

Numbers 23 - Balaam's 3 Prophecies

II. Failure of the first generation (Num 11:1—25:18)

(5) Failure at Moab (Num 22:1—25:18)

(B) Balaam's seven oracles blessing Israel (Num 23:1—24:24)

(a) Circumstances of first Oracle (23:1-12)

(b) Circumstances of second Oracle (23:13-26)

(c) Circumstances of third Oracle (23:27—24:14)

Numbers 23

(B) Balaam's seven oracles blessing Israel (Num 23:1—24:24)

(a) Circumstances of first Oracle (23:1-12)

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

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

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

1 And Balaam said unto Balak, Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven oxen and seven rams.

2 Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on *each* altar.

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

2 So Balak did just as Balaam instructed. Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

2 And Balak did as Balaam had spoken; and Balak and Balaam offered on every altar a bullock and a ram.

3 Then 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.

3 Then 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.

3 Then Balaam instructed Balak, "Stand by your offering and leave me alone by myself. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me. I'll tell you whatever he reveals to me."

And so he went to a high place,

3 And Balaam said unto Balak, Stand by thy burnt offering, and I will go: peradventure the LORD will come to meet me: and whatsoever he sheweth me I will tell thee. And he went to an high place.

- There is no Biblical instruction or precedent for what Balaam did, so presumably the sacrifices were part of a pagan ritual

- Yet God met with him and gave him a message which he was to repeat to Balak

4 Now God met with 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."

4 Now 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."

4 where the LORD met with Balaam, who told him, "I've prepared seven altars and offered bulls and rams on an altar."

4 And God met Balaam: and he said unto him, I have prepared seven altars, and I have offered upon every altar a bullock and a ram.

5 Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and this is what you shall speak."

5 Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus."

5 Then the LORD gave Balaam this message. "Return to Balak and speak to him."

5 And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus thou shalt speak.

6 So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab.

6 So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab.

6 So Balaam returned to where Balak had been standing, that is, next to his offerings, accompanied by all the Moabite officials.

6 And he returned unto him, and, lo, he stood by his burnt sacrifice, he, and all the princes of Moab.

- After the offerings were made Balaam went off by himself to elicit a revelation from the Lord

- Balaam was still seeking to cooperate with the God of Israel even though his methods were not sanctioned in Israel's Law

- And God met with him and gave him a message which he was to repeat to Balak

7 And he took up his discourse and said, "From Aram Balak has brought me, Moab's king from the mountains of the East, *saying*, 'Come, declare Jacob cursed for me, And come, curse Israel!'

7 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!'

7 Then Balaam uttered this prophetic statement: "King Balak of Moab brought me from Aram, from the eastern mountains, and told me, 'Come and curse Jacob for me. Come and curse Israel.'

7 And he took up his parable, and said, Balak the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the east, saying, Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel.

8 "How am I to put a curse on him upon whom God has not put a curse? And how am I to curse him whom the LORD has not cursed?

8 "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?

8 But how can I curse those whom God hasn't cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD hasn't denounced?

8 How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the LORD hath not defied?

- Each of the four oracles concerning Israel takes up one of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and confirmed it

— The first oracle (23:7-10), stressing that God has not cursed Israel, confirmed that Israel will be like the dust of the earth

— Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? (v10)

9 "For I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people that lives in isolation, And does not consider itself *to be* among the nations.

9 "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.

9 I saw them from the top of the rocks. I watched them from the hills. Truly this is a people that lives by itself and doesn't matter¹ among the nations.

9 For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

10 "Who has counted the dust of Jacob, Or the number of the fourth part of Israel? May I die the death of the upright, And may my end be like his!"

10 "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!"

10 Who can count the dust of Jacob? Who can number the dust of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may I end up like him."

10 Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!

- Balaam said that he could look down from his lofty vantage point and see these blessed ones who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations (Cf. Deut 32:8-10)

- They were like dust in number (Cf. Gen 13:16), and to be identified with them in life or death was a blessing of God (Num 23:10)

- Balaam almost seemed to wish that he were one of God's people

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

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

11 "What are you doing to me?" Balak asked Balaam. "I brought you to curse my enemies, not pronounce a blessing!"

11 And Balak said unto Balaam, What hast thou done unto me? I took thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast blessed them altogether.

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

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

12 But in response, Balaam asked, "Shouldn't I be careful to communicate only what the LORD puts in my mouth?"

12 And he answered and said, Must I not take heed to speak that which the LORD hath put in my mouth?

(b) Circumstances of second Oracle (23:13-26)

13 Then 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 put a curse on them for me from there."

13 Then 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."

13 "Come with me to another place where you can see them," Balak replied. "You'll only see a portion of them, because you won't be able to see them completely. Come and curse them from there for me."

13 And Balak said unto him, Come, I pray thee, with me unto another place, from whence thou mayest see them: thou shalt see but the utmost part of them, and shalt not see them all: and curse me them from thence.

14 So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and he built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on *each* altar.

14 So 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.

14 So Balak took him to the field of Zophim, and from there to the top of Mount Pisgah, where he built seven altars and then offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

14 And he brought him into the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bullock and a ram on every altar.

- Here they erected seven more altars and offered seven more bulls and seven more rams

15 Then he said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering while I myself meet *the LORD* over there."

15 And he said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering while I myself meet *the LORD* over there."

15 Then he told Balak, "Stand by your offering while I go alone to meet the LORD."

15 And he said unto Balak, Stand here by thy burnt offering, while I meet the LORD yonder.

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

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

16 Then the LORD met with Balaam and gave a message to him. "Now go back to Balak and speak to him."

16 And the LORD met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, Go again unto Balak, and say thus.

17 So he 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?"

17 He 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?"

17 So Balaam returned to where Balak had been standing, that is, next to his offerings, accompanied by the Moabite officials.

"What did the LORD say?" Balak asked him.

17 And when he came to him, behold, he stood by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said unto him, What hath the LORD spoken?

- Again Balaam went to a solitary place to commune with the Lord and again he returned to Balak with a message

18 Then he took up his discourse and said, "Arise, Balak, and hear; Listen to me, son of Zippor!

18 Then he took up his discourse and said, "Arise, O Balak, and hear; Give ear to me, O son of Zippor!

18 In response, Balaam uttered this prophetic statement: "Stand up, Balak, and pay attention! Listen to me, you son of Zippor!

18 And he took up his parable, and said, Rise up, Balak, and hear; hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor:

19 "God is not a man, **that He would lie**, Nor a son of man, that He would change His mind; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

19 "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?

19 God is not a human male— he doesn't lie, nor is he a human being— he never vacillates. Once he speaks up, he's going to act, isn't he? Once he makes a promise, he'll fulfill it, won't he?

19 God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

- "...that He would lie" - it is impossible for God to lie (Cf. Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18)

Does God Change His Mind?

Much to the Moabite king Balak's chagrin, God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel, but instead prompted this hireling prophet to bless His covenant people. Balaam prefaced the second of his oracles with these words: "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" (Num 23:19-20).

The oracle as such speaks of God's presence with His people (v21) and their invincibility through His power (v22-24). Several factors point to the unconditional nature of this oracle. The oracle is designated a divine blessing and cannot be altered. Balaam recognized the blessing's unalterable character and acknowledged his inability to thwart it through sorcery or divination. This blessing, a prediction of Israel's success, is an extension of the Lord's unconditional promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan (Cf.

Gen 15:16; 17:8; 22:17), and thus it shares the binding quality of that promise. (God's oath to Abraham is called a "blessing" in Gen 28:4.)

The introduction, in which Balaam affirmed that God would not change His mind or lie, formally marks the blessing as a decree. Both דָּבַר and the parallel verb שָׁבַר "to lie," here mean "to retract" (an unconditional promise). The verb שָׁבַר has this same sense in Psalm 89:35, where God decreed, "Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David." While the verbs refer to how God typically acts when He has made a decree, the principle here applies to the specific blessing to follow.

See related note on Ex 32:14.

20 "Behold, I have received a *command* to bless; When He has blessed, I cannot revoke it.

20 "Behold, I have received a *command* to bless; When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.

20 Look! I've received a blessing, and so I will bless. I won't withdraw it.

20 Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.

21 "He has not looked at misfortune in Jacob; Nor has He seen trouble in Israel; The LORD his God is with him, And the joyful shout of a king is among them.

21 "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.

21 He has not responded to iniquity in Jacob or gazed at mischief in Israel. The LORD his God is with them, and the triumphant cry of a king is among them.

21 He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them.

22 "God brings them out of Egypt, *He is* for them like the horns of the wild ox.

22 "God brings them out of Egypt, He is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

22 From Egypt God brought them— his strength was like a wild ox!

22 God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.

- Balaam then said that because of the Exodus out of Egypt (cf. 24:8), Israel had supernatural prosperity (no misfortune or misery, 23:21a), the Lord's presence (v21b), and supernatural power (v22b)

- The shout of the King must be understood as a militaristic threat, implying that the Lord is a Warrior who leads His hosts to victory (Cf. Josh 6:5, 20; Ps 47:5; Jer 4:19; 49:2)

— Such power renders sorcery and divination harmless.

23 "For there is no magic curse 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!

23 "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!

23 No Satanic plan against Jacob nor divination against Israel can ever prevail. When the time is right, it is to be asked about Jacob and Israel, 'What has God accomplished?'

23 Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought!
- In 1843 the U.S. Congress appropriated \$30,000 for Samuel B. Morse to construct an experimental telegraph line between Washington, DC and Baltimore MD. On May 24, 1844, Samuel B. Morse sent the first telegraph message: "What hath God wrought!"

24 "Behold, a people rises like a lioness, And like a lion it raises itself; It will not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of those slain."

24 "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."

24 Look! The people are like lions. Like the lion, he rises up! He does not lie down again until he has consumed his prey and drunk the blood of the slain."

24 Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain.

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

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

25 Then Balak told Balaam, "Don't curse them or bless them!"

25 And Balak said unto Balaam, Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all.

26 But Balaam replied to Balak, "Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the LORD speaks, I must do'?"

26 But Balaam replied to Balak, "Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do'?"

26 "Didn't I tell you," Balaam responded to Balak, "that I'll say whatever the LORD tells me to say?"

26 But Balaam answered and said unto Balak, Told not I thee, saying, All that the LORD speaketh, that I must do?

- Rather than being overcome, Israel like a lion would arise and utterly destroy her enemies (Cf. Num 24:9)

(c) Circumstances of third Oracle (23:27—24:14)

27 Then 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."

27 Then 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."

27 So Balak exhorted Balaam, "Let's go right now! I'll take you to another place. Maybe God will agree to have you curse them for me from there."

27 And Balak said unto Balaam, Come, I pray thee, I will bring thee unto another place; peradventure it will please God that thou mayest curse me them from thence.

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

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

28 So Balak took Balaam to the top of Mount⁵ Peor, which overlooks the open wilderness.

28 And Balak brought Balaam unto the top of Peor, that looketh toward Jeshimon.

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

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

29 Balaam told Balak, "Build seven altars for me right here. Then prepare seven bulls and seven rams."

29 And Balaam said unto Balak, Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams.

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

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

30 Balak did just what Balaam had instructed—he offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

30 And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bullock and a ram on every altar.

- The third oracle of four (23:27—24:14)

- For a 3rd and final time Balak set the stage for Balaam to curse Israel.

- Superstitiously, Balak felt that a move to a new location might create the proper environment for the cursing to take place.

- There once more they prepared the seven altars and sacrifices necessary for the ritual of divination.

- They arrived then at the top of Peor, a mountain near the town of Beth Peor (Deut 3:29; 4:46), close to Israel's encampment in the plains of Moab.