

NUMBERS

Lesson 27 - Chapters 22, 23, and 24

Last week we began with the story of Balaam and Balak, a story that takes 3 full chapters of Numbers (22,23,24) in the telling. And we see from it's timing, structure, and style that it is almost certainly an embellished account of an actual happening; an account of a very real event that gained legend status among the Hebrews and it's all intended to get across some important theological principles.

Let me be clear when I say an embellished account: this is NOT a fairy tale nor does it come from someone's imagination. But it does have elements added to make the telling of the story memorable and thus more easily transmitted mouth to ear. We might say that it has a "folk theme".

The thing that we must keep in mind is that only in two places in the bible do animals ever receive a voice: the serpent in Genesis and the donkey in the book of Numbers. And the two figures could not be more different in their nature. The serpent was Satan himself, and was no ordinary creature or run of the mill snake that had become possessed by the evil one. Rather it is made clear that this serpent of Genesis was a totally unique being, and that no creature of the field was the equal of the Satanic serpent.

Balaam's donkey on the other hand had no such spiritual connection or status, nor was it the product of a special divine creation. It was simply a common donkey that is said to have spoken; and Balaam didn't seem all that impressed or surprised by it. I maintain that this is one of the key elements of the story that helps us to recognize that over time the actual historical events involving Balaam and Balak and Israel became exaggerated and eventually succumbed to the standard Middle Eastern use of talking animals commonly used in their tales and traditions.

In other words, this is yet another type (of the many types) of literary devices employed in the bible, but one that we are to recognize as theologically based Hebrew fable just as the Hebrews do. What I'm telling you about the nature of this story is not controversial; ancient and modern bible scholars are in general agreement on this matter.

In this narrative Balak is the current King of Moab and Balaam is a gentile diviner and prophet who lives in western Mesopotamia, in a place that is right on the border between modern day Syria and Turkey, along the mighty Euphrates River. King Balak has 3 million Israelites on the doorstep to his territory and he is worried that his army might not be able to defend his kingdom if Israel's intentions are hostile. So Balak does a very usual and normal thing for that

era: he hires a professional sorcerer to help him out.

The key to victory (Balak believes) is to get the gods to side with Balak and Moab, and to fight against Israel. In Biblical terms Balak wants to have someone put a curse on Israel so that they can be defeated. The king's choice to curse Israel for him is a well-known seer named Balaam; a gun for hire.

While this story is less historic and more Hebrew fable in it's style, the amount of theology and prophecy it contains is astonishing. As we're going to see it has wondrous Messianic overtones to it that are undeniable, as well.

Perhaps the foremost principle that we first uncovered in our last lesson was this (and it's a very important one): being inspired of God to prophecy for Him does NOT mean that one has a righteous standing before the Lord. God has used pagan kings and prophets to achieve His will in the past, and He will again. Yehoveh has made direct contact with heathens and instructed them to say or do something, and they have obeyed. Yet they are neither redeemed (saved) nor have they been declared to have right standing with Yehoveh.

What this means is that a man who is a false prophet can, at times, be accurate. He can, at times, be given a vision of the future BY GOD HIMSELF in order that the Lord achieves some inscrutable purpose known only to Him. In some ways this makes it all the more difficult for a Believer to judge just who is a man of God, versus who is a man who walks apart from God yet outwardly seems to be in fellowship with Him. I wish I could give you a nice checklist of just how to make that determination, but I'm in the same boat with all other Believers. And this means that I (and you) need to study ALL of God's Word to be able to recognize God's pure ways, versus other ways that only mimic His ways to a degree. And in order that we can recognize His divinely authored patterns versus doctrines of men that use all the right buzzwords and give us nice warm feelings.

Remember: we're told that Satan (the most evil being in existence) can disguise himself as an angel of light. Therefore a person can be so deceived that they honestly believe that God anoints them, when in fact they are being used as a counterfeit tool by the Evil One (or more likely they have followed their own inner evil inclination). So just because a person says all the right things and claims to be speaking for the Lord, don't just assume that he or she is. Here's the test for a person who claims to be a prophet of Yehoveh: if they are EVER wrong, they're not God's prophets. When I use Prophet in this sense, I mean someone who is predicting an event that has not yet happened or foretelling the future. A Prophet in this sense is also someone who says that the Lord came to them and gave them a word for you. Today (and at times in the New Testament) the term prophet is used in the sense as simply meaning a teacher of Holy Scripture (and believe me anyone who teaches is going to make mistakes from time to time). But the Biblical Prophet (particularly the OT type of Prophet) is a seer, one who is in right standing with the Lord, and one who "sees" because he has been given a message directly from God. Therefore that message cannot possibly be in error.

Let's continue with our story of Balaam and Balak by re-reading a portion of Numbers 22.

RE-READ NUMBERS 22:9 - 35

In typical Hebrew storytelling fashion verse 9 has Yehoveh asking Balaam the gentile diviner a rhetorical question: "Who are these men with you and what did they ask you to do?" God, of course, knows what's going on here but this establishes a direct dialogue between the gentile seer, Balaam, and the God of the Hebrews. Three times in the Bible does Yehoveh appear to non-Hebrews to warn them off from doing what they intended to do to His chosen people: all 3 times are recorded in the Torah. The first is with King Abimelech when he was going to take Abraham's wife, Sarah, for his harem; and the second was with Jacob's uncle on his mother's side, Laban (who, like Balaam, is a Mesopotamian), who was heading up a posse that was pursuing Jacob and his family as they fled Laban's control.

Balaam truthfully recounts what has been transpiring in the past few days of his life and it is that these men came to him asking him to come with them to curse an army of people that had just come out of Egypt; and the ultimate purpose of the curse was so that King Balak could defeat these foreigners (who vastly outnumbered his army) in battle. But Yehoveh countermands the King of Moab's intention by telling Balaam that he cannot curse this people (Israel), because they are blessed.

Now what exactly does that mean that they can't be **cursed** because they're blessed? This is referring back to Genesis and the covenant the Lord made with Abraham, that was next handed off to Isaac, and then finally handed off to Jacob called Israel. This covenant is always termed a blessing and the Lord is in essence saying, 1) it is utterly IMPOSSIBLE to curse that which He has blessed from spiritual sense; in other words, no one can reverse what Yehoveh has determined. And 2) from an earthly physical sense to curse God's people by means of attempting to impede or harm His blessed people will bring divine retribution upon the one who does the cursing. God's advice: don't do it.

Even though Balaam's thought was that he'd go with these men, do a bunch of mumbo-jumbo and pronounce a curse upon the Israelites, and then go home with a pile of money for his efforts, Balaam was NEVER going to hang around and be part of the battle. Balaam, so far as we know, was not a violent man. Balaam had no intention of persecuting the Israelites or doing personal harm to them; Balaam had been asked to intervene by a king who presented a good story and an even better promise of money; and by the morality of that day, Balaam would do what he was asked and then just wipe his hands clean of whatever followed because, after all, he was but a mercenary of sorts. He wasn't pro-Moab or anti-Israel, personally. He had no dog in this fight and no real interest in the outcome. He was only doing his job as a professional diviner and had no personal agenda or (as he saw it) evil intent. Balaam was trying to be morally neutral: kind of like the UN.

The problem is that to Yehoveh there IS no such thing as moral neutrality; that condition is a figment of men's fertile imaginations. Further whatever one does to impede or harm God's people IS an offense to God no matter what role one might play in it. For Abba a person is either for or against; as Jesus said, you're either with me or against me. There is no middle ground. So it is with cursing Israel: to NOT acknowledge Israel's untouchable blessing is identical in God's eyes to actively cursing Israel. Balaam can't just "do his job" for Balak and

then leave and absolve himself from responsibility.

Being a spiritual man and being aware that he had most definitely encountered a god, Balaam tells the delegation sent by Balak that he cannot go with them because, and I quote, "YEHOVEH will not let me go with you". That's right; even though most of our Bibles will say "the Lord will not let me go" or some such thing, the original Hebrew employs God's actual name. The Lord told Balaam. (a gentile sorcerer) His personal formal name. But understand, for Balaam this didn't mean that Yehoveh was HIS only god, nor his family god, nor the ONLY god in existence. It's just that this particular god, who was at least one of the gods that had an interest in the Hebrews, had made it quite clear to Balaam what he must and must not do and that was good enough for him.

Bu, neither men with evil intentions nor Satan with his temptations give up and go away never to bother God's people again, just because of one rebuff. So when King Balak gets the word that Balaam said "no" to his offer, he tries again. And this time Balak sends personal representatives of higher status than those who went before, and he sends more of them, to try and persuade Balak to come. They tell Balaam that they will increase the monetary offer. Balaam explains that this is NOT a matter of money; that he is not saying no just to get a higher fee.

Then as the story builds in tension, we find in verse 18 Balaam explaining that he is fully under the command of (and again I quote the original Hebrew), "Yehoveh my elohim". Well anyone hearing this story or reading it and studying it like we are right now would have to conclude that Balaam was a God-fearer. That he held some sort of allegiance to Yehoveh. Yet as the story continues (and in other books of the Bible where more details are added) it is affirmed that Balaam is simply a spiritualist; certainly he believes in Yehoveh just as believes in some unknown number of other gods. In fact Balaam was actually boasting here. He was trying to impress this delegation of high government officials from Moab with his intimacy and influence in the invisible realm of the gods, and PARTICULARLY with the god that most concerned Balak's immediate problem: the god of the Israelites. Balaam was a very good salesman.

Being a good salesman was important not just with his customers, but also with the gods that he dealt with in his profession. So in verse 19 Balaam (who really wants this gig and the king's ransom of a payment that goes with it) tells the 2nd group of men to stay the night, that he's going to consult with God about this again. He says, "Let me find out WHAT ELSE the Lord will say". Balaam is used to bargaining. He is used to having gods "change their minds". Why would this Yehoveh be any different? In fact this whole procedure of negotiating with the gods is the basis of divining. Negotiations with the god in question continue until the hoped for omen is received. The diviners motto was "if at first you don't succeed, try and tray again".

Notice also that while in the first part of this story the Lord came to Balaam unexpectedly and in some manner in which Balaam was fully awake and conscious, NOW Balaam is going to try to summon God in the more usual manner of diviners: a dream or an unconscious vision. And, interestingly, Yehoveh doesn't disappoint.

Now let me point out that generally speaking receiving something from the Lord in a dream

was considered to be an INFERIOR method of divine inspiration as compared to what the Lord's appointed prophets experienced. It's not that a dream was something to be looked down upon, but it paled in comparison to the type of ecstatic and fully conscious contact Yehoveh's Prophets experienced (and there were precious few prophets of that kind). As far as we know the Bible tells us the full extent of those who were God's prophets. This is why I pointed out earlier that the title of "prophet" can be applied in two VERY different ways, on two VERY different levels of intimacy with God: the prophet who is chosen to be God's personal mouthpiece over an extended period of time, bringing forth a direct and new oracle from the Lord. And second type is more along the NT lines of someone who TEACHES God's Word (and to a degree interprets or provides commentary on what has already been given by the writers of the Scriptures). Loosely speaking what this kind of prophet more closely resembles is a TEACHER.

Verse 20 says that God indeed came to Balaam in a dream and tells him that now it's OK to go with this contingent of men from Moab if they ask him to. Yet we quickly find that God is not pleased that Balaam wants to go to Balak. Here we have a clear example of God operating within men's free will. Balaam was determined to go. Balaam was a diviner who only knew the way of all diviners; and that meant negotiating with the particular god until you got what you sought. Let's think this through. WHY was Balaam going to Balak despite the Lord insisting that Balaam was NOT to do what it was that Balak was hiring him to do? Are we to take it that Balaam simply wanted to personally deliver the bad news to Balak that he couldn't curse Israel? That Balaam would travel more than a couple of hundred miles, walking and at times riding on the back of a donkey, just to go home empty handed because he didn't accept the job? Hardly; Balaam was not through negotiating with Yehoveh. After all, Balaam had NOW received permission for YHWH to at least go to Balak; certainly the next step would be the Lord allowing Balaam some leeway concerning the cursing of Israel. Tell me: don't we sometimes tend to do that? We know full well that the Lord's will is that we do or not do something, but we go ahead with our plan anyway? We inherently know that Yehoveh is unlikely to strike us dead in the middle of whatever it is we are doing. And, often, we are no worse for the wear, and achieved whatever it is we set out to do. At other times, things go horribly and we realize that we should have listened to the Lord all along. This is the effect of free will and our using it in a way that is not in harmony with God.

So we find Balaam riding on his female donkey, headed towards Moab, accompanied by two assistants. Suddenly God shows up in the form of "an angel of Yehoveh". And amazingly Balaam doesn't see the Angle of the Lord but the donkey does. Now we learn something more about Balaam: he is utterly spiritually blind. He cannot see the Angel of the Lord standing in his path, blocking his way. His donkey who sees the Lord, swerves off the road and down into the fields, afraid of this sword-wielding apparition. The supposedly super-spiritual Balaam is utterly oblivious of the reason for his donkey's actions and so beats the donkey to get her back onto the road.

A few feet farther the Lord stations Himself in a very narrow spot of the road with a fence (meaning a wall of piled stones) on either side. Afraid, the donkey tries to back away from the fearsome Angelic apparition and in doing so catches Balaam's foot between her side and the stone wall. Balaam is no longer merely irritated but in pain, so he beats the donkey some more

to get her to release his foot and to continue.

A few more feet and the path became so narrow that the donkey couldn't go around the Angel of the Lord so in self-defense her knees buckled and down she went, right on the spot. Balaam completely lost his temper and began a terrible beating of his poor frightened donkey that had done the only thing it could do under the circumstances.

Now let me tell you, animals behaving strangely were omens to even the most novice of sorcerers. That Balaam completely ignored this animal's behavior is meant to show his absolute determination to do what it is that he had set out to do: disobey the Lord and get that money by cursing Israel.

I suppose I could stop and tell you a couple of cute anecdotes about all this, and what this means to us; but I don't think I need to because right about now we're all thinking: wow, how many times I've tried to go around or through the Lord, and it brought nothing but pain and grief. There's that misuse of our Free Will again.

Still completely blind to what was actually going on, the Lord enables the donkey to speak: and the donkey asks Balaam WHY he is beating her. In other words.... hey, stupid, can't you figure out that something extraordinary is going on here? Have I EVER behaved like this before? Haven't I been a good faithful servant to you? And, Balaam admits that the donkey DOES have a point.

Suddenly now that Yehoveh has Balaam's attention by means of his talking donkey, Balaam sees the fearsome figure with the sword standing before him and so Balaam drops to the ground in panic and dread. Now the shoe is on the other foot. The Lord asks Balaam why he keeps treating his donkey so badly? He points out that, in fact, if it weren't for the donkey doing the right thing, the Lord would have used that sword not on the donkey, but on Balaam!

I told you last week that this was a Bible within a Bible!

OK husbands and wives, parents and children, did you catch what just went on? Did one of you ever want something so much and the other one said **no**? You just knew that taking that new job (even though it meant moving) or selling your house (even though the family was happy where they were) or buying that new car (even though there was nothing really wrong with the old one) was exactly the right thing to do, but your spouse or parent just wouldn't agree and it nixed the whole thing? I'm not saying that the one who behaves as a roadblock is the one with good judgment. I'm saying that when something like that happens, it might be wise to stop and take pause. Stop and look for the Lord. Maybe it's merely the reaction of a spouse or a parent that just doesn't like change, or one who always wants to control that 's the problem; or maybe...just maybe..... it's the Lord using that intransigent person to stop something that He doesn't want done, but you are utterly blind to it all. And He is trying to save you from either a terrible mistake that your run-a-way and selfish desires just can't accept; or perhaps you're being saved from His discipline (that some of us would rather not believe He even uses).

In verse 32 the Lord repeats that He finds what Balaam is doing in going to Balak is obnoxious. Balaam replies, but he still doesn't get it: he says, "Oh, Lord, I was so wrong not to see you in the path! I was wrong to beat my donkey so terribly! I just don't know what came over me. And, if you STILL disapprove of my going to Balak, I won't go". STILL disapprove? The Lord just told him that He found his going to Balak obnoxious. Balaam is pandering. He's doing to the Texas two-step. He is groveling and trying to manipulate. Gee, Lord, maybe it's not that you don't want me to get a new SUV, it's that you don't want me to get a new RED Toyota SUV. Would blue be better? Maybe a Ford? Oh this really starts to meddle in our lives, doesn't it?

The Lord, the Creator of free will, allows Balaam to continue to exercise his and so says that Balaam may continue to Moab; but remember, don't say one thing to Balak that I don't tell you to say. Balaam is ecstatic and off he goes to meet King Balak.

Let's read a little more.

RE-READ NUMBERS 22:36 - end

Well King Balak hears that Balaam is coming; and he's so anxious to get him going in his task of cursing Israel that he travels to the northern border of Moab to greet Balaam. And as one of such regal importance would do, Balak chides Balaam and wants to know why he took so long to accept his offer? Don't you believe that I'll pay you? Balaam, being cautious because of the donkey incident, says that while he is here, he really can't do anything other than to speak what God tells him to speak.

King Balak is undeterred; he prepares a grand feast in honor of this sorcerer that is going to help him fend off the Israelites. Let me point out that it was the ancient belief that if a seer and diviner agreed to curse someone, and did so, that there was no question but that the curse was efficacious. Both the curser and the curs-ee believed it. So Balak's concern was NOT whether this curse would work; but rather would Balaam actually do it considering his (up to this point, anyway) reluctant attitude. No doubt the Middle Eastern mind of Balak figured that this was all simply Balaam's way of upping the price.

After the proper protocol of wining and dining this famous Mesopotamian Magician, Balak escorts Balaam up into a high hill from which they could see some of the people of Israel at their encampment. The place they went was called Bamoth-Ba'al; this means the altar, or high place, of the god Ba'al. Now they didn't do this out of curiosity to get a gander at all those Hebrews: a curse was only effective when the cursed person or object was in view of the one doing the cursing. That is why it was necessary for Balaam to come to Moab in the first place. Otherwise, Balak's emissaries could simply have been loaded up with gold and silver, taken it up to Carchemish where Balaam lived, and Balaam perform his ritual right from home.

Let's move on to chapter 23.

RE-READ NUMBERS 23:1 - 12

The number 7 as a divine number of great significance was neither the invention nor the sole

province of Israel. It was a commonly held and used number in ritual throughout the known world.

Listen to this short excerpt from a clay tablet found from the Old Babylonian era (around Abraham's time): "**At dawn, in the presence of Ea, Shamash and Marduk (all Babylonian gods), you must set up 7 altars, place 7 incense burners of cypress, and pour out the blood of 7 sheep.....**"

Ibn Ezra points out that the number 7 is used often in the ritual calendar of the Hebrews: 7 day week, 7th day Shabbat, 7th week (Shavuot), 7 years (Sabbatical year), 7th month for special Biblical Feasts, 7 sprinklings of the blood of the Heifer towards the Tabernacle, and so on and so on. And, why wouldn't it be so that the number 7 as a cultic number of special significance was common throughout the Middle East: the Lord God set down 7 as an important pattern from the time He created the Heavens and the Earth. That mankind had perverted their worship, adopted false gods, and twisted and misused rituals did not mean they forgot everything that had been taught to Noah and then handed down; they just used it as a foundation to fashion their own religions.

Therefore, the ritual we find at the beginning of chapter 23 is what would be expected of a Mesopotamian sorcerer like Balaam: 7 bulls and 7 rams sacrificed on 7 altars, much like we just read from that ancient clay tablet.

After the animals had been slaughtered and their carcasses were burning on the altars, Balaam instructs King Balak to stand beside the altars as he goes to have a word with Yehoveh. Balaam tells the Lord that he has sacrificed on the 7 altars, and naturally the Lord doesn't reply because He certainly didn't instruct such a thing to be done. Rather, the Lord ignores Balaam's attempt at appeasement and instructs Balaam as to what he is to go back and say to King Balak.

Balaam goes back to the where the King has been standing by the burnt offerings, where the King's court was standing dutifully alongside him, and pronounces what Balak thought he had been waiting for.

In a nutshell, Balaam says that even though King Balak brought him here to curse Israel no man can put a supernatural curse on that which Yehoveh has blessed. As much as that must have infuriated the King of Moab, Balaam goes on to prophesy a glorious future for Israel. He basically restates God's promise to Abraham in that the Hebrews will multiply into uncountable numbers.

But something else is also said that succinctly makes a point that we have discussed in this class on numerous occasions: there is Israel, and then there is everybody else. Or as it says in verse 9, "...yes, a people that will dwell alone (or apart), and not be reckoned as among the nations". To review: what this says is that an **ammim** will dwell apart and not be reckoned as among the **goyim**. Here we see that an important transition has been made: Israel is henceforth referred to Biblically as God's "people", His "**ammim**"; and all other people on the planet (gentiles) are called "nations", **goyim**. **Goyim** is no longer a word that means just

nations in general, it now specifically means gentiles or gentile nations. It no longer includes the Hebrew people or Hebrew nation.

So here is a gentile seer who has been instructed to make it clear to all mankind that Israel is entirely different from everyone else in Yehoveh's eyes; not better than gentiles but rather distinct from gentiles. Even the standard vocabulary of calling Israel a nation no longer applies, so separated does the Lord see His chosen from the rest of humanity. To cap it all off Balaam says that it will be a blessing for him (and in essence for all mankind) if they can somehow find righteousness in the eyes of the Hebrew God, and die in that knowledge of blessing.

This was not quite what Balak expected to hear. And obviously frustrated and flabbergasted he says to Balaam: "What have you done to me? I brought you here to curse my enemies (Israel), and instead you have blessed them!!" Balaam replies: "I can only say what Yehoveh tells me to say; I TOLD you that when I arrived here.

King Balak of course figures that the clever Balaam is simply once again raising the ante, and so says to him, OK let's go try another hill for you to curse Israel from. Maybe you can get it right this time.

Let's close here and pick up next week.