

TORAHSCOPE: Chukat (Ordinance)-Balak (Destroyer)

by Mark Huey posted 03 July, 2009 www.outreachisrael.net

Numbers 19:1-22:1

Judges 11:1-33

“On the Face Again”

“The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, ‘If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why then have you brought the LORD's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.’ Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them” (Numbers 20:3-6).

The past three Torah portions have dealt with the challenges that Moses encountered to his leadership in the relatively early stages of the desert sojourn. This week in *Chukat*, the leap from the ordinances given by God to approximately thirty-eight years of sojourning in the wilderness is quite a contrast to contemplate. From red heifer sacrifices, to the chronic problem of water shortages, Moses striking rather than speaking to the rock, and the challenge of hostile nations—the narrative of *Chukat* covers a wide series of circumstances. Searching for a thread that holds everything together has been a challenge for me, but one that is best achieved while in the prostrated position. There is no doubt that the quintessential example of leadership displayed by Moses is repeated one more time for our personal edification.

Once again, when challenged by the children of the earlier generation that has already succumbed to the ravages of death in the desert journey, the Levites, Kohathites, Amramites, and Jochebedites (Exodus 6:18-20) followed the only pattern that they knew worked. They fell on their faces and pleaded with God for mercy, grace, and answers to questions beyond their ability to fathom:

“The sons of Kohath: Amram and Izhar and Hebron and Uzziel; and the length of Kohath's life was one hundred and thirty-three years. The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites according to their generations. Amram married his father's sister Jochebed, and she bore him Aaron and Moses; and the length of Amram's life was one hundred and thirty-seven years” (Exodus 6:18-20).

Before we analyze the balance of the Torah portion, I would be remiss to not consider the perplexing exercise established decades earlier when the priests of Israel were given instruction about how to purify the sporadically unclean. Since twice in the opening chapter the Torah states that aspects of this procedure are to be a “perpetual statute” for the people of Israel and the alien who sojourns among them, so perhaps it is something that should be considered as we seek to let the counsel of Scripture permeate our souls:

“The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening; and it shall be a **perpetual statute** to the sons of Israel and to the alien who sojourns among them” (Numbers 19:10).

“So it shall be a **perpetual statute** for them. And he who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and he who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening. Furthermore, anything that the unclean *person* touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches *it* shall be unclean until evening” (Numbers 19:21-22).

“Perpetual statute” or “eternal decree” (ATS) reads as *chukat olam* (חֻקַּת עוֹלָם) in Hebrew. What we see in Numbers 19 are not the only statutes that are to be done in perpetuity. When you examine the Torah, similar terminology is given regarding the requirements for Passover, Unleavened Bread, various grain offerings, holy anointing oil formulas, celebration of the Sabbath, elevation offerings, restrictions on the priesthood, sabbatical year requirements, and a host of other things. *Chukat* or “ordinance” is derived from the root verb *chaqaq* (חָקַק), generally meaning “cut

in, inscribe, decree” (BDB).¹ The first time this term is used appears in Genesis 49:10, in the prophecy regarding the coming of the Messiah to rule with a ruler’s staff or scepter:

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s [*chaqaq*] staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him *shall be* the obedience of the peoples” (Genesis 49:10).

The term *chaqaq* describes authority with the power to make edicts. A related noun, *choq* (צִוִּי), means “something prescribed, a statute or due” (BDB).² It is used to describe Pharaoh’s allotment of land for the priests of Egypt as directed by Joseph when he was the viceroy of Egypt:

“Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had an allotment [*choq*] from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment [*choq*] which Pharaoh gave them. Therefore, they did not sell their land” (Genesis 47:22).

Considering these related terms we can begin to understand that these statutes not only have a considerable amount of authority attached to them, but that those who follow them also receive or inherit the blessings of the Almighty as they are obeyed. Of course, many of us today ask which of these instructions we should observe—or can observe. We do not live in the same circumstances that many of the Torah’s commandments were originally directed for. However, as Messianics by studying the Torah regularly we do consider what they mean—and so to an extent we do “remember” them.

It is my conviction that we should first strive to adhere to the commandments that Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostles followed, at least to the best of our ability given the challenges of the Diaspora and lack of a functioning Temple in Jerusalem. After all, for the faithful who are desiring an intimate walk with their Savior, the opportunity to commune with Him during times set-apart for daily prayer, weekly Sabbaths, annual feasts, offerings of various types, etc., allows Believers to exercise their faith by rehearsing these truths and building our relationship with Him. However, as we strive to follow the Torah as the Messiah and the Apostles did, we also must do so given the limitations of our Twenty-First Century world, and sometimes speculate on what the Lord would do were He living in our time.

As I examined each of the different passages in the Torah where these ordinances, statutes, and laws were stated, I realized that in almost all cases you could discern their symbolism and how using tangible implements or activities pointed one to God’s holiness and efficacy. Things like the pure oil for the *menorah*, the purification of hands and feet before entering the Tent of Meeting, the peace offerings, the waving of the barley sheaf, the Passover lamb, the proclamation made at *Shavuot*, the *Yom Kippur* service, the celebration of *Sukkot*, the blowing of the trumpets, reveal greater and deeper elements of our faith.

A great difficulty, however, arises if one is trying to understand all of these symbols **without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit** who has been sent to instruct, teach, and guide us into all truth. If you get hung up on all of these ordinances and the impression that without doing them all to the letter of the Law—or at least by some of the methods prescribed by modern-day Orthodox Judaism—you need to check yourself to see where you are in your relationship with God. Is your relationship with the Torah, or is it with the Giver of the Torah? There are many individuals and organizations that are sincerely looking for modern-day spotless red heifers that they believe will be used to purify the implements and reestablish Temple services. At this point, we need to ask the Lord for discernment about what He is trying to teach us when we come to these difficult passages.

The Red Heifer Ashes with Water

The commandments regarding the red heifer that we see in this week’s Torah selection are a challenge when you read them, because they are not being practiced today. Without an operating sacrificial system, God is not sanctioning the impracticality of slaughtering flawless red cows in order for the priests, and consequently us, to be purified. Throughout the centuries the

¹ BDB, 349.

² Ibid.

Jewish Sages have attempted to follow this procedure and understand what it meant in the Diaspora. This has only led to a great deal of debate with no agreement. The physics of what was to be done do not logically make sense to the human mind. Many have simply tried to **exercise faith** in the Author of these requirements.

Prior to the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E., the commands regarding the red heifer were performed. But now as we look back upon these perpetual statutes, we can perhaps see it through the lens of the Messiah and His representation of so many of these ordinances that is without logical explanation. **God simply has commanded that we do them.** But now that we are technically unable to perform some of these ordinances, what are we to do? Is it possible that there is another explanation for what the red heifer ashes of purification are all about? After all, the blood of the Lamb of God, as stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews, has provided a permanent offering not available in the Torah of Moses:

"But when Messiah appeared *as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"* (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Upon reading these verses from the author of Hebrews, I was reminded of a question that a good friend of mine once posed to me, who for years was a part of the charismatic church. At the time, I was a relatively new Messianic Believer. My friend was asking me what the Apostle John meant when he was describing the three witnesses in his first epistle. **He knew what the witness of the blood and Spirit meant, but what about the "water"?** At the time the question was posed, I did not have a ready answer—and I did not take the time to dig into the subject. But as I later considered the red heifer purification laws, I wondered if there was a connection. John's words may shed some light on this issue:

"Whoever believes that Yeshua is the Messiah is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Yeshua is the Son of God? This is the One who came by water and blood, Yeshua the Messiah; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. **For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.** If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:1-13).

Here, the classic argument that John emphasizes in both his Gospel and letters is that if one loves God and is truly born again, he or she will keep His commandments. Yeshua says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." One who has experienced a heart change will want to naturally obey the Lord.

Needless to say, obeying God's commandments in the Torah is something that is difficult and requires sacrifices. Many Christians believe that God's Law has been abolished by Yeshua and they do not concern themselves with it. Others have a very limited view of the Torah and only

follow its “moral” commandments, as opposed to its “ceremonial” commandments. But we are called as mature Believers to do *everything that our Lord did while on Earth*.

So what are we to do when we encounter a passage like this Torah portion when the description of the laws of purification are detailed?

Upon reading that the priests who slay the red heifer without blemish, and then reduce it to ashes and gather them all, become unclean in the process of preparing the ashes for their ritualistic uses. Furthermore, we learn that those who are responsible for sprinkling the waters of purification also become contaminated during the process. Nevertheless, Israel is to follow these procedures when being exposed to death, human bones, or graves.

Some of you may ask if there is any way someone can remain clean before the Holy One of Israel. Even in this procedure, the desire to be clean in order to commune with God is impacted by the procedure itself. The priests who are responsible for encouraging the people to serve the Lord and have a relationship with Him are in a chronic state of being unclean as they intercede and perform their various functions as priests before Him.

I believe that the principal thrust of these commandments, more than anything else, is our human incapacity to be redeemed by our own actions. Those of us who can see this in the Torah should likewise see the need for us to know Yeshua as our Savior. The Lord is faithful to forgive us of our sins when we call upon Him:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

When we are forgiven of our sins, we should then strive to be children of God who have the faith that we can overcome the ills of our fallen world:

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4).

We must have faith in the shed blood of Yeshua the Messiah and His redemptive work that is confirmed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. These two components are fairly easy to identify, but they must be exhibited in the atoning work of the blood of the Lamb and the reality that God has taken up residence in a heart of flesh that has replaced a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). As a result, the “witness of the water” can mean that we are now desirous of moving toward holiness and knowing the Lord more intimately **by the washing of the water of the Word**. As the Apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians regarding interpersonal relationships, he compares them to the relationship that the Messiah has with His called out ones:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Messiah also loved the [assembly] and gave Himself up for her, **so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word**, that He might present to Himself the [assembly] in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Is it possible that things like the purification waters sprinkled with red heifer ashes, the ritual baths, and other implements that were used to physically remind us of constant state of uncleanness, are all used by the Lord to remind us of the need we have of a permanent sin covering? Is it possible that the “water witness” that 1 John is connecting us to is the cleansing power of red heifer, ash laden water? Faith is certainly an intangible understanding that recognizes that the blood of the Lamb, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, and the purifying symbolism of water, are all vital components of our relationship with the Holy One of Israel.

Consequently, as the Apostle John states, the resulting eternal life that salvation affords is a result of the love you have for the Messiah that evidences itself in the desire to obey His commandments. Even when you are not able to follow these commands perfectly, you should at least be rehearsing the ones that remind you of His finished work at Golgotha (Calvary) and His promises to return and reestablish them in His Millennial Kingdom (Ezekiel 44-48).

I do not entirely know if this is the answer to my friend’s inquiry about the witness of the blood, the water, and the Spirit. I have heard the interpretation about the fact that Yeshua was born of a woman and that through the waters of the birthing process His humanity was verified.

That makes good logical sense as do the arguments about the waters of baptism. But for this week as I was trying to understand the essence of the red heifer procedure, these verses seemed to come together. Regardless, I do know that it is by faith that I believe in the atoning power of the blood, the indwelling presence of the Spirit, and the cleansing ability of being washed by the water of the Word. And by faith, I believe that through the consistent study of the Torah, the Holy Spirit will continually give all of us more and more understanding so we can be better equipped to deal with all of the unknowns of our human existence.

The Rest of the Story

After Numbers 19, the narrative leaps forward approximately thirty-eight years to the time just before the Israelites are getting ready to enter into the Promised Land. Moses is almost 120 years old, and his sister Miriam dies and is buried. Apparently, as long as she was alive, the ubiquitous rock ushering forth water is following the people through the various desert stops. But now that the Moses and Miriam generation has been buried in the wilderness sojourn, their children and grandchildren are about to fall into the same pattern of complaining and murmuring. Without much apparent hesitation, once the water dried up, they were at the throats of Moses and Aaron quarreling about the lack of water and complaining about the lack of various fruit bearing trees.

Interestingly, Moses and Aaron, now in their “senior season,” respond in the best manner that they have mastered over the years. **They get down on their faces once again and implore the Lord to intercede.** They receive the answer to their question as how to proceed, and the instructions were very direct. But paradoxically, Moses, in particular at this late stage in his life, makes a tragic mistake—and rather than speaking to the rock, he strikes it twice in order to bring forth water. This results in God disallowing their personal entrance into the Promised Land:

“Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. **But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’** Those *were* the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them” (Numbers 20:11-13).

This is a great lesson for all of us to learn. Here is the man chosen to be the one that God is going to talk with “face to face,” and at this late stage in his life, he acts rashly and it costs him dearly. He is denied the opportunity to enter into the Promised Land with the people of Israel. In fact, when you read the account, you will realize that God actually spoke the punishment to both Moses and Aaron. Shortly after this, Aaron dies. The rest of *Chukat* deals with the battles that erupt with the peoples who want to harass Israel and keep them from achieving their destiny.

What can we learn from this text—that takes us on a wild journey from discussing the red heifer to burying Aaron and ending up on the precipice of entering the Promised Land on the plains of Moab? Are we going to be like Moses and Aaron or their generation who perished in the wilderness, or are we on the road to entering into the rest provided in the Messiah? Are we going to follow the instructions of John, Paul, and Yeshua Himself, and obey God’s commandments and walk in the same manner that our Lord did? Will there be strong evidence that by our obedience to the Lord we will be truly demonstrating that we love Him?

Will we have a witness in faith in the atoning blood of the Messiah? Will we have a witness that the Holy Spirit indwells us, and that we are trying to submit our will to His will? Will we have the witness that the purifying water of God’s Word is something that we seek to be washed by and cleansed by as we seek to know Him better?

These, and a flood of other questions, permeate my soul as I contemplate the simple instructions given to us this week in *Chukat*. But at the end of the day, there is really one thing that is only available for us to do so that we may truly hear the voice of God. **Have you fallen on your face and cried out for mercy?** If there is nothing else we can take away from *Chukat* that speaks about the instructions about the use of the ashes of the red heifer, perhaps we can identify

with Moses and Aaron and learn that when times of testing, tribulation, murmuring, and quarreling arise—and they surely will—the best thing to do is hit the floor. Then and only then will we place ourselves in a position to admit that we are helpless and in need of a loving Heavenly Father who can confirm that we are sprinkled by the blood of the Messiah, filled with the Holy Spirit to comfort and teach us, and washed by the frequent pursuit of Him in His eternal Word. Just perhaps, by His grace, we will be empowered to speak of His mercy and love toward others—rather than striking out and not entering His rest.

Numbers 22:2-25:9

Micah 5:6-6:8

“Self-Inflicted Curses”

“While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel” (Numbers 25:1-3).

This week’s Torah portion, *Balak*, chronologically finds the people of Israel further down the trail on their arduous and circuitous march to Canaan, the Promised Land, but without the able counsel of Aaron to co-administer with the aging Moses. After thirty days of mourning Aaron’s death, the indigenous populations of the desert areas begin an incessant military attack on the migrating Israelites. In the closing chapters *Chukat* (Numbers 21), a brief engagement with the Canaanites is described, as Israel must turn to the Holy One for guidance and deliverance to secure victory.

Next, the sojourn takes a turn to avoid the conflict with the Edomites, who earlier had refused passage through their territory (Numbers 20:18-21). At this point, the complaints of Israel once again center around the lack of bread and water, and an apparent distaste for the ubiquitous manna provisions enhanced by quail. God is not pleased. To chastise the Israelite grumblers, He sends snakes into the camp with a deadly venomous bite. This judgment creates an opportunity for Israel to gaze by faith upon the brazen serpent fashioned by Moses in order to receive physical healing (Numbers 21:4-9). The lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness parallels the lifting up of Yeshua the Messiah on the cross:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

Rather than elaborate on these basic principles of our faith, I would like to focus on how the Torah goes on to record the continuing sojourn of the Israelite survivors in the wilderness. The journey continues as a series of encampments are detailed from Oboth to Moab to Zared, to beyond the Aram at the border between the Moabites and the Ammonites (Numbers 21:10-14). Apparently, more specific details of these different encampments and the conflicts that ensued were contained in another text called “the Book of the Wars of the LORD” (Numbers 21:14), that today is no longer extant.³ Some additional locations are cited as the sojourn proceeds “from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the land of Moab, at the top of Pisgah which overlooks the wasteland” (Numbers 21:19-20).

Many theologians and Bible scholars have attempted to trace the exact locations of these wanderings, and Biblical archaeologists are often very interested as to where they might have been

³ Editor’s note: The phrase *sefer milchamot ADONAI* (סֵפֶר מִלְחָמוֹת יְהוָה), “the Book of the Wars of HASHEM” (ATS), may be a textual redaction following the principal compilation of the Torah by Moses. If indeed added later, either during the period of United Monarchy, Divided Monarchy, or even the post-exilic period, it refers to a text or series of records that is no longer extant. It is possible that many traditions of this text survive in veiled references through the remainder of the Tanakh (Old Testament), as well as some of the histories as recorded by Josephus, Philo, or other ancient Jewish (and possibly also Christian) commentators.

located in the Ancient Near East. Time does not permit us the luxury of researching these specific places, but most assuredly, we know that God gave His people more instruction and admonition at each stop.

As the Israelites reach the border with the Amorites, they again, similar to the pleas made with Edom, send messengers to their king to receive passage through their territory on the “king’s highway.” The belligerent Amorites, fearful of the perceived invasion of their lands, challenge Israel to battle. A war erupts when the Amorites refuse passage. Once again, Israel prevails, and even occupies some of the cities built by the Amorites (Numbers 21:25). In a short time, with the favor of the Almighty, Israel begins to receive a regional reputation as a powerful army when the Amorites are defeated.

After occupying the Amorite cities and towns, the final encampment finds Israel bivouacked in martial array by tribes on the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. One can just imagine how awesome a sight this must have been as the victorious Israelites prepared themselves for the final assault on the Jericho stronghold that was protecting the eastern flank of Canaan (Numbers 22:1). It is at this point that Balak, the king of Moab is introduced, and his dread of the Israelites is recorded (Numbers 22:2-4). Fearing a military defeat if his army challenges the Israelites, Balak instead chooses another method to thwart their advance into his domain. Rather than engage Israel in battle, Balak decides to call upon the infamous Balaam, a renowned prophet, whom he entices to make a lengthy sojourn from his home town of Pethor on the Euphrates River, to verbally curse the people of Israel:

“Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.’ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the *fees for* divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak’s words to him” (Numbers 22:6-7).

The diviners in Balak’s court were accustomed to bringing down curses upon anyone that their master asked them to curse. Probably not unlike Pharaoh’s magicians we see in Exodus, these diviners were associated with the black arts. Some of what they performed may have been nothing more than “parlor tricks,” but there were those few who were demonically empowered and could use the supernatural to please Balak. In the case of Balaam, Balak hires someone who is particularly keen on using the supernatural.

Now, on the plains of Moab, King Balak, threatened by the presence of God’s glory emanating from the Tabernacle, with the tribes of Israel positioned in a semblance of military order, decides that he is going to call upon some of the mystical arts to resolve himself of the problem. He has heard of Balaam’s fame, and that he may have some kind of influence with Israel’s God. He wants Israel to be cursed and ineffective lest they do to him what they have done to some of the other surrounding nations:

“Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.’ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the *fees for* divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak’s words to him. He said to them, ‘Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the LORD may speak to me.’ And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. Then God came to Balaam and said, ‘Who are these men with you?’ Balaam said to God, ‘Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent *word* to me, “Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.”’ **God said to Balaam, ‘Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed’**” (Numbers 22:6-12).

In this initial invitation from the diviners sent by Balak to retrieve Balaam, we learn some interesting things. Balaam has supernatural power because of some kind of relationship to the Creator God. Balak freely declares that he knows that whomever Balaam blesses is blessed, and whomever he curses is cursed. Balaam knows who the God of Israel is. Whether He is only one of

many deities that Balaam knows or is the only one he knows, we cannot be entirely certain. Some would suggest that Balaam may be a descendent of Abraham, and carried on the traditions of Abraham's God, mixing them with other local religions. Others may speculate that Balaam, as the able profiteer, was quite inclusive about what deities he would commune with as he was ultimately interested with only money. Regardless of which is the case, the God of Israel allows Balaam to communicate with Him.

Curiously, in the dialogue that ensues between Balaam and the Lord, He absolutely declares that Israel is His blessed people. He commands Balaam *not* to curse the Israelites. This causes quite a predicament for Balaam, who is enticed by the prospect of lining his pockets with some significant amounts of silver and gold. On the second approach to Balaam, by a more impressive group of suitors, he indicates that his true desire is to have the security that he believes comes from the accumulation of wealth:

"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 22:18).

Balaam basically tells Balak's messengers that he can be bought for a price. Balaam would circumvent the decree of the God of Israel not to curse His people for just the right amount. This indicates that whatever kind of relationship Balaam had with the Lord, it was not an exclusive relationship by any means. As you read through the balance of our reading, you will find that when Balaam arrives at Balak's court, we see him in the process of going through the motions of cursing Israel just so he can receive his payment. Ironically, a messenger from God confronts him for his self-serving act:

"Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back.' But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.' So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak" (Numbers 22:34-35).

Balaam receives permission to go with the men back to Kiriath-huzoth, a city in Moab, but with the strong caveat that he only declare to Balak what he is instructed to say by the God of Israel. Apparently, the Lord wants to make a recorded example for future generations that He will even use "prophets for hire" to declare His blessings upon His people. As you continue in the narrative, you can read the various sacrificial methods for preparing the people to receive the word of the Lord, and also read through the different prophetic blessings that are declared by Balaam.

Two important things need to be mentioned from these blessings. First, it must be noted that when Balaam tries a third time to curse Israel, he is instead compelled to bless them mightily:

"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. And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe; and the Spirit of God came upon him. He took up his discourse and said, 'The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, and the oracle of the man whose eye is opened; the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered, **how fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!** Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens beside the river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. Water 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" (Numbers 24:1-7).

In this scene we find Balaam high up on a hill overlooking the encampment of Israel, and noting that they were camped in an orderly way around the Tabernacle. Can you imagine seeing several hundred thousand arrayed around the Tabernacle from a vantage point? If you have ever been to Israel and looked at this specific area, you can probably vaguely picture what Balaam was seeing. But the curious thing is that as Balaam begins his utterance, perhaps beginning to curse Israel, all he can say is "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (ATS). The opening lines of this declaration are *mah tov* (מַה טוֹב), used in the liturgy of the Jewish

Synagogue. I consider it to be quite ironic that something that Israel's enemy intends for gross evil *ends up being one of the opening phrases that are used to entreat God's favor in the Synagogue today!*

In his fourth oracle, Balaam looks prophetically into the future and describes the ultimate end of the nations that will be harassing Israel:

“He took up his discourse and said, ‘The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, and the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the 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. I 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. Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, while Israel performs valiantly. One from Jacob shall have dominion, and will destroy the remnant from the city.’ And he looked at *Amalek* and took up his discourse and said, ‘Amalek was the first of the nations, but his end *shall be* destruction.’ And 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. Nevertheless Kain will be consumed; how long will Asshur keep you captive?’ Then he took up his discourse and said, ‘Alas, who can live except God has ordained it? But ships *shall come* from the coast of Kittim, and they shall afflict Asshur and will afflict Eber; so they also *will come* to destruction.’ Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way” (Numbers 24:15-25).

As you read this prophecy, you will note that Balaam starts this oracle with the same recognition that he starts his third oracle with when he blesses Israel. But this time, as Balaam gets a peek into the future for Israel, he gets a vision of a “star” with power coming forth, coming and crushing their enemies. I believe that this is a strong prophetic picture of the return of Yeshua when He will return to execute judgment upon the nations of the Earth and restore the Kingdom of Israel. It reminds me of the description that the Apostle John gives in the Book of Revelation when He is shown Yeshua in His exalted glory:

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS’” (Revelation 19:11-16).

One actually gets a prophetic glimpse at the future work of Yeshua through the oracles of Balaam, which when we compare to the declarations made by some of the Prophets of the Tanakh, are really no different. This demonstrates that the Lord can communicate His message for humanity through a large number of vessels—even those on the outside trying to harm His people.

Finally, as our Torah portion concludes, we discover that there is one piece of counsel that Balaam did provide Balak that goes beyond his inability to verbally curse Israel. Since Balaam was unable to issue any verbal curses against Israel, he does tell Balak that the men of Israel can be given over to their fleshly lusts, and would thus be responsible for cursing themselves by disobeying their God. By enticing the men to take up lascivious relationships with the women of Moab, their actions should bring God's judgment upon them in just a short matter of time. This is described in the closing verses of *Balak*, and will continue next week with more details given in *Pinchas*:

“While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel” (Numbers 25:1-3).

We see that the gross sexual activities that the Israelite males performed with the local prostitutes ultimately brings the anger of the Lord down upon them. This is because their sexual debauchery will ultimately lead to idolatry and them sacrificing to other gods. We see that the God of Israel is jealous and He does not appreciate His chosen people engaging in sin. This is one of the reasons that the curses levied for disobedience, including the vile sins of sexual immorality and worshipping other gods, are repeated continually throughout the Scriptures. Even if some restitution can take place between God and His people, the consequences of such sin often remain.

When we turn to this week's corresponding Haftarah reading, taken from the Prophet Micah, we are admonished about the human propensity to do things that people hope will appease God for their wicked ways:

“My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered him, *and* from Shittim to Gilgal, so that you might know the righteous acts of the LORD.’ With what shall I come to the LORD *and* bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn *for* my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? **He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”** (Micah 6:5-8).

As you read the concluding statement, you will note that Micah is reminding his audience that the Holy One of Israel is not at all impressed with the burnt offerings of animal sacrifices, or even the presentation of one's firstborn as some kind of offering. Instead, the focus turns to what the Lord is most concerned about for His people, as He desires that they perform justice, love, kindness, and walk humbly before Him. This is what pleases our Heavenly Father. These qualities are a total reflection of who He is—qualities and traits perfectly embodied in the Person of Yeshua the Messiah.

Is there any other who humbled Himself more than Yeshua? Certainly, even though Moses is referred to as the humblest human who ever lived upon the Earth (Numbers 12:3),⁴ Moses' humility, however, is quite insignificant compared to the Son of God who emptied Himself of His exaltedness and power in Heaven to come down to Earth as a lowly human:

“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Messiah, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Yeshua the Messiah, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, **but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.** For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Yeshua EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:1-11).

This degree of humility is almost beyond our comprehension. But it is this same Yeshua who admonished the Pharisaical leaders of His era that they had forgotten the weightier matters of justice emphasized by the Torah:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: **justice and mercy and faithfulness;** but

⁴ Editor's note: Please keep in mind that if Moses were indeed the most humble human being who ever lived on Earth, that he would have never written this about himself. Most conservative commentators are agreed that the statement in Numbers 12:3 was added to the Torah by Joshua, or other scribes, after Moses' death.

these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Matthew 23:23-24).

Here, the Messiah is rebuking these Pharisees for their obedience to relatively minor aspects of the Torah, but forgetting to do the most important things. The problem that Yeshua addresses is that one's adherence to the minute details of the Torah, although good, is nothing compared to the neglect for the weightier provisions that deal with justice, mercy, and faithfulness. If all one focuses on is doing outward things, rather than exhibiting what it means to be just, loving, merciful, and compassionate to others, then he or she is desperately missing the point of why one is to obey God. Obeying God includes the mission of demonstrating His goodness to others—so that they may come to serve Him as well!

Problems inevitably come when we decide to disobey God, and/or ignore His instructions for us. If we do not obey our Heavenly Father, we will incur consequences for our disobedience to Him. In the case of the Israelites who cohabitated with Moabite prostitutes, how many of them had bastard children as a result? Certainly, while these men could be reconciled to God, damage was done and many of them had half-Israelite children to deal with. This is not only a sin that remains confined to ancient times—because the sins of adultery and fornication *always bring consequences*. And this is certainly not the only sin that can create generational problems (but we will leave these discussions for another time).

In Jude's epistle we see warnings that in his generation, over a millennia after the incident with Balak, some gross sinful activities were occurring among those claiming to follow Yeshua. We should not be surprised when we see similar things today, and instead know that we can turn to the Scriptures to be prepared for inevitability of God's judgment:

"Yet in the same way these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!' But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. **Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.** These are the men who are **hidden reefs in your love feasts** when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. *It was* also about these men *that* Enoch, *in* the seventh *generation* from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.' These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their *own* lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of *gaining an* advantage. But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah that they were saying to you, **'In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.'** **These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit"** (Jude 8-19).

What we particularly need to be mindful of in this era of mass communication, is that the same demonic influences that were present among the diviners in Balak's court, or in the Apostolic era, are still influencing people today. They are looking for willing vessels, and lamentably they find them far too often in those who are not only open to sin and are in open rebellion against God, but may even be masquerading as men and women of God. Instead of being truly humble men and women of God, who are totally satisfied with the assignments and tasks that He has given them, they exercise their free will and do things motivated at the best by their flesh, and at the worst by Satan himself. The Apostle John warns us about this:

"Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes**

and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

Certainly in our reading this week, we can see that Balak and Balaam were both motivated by the world system that John would later warn his audience about. The questions we should be asking ourselves today when we consider this are innumerable, but a few come to my mind:

- What am I focusing on throughout the day when I allow to let my mind wander?
- Who am I worshipping?
- Who am I praising?
- What does my heart and will want to do with my time?
- How am I exercising justice?
- Am I loving in all situations?
- Do I extend mercy at all times or just in the case of someone I know?
- Am I worrying about the minute details of the Torah, or am I focusing on the weightier matters of morality and justice?
- What could I possibly be doing to bring curses upon myself, and/or damage my relationship with God?

As you can see, the list can go on and on and will be specific for each person who is truly trying to walk out his or her salvation with fear and trembling.

On another expansion of this subject, I think it is important to mention the tripartite nature of a human being that the Apostle Paul mentions:

“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. **Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah.** Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-24).

Did you notice that Paul talks about the spirits, souls, and bodies of the Believers he was addressing? Each one of these three aspects of a person should all be transformed if one has experienced salvation of Yeshua. Do you honor God with your spirit, soul, and body? Or do you honor Him with just your spirit and soul? Do you just honor God with your body and go through outward motions? How do you worship God with both your heart *and* mind? Do you do things that harm your body? Do you do things that harm your mind? This is a huge subject, but when you consider the fact that we are the ones who can curse ourselves out of ignorance or blatant defiance—at the very least damaging the relationship that we are supposed to have with our Father—it might be helpful for us to consider what we do with ourselves, what we put into our minds, and what we put into our bodies.

Our Heavenly Father wants a relationship with us and He wants the best for us. He does not want us to be cursed, but instead wants us to be blessed. When we obey Him, it pleases Him—and He has no choice but to shower us with His blessings! But these blessings will be things that can testify of His goodness—they will not be the wanton desires of our fallen flesh. I believe that when we study the Torah we can learn how to serve and obey the Lord more effectively. When we can do this, we can truly fulfill the calling that Israel was intended to have as being a light to the world. People can come to us and see Yeshua the Messiah living through us, and desire to have what we have.

Mark Huey (B.A., Vanderbilt University in History and Graduate Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the Director of Outreach Israel Ministries (www.outreachisrael.net). He is the author of several books, including: *TorahScope, Volumes I & II*, and *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. He is also co-author of *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.