

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

### **Survey of the Bible Series – Prophecy Series**

#### **Proph11C – Messianic and Eschatological Prophecies in the Pentateuch\_ The Prophecies of Balaam**

##### **Introduction to Numbers 22:1-24:25**

While the book of Numbers derives its name from the fact that it contains much statistical information regarding such matters as tribal population figures, the totals of the priests and the Levites, and other numerical data, it also contains much information about post-Sinai Israel.<sup>1</sup> As such, it covers a period of approximately 40 years from the giving of the Law at Sinai until the eve of the conquest of Canaan. In the period covered by the book of Numbers, Israel had the promise of the Land, but Israel had not yet experienced the fulfillment of the promise. The first nine chapters or so deal with the order of the tribes, instructions to the Levites, cleansing rituals, Tabernacle service, and Passover instructions. Chapters 10 through 21 deal with Israel's journey to Moab in preparation of entering the promised land.

As Israel journeyed toward the land of promise, they were refused passage through the land of the Edomites (Num 20:14-21). Israel was forced to detour around Edom. Next, they requested permission to pass through Amorite territory (Num 21:21-22) which request was refused and even met with force from the king of the Amorites. Israel defeated Sihon, King of the Amorites in battle (21:24). Then, Israel defeated Og, the king of Bashan whose territory was further north, but east of the Sea of Galilee. Israel now controlled virtually all the land to the east of the Jordan river that lay between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

Chapters 22-24 take the readers' perspective away from the camp of Israel and into enemy territory and thinking. This conquest was quite disturbing to one of the other kings of the Trans-jordan, Balak, king of Moab. Balak was so disturbed that he solicited the services of Balaam, a seer/diviner from Mesopotamia. Balak wanted a powerful oracle from Balaam that would significantly diminish the threat Moab perceived Israel to be. The diviner, Balaam, was taken several times to a high peak in the vicinity of Mt. Pisgah, a mountain in the same proximity to the more prominent Mt. Nebo.<sup>2</sup> From the vantage point of a mountain peak, Balaam repeatedly tried to pronounce his curses.

In reality, Balak had nothing to fear since God had forbidden Israel from attacking Moab (Deut 2:1-9). Balak either did not know about this prohibition or he refused to believe it. His people were sick with fear and in one sense this very fear may be seen as a fulfillment of prophecy.

This day I will begin to put the dread of you and the fear of you on the faces of the peoples under all the heavens, who whenever they may hear report of you, will quiver and writhe in terror before you. (Deut 2:25)

Balak decided to engage Israel apart from the field of battle. He sought out the most famous of the diviners or seers of that day, Balaam, the son of Beor at Pethor (Num 22:5). Pethor was a city on the Euphrates river and was possibly not very far from Mari, a city that was discovered in 1933 in the Euphrates valley. In the 1933 discovery, a large number of cuneiform

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Old Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1985), 94.

tablets were unearthed and revealed the existence of a complex cult of prophets and seers whose activities were very similar to Balaam.<sup>3</sup> In 1967, a discovery was made in Jordan of an eighth century B.C. inscription of prophecies of Balaam. This discovery of an eighth century B.C. inscription of this pagan prophet is testimony to his renown even centuries after his death.

Balaam specialized in animal divination whereby the entrails of animals were inspected to determine the will of the gods. Such prophets even studied the movements of animals and birds in order to determine if they might constitute a sign from the gods. Such prophets, it was believed, could even influence the gods by sacred rites and rituals.<sup>4</sup> One can readily see Balak's reasoning. If Balaam could influence the "god" of Israel, then he might reverse Israel's blessing into a curse and destroy them.

In reality, Balaam became an unwilling agent that God used to produce some of the most wonderful prophecies of the glorious future of Israel. In spite of being used as God's agent, Balaam remained an enemy to Israel and ultimately died in the camp of the enemies of Israel, the people of Midian (Num 31:8, 16). Balaam was a pagan diviner who unwittingly became engaged with the one true God, Yahweh of Israel. This true God was like no other "god" he had ever encountered and Balaam became totally overwhelmed by his encounter as he was unable to practice his craft to curse Israel. He could only bless Israel.

The fact that the events of Numbers 22-24 are recorded at such length is quite remarkable. The book of Numbers does not present the people of Israel in a very positive light. Numbers includes account after account of Israel's rebellion and failure to live up to her calling. Time after time, Israel displayed a grumbling and disloyal nature. For the most part, Numbers pictures a generation of Israelites wandering through the wilderness due to unbelief waiting to die so the next generation could enter the land of promise.

Yet in spite of this fact, Balaam could not curse God's people whom God had blessed. The connection to God's pronouncement of blessing upon Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 12 to include a blessing upon those who bless you and a cursing upon those who curse you (Ge 12:2-3 cf. Num 24:9) is unmistakable. The Balaam story can be seen as a direct frontal attack by Satan upon the very foundational principle that underlay the Jewish race and nation of Israel. This frontal attack was countered by Yahweh Himself. Israel's status among the nations is unique (23:7-10) and it has ultimate fulfillment in the "latter days" (24:14) of her history when she is delivered by her Ruler and Deliverer (24:15-19). Even after pronouncing his first oracle, Balaam, who came to curse Israel, desired to participate in the blessing of Israel:

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his! (23:10b)

### **Summary of the Narrative**

Chapter 22 relates the story of the call of Balaam from his home along with his initial reticence. At first, God refused permission to allow Balaam to go. However, after persistent efforts, Balaam rejected the directive will of God and was allowed to go under God's permissive will. The offers of significant pay for his services certainly played a role in his motivation and persistent efforts.

During his trip by donkey to Moab, Balaam encountered the Angel of the Lord and even witnessed his donkey speak. Eventually, the Angel allowed Balaam to pass, but only after

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<sup>3</sup> Merrill, "Numbers" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 241. See also Werner Keller, *The Bible as History* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1964), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 267.

warning him that he was to speak only the word that Yahweh would tell him (22:35). Balaam and Balak then met and began preparations for the curse on the Israelites.

In chapters 23-24, the oracles of the pagan prophet are documented. After his cultic acts of preparation, Balaam began to curse Israel. However, to his and Balak's amazement and consternation, only blessing came forth. Balaam found it impossible to curse those whom God had not cursed. Finally, in an act beyond his control, he gave a prophecy of incredible significance (24:17).

After these failures, Balaam tried a new approach. What he had failed to do by cursing, he would accomplish by more subtle means. In their staging area, the Acacia Grove across the Jordan river from Jericho, the Israelite men were seduced by the women of Moab into Baal worship and all of the sexual rites that accompanied it. The instigator for this activity was Balaam (31:16). Twenty-four thousand died as a result of the Lord's judgment (25:9). The judgment was stayed because of the actions of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest (25:7) who killed with a single thrust of the spear a Jewish man (Zimri) and a Midianitess (Cozbi) while they were in the act of copulation (25:7-8). Their names are memorialized perhaps to denote the severity of the offense. This was Israel's first encounter with the immoral fertility cults of Canaan which were rife with sexual aberration.

Finally, in chapter 31, after a pause in the action to conduct a census, we see the final outcome of this story. In Numbers 31, there is the account of the holy war with Midian in which Balaam was killed (Num 31:8, 16). In this chapter, we find a summary of Balaam's involvement in the incident of Numbers 25 (Num 31:15b-18).

### **The Messianic Prophecy (24:17-19)**

Balaam's prophecy primarily revolved around a "star" and a "scepter" that would originate in Israel in the future. In the poetic structure of the passage, the star and scepter are in parallel construction, thus both refer to royalty. This has been confirmed in prophetic texts from Mari which describe various kings using the word – 'star.'<sup>5</sup> The connection of this prophecy to that of Jacob in Genesis 49:10 that a ruler over Israel would come from Judah is unmistakable. The pagan Balaam had a vision of the coming of the Hebrew Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. His vision was of Christ conquering His enemies to establish the Messianic kingdom. All the nations that had resisted God's work through Israel would come under the curse they unwittingly embraced. These included Edom, who rejected the request of Moses for safe passage (20:14-21). Both Moab and Edom will one day suffer the judgment of the King of Israel (Isa 15-16; Jer 48; 49:7-11; Obad 15-18; 21). The One out of Jacob, the Messiah, would be the victor (Psa 2; 110; Re 19:11-21).

The burden against Moab. Because in the night Ar of Moab is laid waste and destroyed, because in the night Kir of Moab is laid waste and destroyed. (Isa 15:1)

In mercy the throne will be established; and One will sit on it in truth, in the tabernacle of David, judging and seeking justice and hastening righteousness. (Isa 16:5)

For the day of the Lord upon all the nations is near. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your reprisal shall return upon your own head. For as you drank on My holy mountain, so shall all the nations drink continually; yes, they shall drink and swallow, and they shall be as though they had never been. But on Mount Zion there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and

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<sup>5</sup> Merrill, "Numbers" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 244.

the house of Joseph a flame, but the house of Esau shall be stubble; they shall kindle them and devour them, and no survivor shall remain of the house of Esau, for the Lord has spoken. (Obad 15-18)

Then saviors [deliverers] shall come to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's. (Obad 21)

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, 'Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great. And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh. (Re 19:11-21)