

¹⁵He took up his discourse and said,

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye
is opened,

¹⁶The oracle of him who hears the
words of God,
And knows the knowledge of the
Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes
uncovered.

¹⁷I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near;
A star shall come forth from Jacob,
A scepter shall rise from Israel,
And shall crush through the forehead
of Moab,

And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

¹⁸Edom shall be a possession,
Seir, its enemies, also will be a
possession,

While Israel performs valiantly.

¹⁹One from Jacob shall have
dominion,
And will destroy the remnant from
the city."

²⁰And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said,

[Read v.10-25]

Q: How do we know that Balak's heart is spiritually hardened beyond the point of recovery?

A: He is not just angry with the Word of God which came through Balaam, but actually assigns Balaam's failure to God by stating, "*behold, the Lord has held you back from honor*". (v.11) The act of striking one's hands together was a powerful demonstration in this time and culture of anger.

"Behold, then, I smite My hand at your dishonest gain which you have acquired and at the bloodshed which is among you. — Ezekiel 22:13

Q: In this instance, what is the full meaning of "honor"?

A: It is being financially compensated for his services. Balak will not pay Balaam for failing to invoke a curse.

*Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former. They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; for **I will indeed honor you richly**, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.'" Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. — Numbers 22:15–18*

Q: How is the object of this message different from the previous ones?

A: The first was a message to Balaam personally, the second a message to Balak personally, and the third a message concerning Israel in general. Here the message is what will become of Balak's nation and allies.

Q: How does this message reflect the true nature of prophecy in that it has both a past literal and historical meaning and yet a simultaneous future fulfillment yet to come?

A: Much of what is detailed here will be literally fulfilled by King David, such as overcoming Moab and Edom, but there will be an ultimate fulfillment through Christ the Messiah as the ultimate "*star...from Jacob*" and "*scepter...from Israel*". (v.17)

1. (v.17-19) What David will accomplish temporarily against the perpetual enemies of Israel, the Messiah will resolve permanently.
2. (v.20) The primary antagonist from Saul through the time of Mordecai and Esther, an ally of Balak, will ultimately be resolved permanently. ("*Amalek*" means "strangler of the people".)
3. (v.21-24) Although the Kenites (who come from Kain), Asshur and Eber all find temporary security as part of Balak's Midianite alliance, like Moab and Edom they will all ultimately come to their end. ("*Kenite*" = "a nest", "*Asshur*" = "lifted up", and "*Eber*" = "passed over" is a combination of terms which depicts being out of reach or untouchable, contrary to their ultimate fates for their treatment of Israel and God.)

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“Amalek was the first of the nations,
But his end shall be destruction.”

²¹And he looked at the Kenite, and
took up his discourse and said,

“Your dwelling place is enduring,
And your nest is set in the cliff.

²²Nevertheless Kain will be
consumed;
How long will Asshur keep you
captive?”

²³Then he took up his discourse and
said,

“Alas, who can live except God has
ordained it?

²⁴But ships shall come from the coast
of Kittim,
And they shall afflict Asshur and will
afflict Eber;
So they also will come to
destruction.”

²⁵Then Balaam arose and departed
and returned to his place, and Balak also
went his way.

Point: *Balak repeatedly sought a curse to be divinely invoked against Israel, and in the end it is turned around so that he receives the divine bad news himself.*

Application: *The fourth revelation is a vision of God’s future glory for Israel temporally in history and prophetically permanent through the Messiah.*

Overall Application

This four-fold revelation, while having a literal application for the personalities and nations of the time, mirrors the experience of the New Testament believer:

- *First there is the divine calling. (23:1-12)*
- *Next is the acceptance of that calling. (23:13-26)*
- *Then is the revelation of God’s plan. (23:27-24:9)*
- *And finally future glory and ultimate fulfillment of that plan. (24:10-25)*

Like Israel, each believer has been chosen by God, justified, and provided a divinely rich inheritance with the promise of an ultimate future glory.