

Numbers 22:2-25:9

Micah 5:6-6:8

"Consistent Blessings"

Many Bible readers are quite familiar with elements seen in this week's Torah portion, *Balak*, even if they do not remember the chapters or verses where they appear. One of the main features seen in *Balak* is God using an animal to verbally communicate to a human being:

"And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' Then Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now.' The donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?' And he said, 'No'" (Numbers 22:28-30).

You may have heard the account of Balaam's donkey referred to, and someone quite seriously—or half-jokingly—say something like: *If God can speak through Balaam's a**, He can certainly speak through mine!* Even if you laughed at this, such an expression is certainly true, because many Believers can often recall points in their lives when the Holy Spirit used them in circumstances which in many cases were beyond their mortal comprehension. When they did not know what to say, the presence of the Lord took over, and communicated the proper words.

The focus for most people when they remember this section of Scripture is upon the miraculous incident of the donkey speaking to Balaam. Yet as memorable as it is to think about Baalam's donkey, too many forget the larger series of events in which this takes place. Baalam was some kind of prophet, who was to be hired by Balak king of Moab, who wanted him to curse the people of Israel.¹ However, the Lord would explicitly forbid Baalam from cursing Israel:

"God said to Balaam, 'Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed'" (Numbers 22:12).

Balam is permitted to see Balak, but he is not permitted to speak any words except those that God specifically would give to him:

"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 22:35).

Balaam will only be permitted to speak the words that are given to him by God Himself (Numbers 22:38). This is a very interesting restriction, because even though Balak hires him (Numbers 22:41), what is spoken forth by Balaam are not curses upon Israel, but rather great blessings. While Balak expects Balaam to issue damning cries and laments upon the Israelites, Balaam instead declares great words of admiration, blessing, and prosperity (Numbers 23:1-30). As you read through the various utterances, one sees that Balaam is a mouthpiece for the God of Israel. Each of his three attempts to curse Israel (Numbers 23:7-10, 18-24; 24:3-9) turn out to be pronouncements of the Lord's great favor toward them.

Balaam's First Attempt

The first attempt by Balaam to curse the Israelites comes from atop a hill overlooking the camp of Israel, after seven bulls and rams are offered up on seven altars² prepared by Balak and Balaam:

"He 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!" How shall I

¹ Numbers 22:2-6.

² Numbers 23:1-6.

curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? As 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. Who 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!” (Numbers 23:7-10).

This first utterance can be essentially summarized by the statement, “How can I damn whom God has not damned, how doom when the LORD has not doomed?” (NJPS). Balaam has spoken only what the Holy One has instructed him to say, and Balak is horrified. Shocked, he tells Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!” (Numbers 23:11).

Balaam’s Second Attempt

A second attempt is offered from another place, only where Balaam will not be able to see the entire camp of Israel. Again, seven bulls and seven rams are offered up before Balaam can speak:³

“Then he took up his discourse and said, ‘Arise, O Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor! 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 it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a *command* to bless; when He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it. He 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. God brings them out of Egypt, He is for them like the horns of the wild ox. For 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! Behold, 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” (Numbers 23:18-24).

Once again, Balaam blesses rather than curses the people of Israel. In his declarations, the overriding thought is directed to the attributes of the Creator God. Balaam makes the categorical statement, “**God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind**” (NRSV). Not only is Balaam respecting Israel’s God in making these statements, but he declares forth how the words He causes him to speak will not be revoked. Unlike human beings, who will often say things that they will later renounce or alter—God’s words about blessing Israel, spoken forth through Balaam, are not things He will renounce or alter. If anything, all Balak can witness is that things are going to be very good for Israel—by extension meaning that things are likely to be very bad for him!

Balak realizes that he has made a mistake in hiring Balaam, telling him to just stop speaking: “Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!” (Numbers 23:25). But it is too late, because Balaam responds and reminds Balak, “Did I not tell you, ‘Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do?’” (Numbers 23:26). Balaam still has more to say about Israel.

Balaam’s Third Attempt

Balak realizes that Balaam has not finished speaking, so instead he takes him to another place where he can prophecy from, saying, “I will take you to another place; perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there” (Numbers 23:27). For a third time, seven bulls and seven rams are offered up. This final time, Balaam issues a very special word, moved by the Spirit of God, that would impact not only future generations of Ancient Israel—but even Judaism until this very day:

“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

³ Numbers 23:13-17.

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. God 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. He 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” (Numbers 24:3-9).

Certainly, one can see a bit of irony in how at the third time Balak asks Balaam to curse Israel—Balaam does exactly the opposite! Balaam can only declare how Israel has been blessed by God in abundance, and how He has been there to defend and guard His chosen people. Balaam was originally contracted to curse Israel, but was supernaturally prevented from doing so. It is easy to see in the Scriptures how devastating this would have been for King Balak. But, consider how even today the *Mah Tov* is a traditional prayer that is used in the Jewish liturgy of the morning *Shabbat* service. These words, originally spoken by a pagan non-Israelite—speaking of the goodness of Israel's ancient tents and dwellings—remind pious Jews every week of the harmony that should be present in their lives on the Sabbath:

Mah-tovu ohalekha Ya'akov
mishkenotekha Yisrael

מִה־טוֹבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! (Numbers 24:5, NIV).

This liturgical tradition of today's Synagogue, whether one is Orthodox or Conservative, intends to instill a connection between God's goodness and orderliness, and reverence that people are to show Him in the assembly place. The opening prayer when one enters into the sanctuary begins with exclaiming Numbers 24:5, and is then supplemented from various Psalm quotations:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! (Numbers 24:5).
But I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house; I bow down in awe at Your holy temple (Psalm 5:8).
O LORD, I love Your temple abode, the dwelling-place of Your glory (Psalm 26:8).
As for me, may my prayer come to You, O LORD, at a favorable moment; O God, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance (Psalm 69:14).⁴

As you review the verses of the *Mah Tov* prayer, perhaps you will discern that there is a thematic connection to be made between Israel being fair or goodly, and what the Prophet Micah declares is required by God of His people (Micah 6:8). Micah simply says that people are to do three things: (1) perform justice, (2) love kindness, and (3) walk humbly before the Lord. Is it possible that within the Jewish liturgical tradition, the Sages simply took Micah's description of *mah-tov* (מִה־טוֹב), “what is good,” and found some important verses from Psalms that would get people to continually remember that God requires much more than simply tents in straight lines? And by extension in more modern synagogues, more than just reverent respect when the rabbi speaks?

When you consider the *Mah Tov* verses from Psalms—or better yet, when you search intently into the counsel of Scripture about what doing justice, exhibiting lovingkindness, and walking humbly entails—there is much to inculcate into the mind and soul. This is to be a conformation process, where via the sanctification provided by the Holy Spirit, you can be transformed into the image of the Messiah Yeshua. The Apostle Paul taught, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

⁴ All quotations for the *Mah Tov* here are taken from the NJPS.
Cf. Hertz, *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, pp 4-5; Harlow, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, 61.

While the prophet-for-hire Balaam may have originally declared that Ancient Israel was “goodly,” being good and proper involves far more than just being blessed by God. *Being blessed by God requires proper obedience and behavior becoming of Him.*

In order to prove, analyze, or examine what the perfect will of God is, His children must have their minds renewed by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit. The Spirit should be working in concert with a consistent, almost repetitious study of the Holy Writ. When Balaam type-figures, pagan persons, or irreligious individuals see you today—are the only things they can say about you are that you are blessed by the One you serve?⁵

Balaam's Words to Balak

After Balaam makes this third, and rather significant blessing upon the Israelites—as he was “contracted” to do—Balak is furious. Balak sends Balaam away, but not without receiving a final prophecy delivered to himself. This prophecy against Moab has a message that will resonate to the end-times:

“Then 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! Therefore, flee to your place now. I said I would honor you greatly, but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor.’ Balaam said to Balak, ‘Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying, “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”? And 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”’ (Numbers 24:10-14).

This prophecy was one that Balak did not bargain for, but by the end of the series of oracles, Balaam had no choice but to utter forth genuine words from God:

“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”’ (Numbers 24:15-24).

In these the final words delivered by Balaam, generations of Israel could take comfort in knowing that foes like Moab would be defeated. Evil kings like Balak would be humiliated, and God's chosen nation would stand supreme. But this is not something that Israel itself would be responsible for, as instead someone coming forth from Jacob would accomplish it:

“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” (Numbers 24:17).

We believe that this reference is to Messiah Yeshua, the King of Israel. It is only by recognizing Him as the vindicator of Israel, that those who would cause harm to God's chosen nation can be discredited and conquered. But as our Torah portion from this week shows,

⁵ For some further thoughts, consult the author's article “God's ‘Mah Tov’ Requirements,” appearing in the July 2009 issue of Outreach Israel News.

individuals like Balaam had no choice but to recognize the supremacy of Israel and how God has blessed His people. When that future day comes when Moab, Edom, Amalek, Kain, Asshur, and any other enemies of Israel face a hopeless battle against the Lord—will many from those nations turn in repentance and acknowledge the King of Kings? If Israel does its job as is expected by the *Mah Tov* prayer, then surely many will bow their knees in worship to Yeshua as Savior and be counted among the redeemed (cf. Philippians 2:9-11)!

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