

Balak

בלק
“Balak”

Numbers 22:2 – 25:9

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion is entirely devoted to the telling of the story of Balaam. This well-known story contains many valuable lessons for the follower of YHWH. In addition to this, it is very entertaining as one cannot help but laugh at the frustration felt by Balak, the king of the Moab, as his attempts to curse the Israelites seem to fail at every turn.

1. Balak Summons Balaam - 22:2-20

a) Who was Balak? Of what was he afraid? Who was Balaam and where did he live?

Balak was the king of Moab. He was afraid that as the Israelites had defeated the Amorites (who had recently taken much of Moab's territory) they would also defeat the Moabites. Balaam was a sorcerer who lived in Aram (Syria) at Pethor near the Euphrates river, several days journey from Moab.

b) For what purpose did Balak send the delegation to Balaam? Why do you think Balak decided to do this? What were Balaam's credentials that he might perform this task?

Balak wanted Balaam to “put a curse on” the Israelites so that he might be able to defeat them. He knew they were too strong for him. Obviously, Balaam was known for his trade as the delegation took the fee for divination.

c) What form of payment did the first delegation offer? Did Balaam accept their offer? Why or why not?

It appears that the first delegation took the “standard fee for divination,” whatever that was. God told Balaam not to go with the delegation and not to curse the Israelites because He had blessed them. So Balaam sent them back.

Who was Balaam?

There are several references to Balaam in the Bible (e.g., **2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14**) and many references to him in extra-Biblical sources. Balaam is spoken of in the Koran and in the writings of Josephus. The consensus of opinion is that Balaam was a well-known “prophet” of the time, knowledgeable in the mystic arts and the casting of spells.

Scripture Link:

In **James 2:14-26**, the writer is discussing the relationship between faith and actions. James' conclusion, in verse 26, is that "faith without deeds is dead." Faith is much more than just believing "in" something – it's believing enough that it can be seen in our actions. Perhaps a better word than "believer" would be "follower." To be a follower would imply obedience. Do you think Balaam was a "follower of YHWH?"

Having our own way

Perhaps as a child you experienced a situation when you asked a parent for permission to do something that was not particularly good for you and your parent said, "No." Perhaps then, because you were a child, you whined and wheedled until your parent finally said something like, "Well, I don't think it's a very good idea, but if you really feel you must do it, then go ahead." And then perhaps whatever it was that you chose to do ended up causing exactly the negative results that your parent had predicted. Do you think this more or less describes what was going on between Balaam and God?

d) What did Balak do next? How was this effort different than his first one? Did Balaam accept the offer this time? Why or why not?
Balak sent a "more numerous and distinguished" delegation and offered more money to Balaam. This time God told Balaam he could go with the men, but he could only do what God told him to do. (It could be that Balaam really wanted to go and although it wasn't in God's perfect will that Balaam do this, God "reluctantly" gave him the desire of his heart.)

"A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me."

Numbers 22:5

e) In verse 18, Balaam refers to "YHWH my God." Do you think he believed in YHWH? Do you think he desired to be obedient to God? Does **James 2:19** apply here?

Balaam obviously believed in YHWH, but he was only interested in what he could get YHWH to do for him. He was not obedient or submissive to God, only manipulative. James 2:19 shows that even the demons believe in God.

f) Why do you think God relented and allowed Balaam to go to Moab?

God could have done any number of things, but by allowing Balaam to go to Moab, He was able to again show His sovereignty. And not just to the Israelites, but to the Moabites and to later readers of this story.

2. Balaam's Donkey - 22:21-41

a) When Balaam left his home on the donkey, "God was very angry when he went" (verse 22). Why do you think God allowed him to go but was then angry with him?

God was able to see Balaam's heart and knew that he was going primarily for the money. God may have been giving Balaam a chance to change his heart attitude and was angry that he hadn't done so.

b) Describe the 3 times that Balaam's donkey was beaten. What made the donkey misbehave? What was Balaam's response when the donkey questioned him? Why do you suppose Balaam, a "prophet," couldn't see what his donkey saw?

The angel of God appeared before the donkey with a drawn sword. The donkey could see it but Balaam could not and so the donkey walked off the road (1), rubbed against a wall (2), and then lay down (3). When the donkey asked why Balaam had beaten him, he responded that "he had made a fool of him," and that if he had a sword, he would have killed the donkey. A prophet (or anyone else for that matter) can only see what God allows him to see.

c) What did Balaam do when God "opened his eyes" to the angel of God? Do you find anything interesting by comparing verses 29 and 33?

Balaam "bowed low and fell facedown." (verse 31) Just as Balaam threatened to kill his donkey, the angel said that had it not been for the donkey, he would have killed Balaam.

d) What was Balaam's response to the angel of God? How did the angel respond when Balaam offered to go back?

Balaam acted contrite saying, "I have sinned" and offered to go back. Again he was instructed to go but speak only what he was told.

e) Who came out to meet Balaam as he neared Moab? Describe the meeting. What conditions did Balaam put on what he could do?

Balak went to meet Balaam near the border of Moab. Balak asked why he had taken so long in coming, offering him generous payment. Balaam said that he would only be able to speak the words that YHWH put in his mouth.

f) What did Balak do when he and Balaam went to Kiriath Huzoth? Which god do you think he was serving?

Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep and gave some to Balaam and others. As the king of the Moabites, who were well-known worshippers of the Canaanite gods, it seems likely that Balak served only those gods.

Moabite Pagan Worship

The people of Moab worshiped many of the Canaanite gods and in particular, Molech. Worship of this god often involved lewd behavior and temple prostitution. In addition to this, infant and child sacrifice was also common. It's no wonder YHWH found the worship Molech detestable (**Leviticus 18:21**).

Balaam's First Oracle

The first time that Balaam tries to pronounce a curse on the Israelites, he describes them as “a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations.” (verse 9) While certainly not a curse, do you see how this might be a blessing?

3. Balaam's First Oracle - 23:1-12

a) What did Balak and Balaam do first on Bamoth Baal? Whose idea was this? To which god were these offerings made? Do you think God was favorably impressed?

Balaam instructed Balak to construct 7 altars and sacrifice 7 bulls and 7 rams, probably to YHWH, hoping to win His favor. God is not so easily manipulated. One could interpret Numbers 23:4 to imply that the offerings were made to YHWH.

b) Where did the words come from which Balaam spoke when he uttered his oracle? What was Balak's reaction when he heard them? How did Balaam respond?

Verse 7 says that “YHWH put a message in Balaam's mouth.” Balak was upset, saying, “What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies but you have blessed them!” Balaam said that he only spoke the words that YHWH had given him.

c) Analyze Balaam's oracle. Why could he not curse the Israelites? To what does the “dust of Jacob” refer? (see **Genesis 13:16**) Do you find anything else interesting?

Balaam could not curse what God had blessed. The “dust of Jacob” refers to the numerous people of the Israelites. (“I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth. . .” Genesis 13:16.) It was also noted that Israel was a people set apart (holy, sanctified) to God.

4. Balaam's Second Oracle - 23:13-26

a) Where did Balak take Balaam for his 2nd try at cursing Israel? What did they do first?

Balaam & Balak went to the top of Mount Pisgah, overlooking the Israelites and again sacrificed 7 bulls and 7 rams (kind of expensive?).

b) Where did the words come from for this, Balaam's second oracle? How did Balak react when he heard these words? What was Balaam's response?

Again, YHWH put a message in Balaam's mouth (verse 16). Upset again, Balak said it would be better to neither curse nor bless them. Again Balaam said he must follow God's instructions.

c) What do you find interesting in Balaam's second oracle? Does verse 19 give you any insight into God's character? Is God's relationship to the Israelites clear?

God again speaks of Israel's strength and promising future. In verse 19, God says He won't change His mind about blessing Israel; He always keeps His promises. Verse 21 says that YHWH is the God of the Israelites.

Balaam's Second Oracle

In Balaam's second attempt to curse Israel, God speaks directly to Balak, telling him that He (God) has no intention of cursing Israel. God also points out that the Israelites are His special people and “there is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel.” (verse 23)

5. Balaam's Third Oracle - 23:27 - 24:14

a) Where did Balak take Balaam for his third try at cursing Israel? What did they do first?

For the third try, Balaam & Balak went to the top of Mount Peor. Again they built 7 altars and sacrificed 7 bulls & 7 rams.

b) Where did the words come from for this, Balaam's third oracle? How was this different than his earlier oracles?

This time, instead of using sorcery, the Spirit of God came upon Balaam and he spoke God's words.

c) What does Balaam see in Israel's future? Was the prophecy concerning Agag (verse 7) fulfilled? (see **1 Samuel 15:7-9**) How do you think Balak felt about the words in verse 8? How does the last half of verse 9 compare with **Genesis 12:3**?

Balaam sees Israel become prosperous in a productive land. Israel's first king, Saul, defeated Agag, king of the Amalekites. Balak may have been frightened by the description of Israel as "devouring hostile nations." In Genesis 12:3, God promised Abraham that those nations that blessed his descendants would be blessed and those that cursed them would be cursed.

d) How did Balak respond to Balaam's words this time? What did he tell Balaam to do? How did Balaam respond? What did he say he would do before he left Moab?

Balak's anger "burned" against Balaam. He clapped his hands and said that he'd summoned Balaam to curse Israel and yet he blessed them three times. Balak told Balaam to go home and that he'd not be paid. Balaam said that he had told them from the beginning that he could only do what YHWH commanded. Before he left, however, he wanted to warn Balak of what the Israelites would do to the Moabites in the future.

6. Balaam's Fourth Oracle - 24:15-19

In this fourth oracle, who do you think is referred to in verse 17? Do you know who in Israel's history defeated Moab and Edom? How do you suppose Balak felt about this prophecy?

Verse 17 could refer to King David, who defeated the Moabites and the Edomites, or to Yeshua the Messiah. Balak was probably angry and frightened.

Balaam's Third Oracle

In his final attempt to curse God's people, Balaam seems to have given himself over to be used by God. He simply stands there and as "the Spirit of God came upon him," he spoke God's words. In **verse 4**, Balaam uses the term "**El Shaddai**," to refer to God, which means "God Almighty." This term is first used of God in **Genesis 17:1**, when He established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham.

God's Prophecies

Once under the power of the Spirit of God, Balaam seems to have given voice to several additional items that God wanted to communicate. Verses 15-19 would certainly not give Balak much comfort as the destruction of Moab seems assured. The fates of other groups of people are foretold as well.

What Balaam could not do

It seems that Balaam knew enough of God to know that what he could not do himself (i.e., curse Israel) he could cause to happen another way. **Numbers 31:16** strongly implies that Balaam advised Balak to have the Moabite women entice the Israelites into sexual immorality and idol worship. In this way, God Himself would be forced to curse His people. Clearly Balaam was not a follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

7. Balaam's Final Oracles - 24:20-25

In these verses Balaam speaks three short oracles. The first concerns the Amalekites, the second the Kenites, and the third refers to Kittim, Asshur and Eber. See what additional information you can find out about any of these nations.

The destruction of the Amalekites is spoken of in I Samuel 15. The Kenites probably lived in Edom (along with the Edomites and the Midianites). The description of the Kenite dwelling place as set in a rock could be Petra, in Edom. The prophecy speaks of Asshur (Assyria) taking them captive, which surely happened during the height of the Assyrian empire. Finally, Kittim refers to Cyprus and Eber is thought to refer to Mesopotamia (Babylon & Persia) This prophecy could refer to the invasions of Alexander the Great or later, the Romans.

8. Moab Seduces Israel - 25:1-9

a) What sin did the Israelites commit in Shittim? How were they tempted to do this? Whose idea was this? (see **Numbers 31:16**) What was God's reaction and punishment?

Israelite men engaged in temple prostitution with Moabite women, worshipping Baal of Peor. The Moabite women seduced them. Numbers 31:16 states that this was Balaam's idea for how Balak could defeat the Israelites. God's "anger burned against them." He commanded that those who had joined in the worship of Baal be executed.

b) What did the Israelite man (Zimri) and the Midianite woman (Cozbi) do that so outraged Phinehas? Who was Phinehas? What did he do?

Zimri (an Israelite man) and Cozbi (a Midianite woman) engaged in ritual prostitution before Moses and the whole assembly. Phinehas, son of Eleazar the priest, ran the two of them through with a spear, killing them both.

c) How many people died because of their involvement in this sin? How did they die?

Before Phinehas' action, 24,000 Israelites died in a plague (verse 9).

Balaam's Error

The story of Balaam offers a key insight into a character flaw that anyone may suffer from. According to **Numbers 22:8-13**, the delegation from Balak, king of Moab, offered to pay Balaam to come to Moab and "put a curse on these people," the Israelites. It is clear that Balaam knew who the God of the Israelites was as he was able to speak with God (**Numbers 22:9-10**). God instructed Balaam not to follow the men and to "not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed." (**Numbers 22:12**) Balaam agreed, apparently deciding to be obedient to God's command.



Later, a larger and more distinguished group returned offering even greater monetary gain if Balaam would go to Moab and curse "these people." Again, Balaam approached God with the question and this time, God said that Balaam may go with them but he must do only what God said (**Numbers 22:29**). (Given what you know of God's character, do you think it likely that He would change His decision concerning Balaam because more money was involved?)

As Balaam prepared to leave the next morning, **Numbers 22:22** states that ". . . God was very angry when he went . . ." Why would God be angry if He said Balaam could go? Could it be that God was able to see the attitude of Balaam's heart that he was only trying to take advantage of his relationship with God to enrich himself?

As the story unfolds, we can't help but laugh at the frustration Balak must have felt each time Balaam was supposed to pronounce a curse on the people of Israel but was only able to bless them.

In the end, Balaam turns on God by telling Balak how to effectively curse the Israelites: Make the Israelites curse themselves by enticing them to commit sins against God. (**Numbers 31:15-18** shows that Balaam advised Balak to use the Moabite women to entice the Israelite men into acts of sexual immorality, thereby bringing a curse upon themselves.) So it is not enough to merely "know" or "believe" God. ("... Even the demons believe that -- and shudder." **James 2:19**) True followers of God must submit themselves to God with a commitment to be obedient and carry out His will for their lives, always placing God's desires and wishes before their own.

So what can we learn from Balaam? He obviously knew who God, YHWH, was and he had some sort of relationship with Him. (Balaam was able to call on God and God spoke to Balaam.) But what was Balaam's view of God? Did he consider God as his Lord or as his Savior? (Did he even think he needed a savior?) Was he interested in pleasing or serving God? Did he really even care about God beyond what he (Balaam) could obtain through Him? Balaam's actions revealed the true nature of his heart: when God told him not to go with the delegation from king Balak, that should have been the end of it. When the delegation returned with an offer of more money, Balaam asked God again. This showed God (and us) that Balaam valued wealth above God's will. He viewed God not as the Creator of the Universe, but as a spiritual force (perhaps one of many "gods" at his beck and call) that he might use for his own personal benefit. However God, in His infinite creativity, was still able to use Balaam to bring about His will, to bless and not curse Israel, and to teach us a valuable lesson.

Digging deeper

1. There is often a difference of opinion concerning Balaam: was he a good, God-fearing man or was he evil? What is your conclusion after examining these scriptures: **Numbers 31:15-16, Deuteronomy 23:4-5, 2 Peter 2:15, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14**? What finally became of Balaam (**Numbers 31:7-8**)?

The Bible clearly thinks of Balaam as an evil character, having a lust for riches. He obviously “believed” in YHWH, but he sought to manipulate Him for his own benefit and enrichment. Balaam is held up as a negative example of certain attitudes that are still prevalent in the body today. Balaam was killed when the Israelites took vengeance on the Midianites in Numbers 31.

2. There are many lessons that can be learned from the story of Balak and Balaam. For example, just as God can make a dumb animal speak His words, so He can also make a man speak His words. What other lessons can you learn from this story.

Some possible lessons include: a) God can use evil people and evil actions for His own glory, b) God is sovereign and will accomplish His will in spite of those who seek to thwart it, c) God is faithful to His promises (His promise to bless Israel), d) just because a person “knows” God doesn’t mean that he is walking with Him. Many others are possible.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Micah 5:6-6:8

Brit Hadashah : 2 Peter 2:1-22; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14-15