

Numbers 22-24 Chapter Study

I. A Tussle with Moab Chs. 22-25

1. Balak summons Balaam Chs. 22-24

¹Then the children of Israel moved, & camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho. ²Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³And Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because they were many, & Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel.

As we read in v. 26 of ch. 22, the Ammonites had defeated the Moabites in battle & taken some of their territory – & now Israel had defeated the Ammonites. So yeah – they were panicking!

⁴So Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.”

The Moabites & Midianites, who were a nomadic people of the Saudi Peninsula, were allies.

The Moabites tried to gain the active support of the Midianites saying, “Look, Israel will wipe us out & once they’re done with us, they’ll come after you!”

And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time.

⁵Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River [Euphrates] in the land of the sons of his people,

Normally the phrase would be that Pethor, which was in Mesopotamia-Babylon, was the land of the “*fathers*” of his people, meaning they had *come from there*. This phrase, that it was the land of the “*sons*” of his people means that this is where they sent their youth to be educated.

Babylon was the emerging world power & the undisputed culture center of that day.

All the wealthy sent their sons to Babylon to be educated, just as today the world’s rich send their kids to Harvard, Yale, Oxford, & Cambridge.

Because of this – Balak, who had himself probably been educated in Babylon, knew about a certain prophet he figured could be helpful named *Balaam* who lived at Pethor.

In 1933, archaeologists uncovered the city of Mari in the Euphrates Valley.

The discovery of a vast number of cuneiform tablets there revealed the existence of a complex cult of prophets & seers whose activities closely match those of Balaam. ^[1]

In any case, Balaam had a reputation as a genuine prophet & Balak made urgent request that he come immediately. We read on in v. 5 . . .

to call him, saying: “Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, & are settling next to me! ⁶Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them & drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, & he whom you curse is cursed.”

Balak misunderstood the role of a prophet, thinking that the prophet's words were incantations that *made* something happen.

He didn't understand that a prophet doesn't create – he only speaks forth what is.

The reason Balaam had a solid rep as a guy whose words foretold what would be was because when something was blessed, Balaam could discern it & so give the right diagnosis.

Conversely, when something was cursed, he would speak the appropriate word, Balaam knew that his words did not CREATE blessing or cursing – he only exposed it.

Balak hoped that Balaam would come & speak some kind of weakening incantation over Israel, then he could attack with his Moabite armies & defeat them.

7 So the elders of Moab & the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, & they came to Balaam & spoke to him the words of Balak. 8 And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, & I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam.

It's noteworthy that Balaam used God's covenant name – "Yahweh."

As we read on we discover that Balaam did know about the true God.

How he came by this knowledge is a bit of a mystery, just as we don't know how Melchizedek, the King of Salem & Jethro, Moses' father-in-law came about their knowledge of God.

It would appear that while the practice of idolatry was widespread in the ancient world, the lingering revelation & knowledge of the true God was also sprinkled among the peoples of the world.

Some held on to that knowledge more deftly & strongly than others.

Balaam's skill as a prophet was probably tied to his knowledge of the true God.

When the elders of Moab & Midian arrived & made their request, Balaam replied by telling them to wait till the morrow while he sought the mind of God.

Since Yahweh was the covenant God of Israel, news of that fact had already spread this far north, Yahweh would be the deity Balaam would apply to to find out what to do.

Remember, as a prophet, he could only speak what God already said.

Balak wanted him to *curse* Israel – could he, or did Yahweh intend blessing for them?

9 Then God came to Balaam & said, "Who are these men with you?"

10 So Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, 11 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt, & they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them & drive them out.'" 12 And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

That settles that!

13 So Balaam rose in the morning & said to the princes of Balak, "Go

back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you.” ¹⁴And the princes of Moab rose & went to Balak, & said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.” ¹⁵Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous & more honorable than they. ¹⁶And they came to Balaam & said to him, “Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: ‘Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷for I will certainly honor you greatly, & I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.’”

The word “honor” here carries a strong implication of *wealth & power*.

Balak is saying – “Look, do this & you’ll be set for life!”

¹⁸Then Balaam answered & said to the servants of Balak, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver & gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more. ¹⁹Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.”

Balaam ought to have sent the guys away at this point. There was no need to apply to God again & Balaam knew it.

But out of politeness, & out of an inner desire for the reward offered, he tells the guys to wait overnight again, while he seeks God.

His words – “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver & gold,” are a give away that he’s highly motivated by the offer.

²⁰And God came to Balaam at night & said to him, “If the men come to call you, rise & go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do.”

God knew what was in Balaam’s heart & that this would not end until Balaam secured permission to go.

Knowing that Balaam would end up going anyway – God said he could go, but that he’d better speak only what God told him to say.

²¹So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, & went with the princes of Moab. ²²Then God’s anger was aroused because he went,

Why would God be angry when he’d given him permission to go?

He’s angry because as soon as Balaam took off, his heart began to scheme on how he could secure the reward Balak was offering.

God told him to go with the intent of *only* speaking what God put in his mouth. Balaam had disregarded that & was angling on how to both appease God but get the reward too.

& the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way as an adversary against him. & he was riding on his donkey, & his two servants were with him. ²³Now the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand, & the donkey turned aside out of the way & went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. ²⁴Then the Angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, *with* a wall on this side & a wall

on that side. ²⁵And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she pushed herself against the wall & crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. ²⁶Then the Angel of the LORD went further, & stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. ²⁷And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, & he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, & she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

²⁹And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" ³⁰So the donkey said to Balaam, "*Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?*" & he said, "No." ³¹Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, & he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; & he bowed his head & fell flat on his face. ³²And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me." ³³The donkey saw Me & turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, & let her live." ³⁴And Balaam said to the Angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." ³⁵Then the Angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

If you ever went to Sunday school as a kid, chances are you heard this story. But what's going on here?

God wanted to jolt Balaam out of his perverse thinking & remind him he was only to speak the words God showed him.

3 times & angel stood poised to smite him down, & 3 times Balaam's trusty steed saved his life. But Balaam, not seeing the angel, struck his donkey.

Then suddenly when his eyes were opened, it all became clear.

In a flash, Balaam realized – here he was, a prophet, & a dumb donkey could see what he could not!

This is a rude wake up call to the man who is supposed to be so spiritual.

This is like a 6 year old explaining the General Theory of Relativity "E=MC²" to Albert Einstein who doesn't get it.

Better - it's like Einstein's *dog* explaining it to him.

When your donkey talks to you – well, that ought to be a sign that the supernatural is at work.

But Balaam has become so *spiritually dense*, he carries on a *conversation* with his donkey as though he's talking to a person – all this before he sees the angel.

Balaam has become so caught up in his greed, he's totally lost spiritual perception.

This whole thing was meant to give him a badly needed course correction.

36 Now when Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which *is* on the border at the Arnon, the boundary of the territory. **37** Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not earnestly send to you, calling for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?" **38** And Balaam said to Balak, "Look, I have come to you! Now, have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak."

Balak meets Balaam & expresses his disappointment that he hadn't come at the first summons. After all, he was a king & you don't refuse a king's invitation. Balaam is quick to let Balak know that the king is a bit confused as to what a prophet *actually* does.

39 So Balaam went with Balak, & they came to Kirjath Huzoth. **40** Then Balak offered oxen & sheep, & he sent some to Balaam & to the princes who were with him.

Balak makes some big offerings to Baal & Chemosh & sends some of the meat to Balaam to party with.

41 So it was, the next day, that Balak took Balaam & brought him up to the high places of Baal, that from there he might observe the extent of the people.

This was a high place devoted to the worship of Baal.

It provided a good vantage point from which to look out over the camp of Israel.

From Balak's way of thinking, it would also be a prime place to utter an incantation from, since in his mind, this was a battle between Baal & the God of Israel.

Numbers 23

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

Balaam intends these altars to be erected to Yahweh, but he knows Balak thinks they're being constructed to Baal. He does nothing to disabuse the king of his assumption.

This shows Balaam is being less than open & forth-right with Balak. Why? Because the desire for the reward has resurfaced!

His short time in Moab has served to raise his hopes.

He's had a chance to see some of Balak's wealth & wants it.

2 And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, & Balak & Balaam offered a bull & a ram on *each* altar. **3** Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand by your burnt offering, & I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, & whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a desolate height. **4** And God met Balaam, & he said to Him, "I have prepared the

seven altars, & I have offered on *each* altar a bull & a ram.”

⁵Then the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth, & said, “Return to Balak, & thus you shall speak.” ⁶So he returned to him, & there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he & all the princes of Moab. Balaam gets a word from the Lord alright – but it is not at all what the king was hoping for.

⁷And he took up his oracle & said: “Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, From the mountains of the east. ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, & come, denounce Israel!’ ⁸“How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? & how shall I denounce *whom* the LORD has not denounced? ⁹For from the top of the rocks I see him, & from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations. ¹⁰“Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, & let my end be like his!”

Though this may not appear as a very potent blessing in our ears, it was huge to the people of that day.

It promised great prosperity & peace for the people of Israel.

¹¹Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, & look, you have blessed *them* bountifully!”

¹²So he answered & said, “Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD has put in my mouth?” ¹³Then Balak said to him, “Please come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only the outer part of them, & shall not see them all; curse them for me from there.”

Balak says, “Okay, if you can’t curse the whole camp, then curse at least one part of it so I can attack & redeem myself in the eyes of my own people.

You see, Balak has been hyping & promoting the coming war with Israel, telling his people they will be glorious victorious because he has a secret weapon – Balaam!

If Balak cannot deliver now, his problems are only beginning!

¹⁴So he brought him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, & built seven altars, & offered a bull & a ram on *each* altar. ¹⁵And he said to Balak, “Stand here by your burnt offering while I meet *the* LORD over there.” ¹⁶Then the LORD met Balaam, & put a word in his mouth, & said, “Go back to Balak, & thus you shall speak.” ¹⁷So he came to him, & there he was, standing by his burnt offering, & the princes of Moab were with him. & Balak said to him, “What has the LORD spoken?”

¹⁸Then he took up his oracle & said: “Rise up, Balak, & hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor! ¹⁹“God *is* not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, & will He not do? Or

has He spoken, & will He not make it good? ²⁰Behold, I have received a *command* to bless; He has blessed, & I cannot reverse it. ²¹“He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God *is* with him, & the shout of a King *is* among them. ²²God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox. ²³“For *there is* no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob & of Israel, ‘Oh, what God has done!’

²⁴Look, a people rises like a lioness, & lifts itself up like a lion; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, & drinks the blood of the slain.”

This is another, even more potent blessing than the first. Balaam lets the king know that any attempt to attack Israel will prove futile.

²⁵Then Balak said to Balaam, “Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!”

The king of Moab says, “Listen, if you can’t curse them, then shut-up!”

²⁶So Balaam answered & said to Balak, “Did I not tell you, saying, ‘All that the LORD speaks, that I must do’?” ²⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.”

Balak is not a very bright guy – but *he is desperate*.

As many weak politicians do, he feels he has to redeem the situation some how, so he just digs the hole a bit deeper.

²⁸So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, that overlooks the wasteland. ²⁹Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, & prepare for me here seven bulls & seven rams.” ³⁰And Balak did as Balaam had said, & offered a bull & a ram on every altar.

Numbers 24

¹Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery,

See, Balaam wasn’t a simple & pure believer in Yahweh.

His ideas about God were mixed up with the pagan conceptions of the day.

Before when he’d sought to know the mind of God, he’d used rituals to get in touch with the Lord.

He realized now that those rituals had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with making contact with God.

God’s way of speaking to him was utterly unlike the practices he’d learned at Pethor.

. . . he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness. ²And Balaam raised his eyes, & saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; & the Spirit of God came upon him. ³Then he took up his oracle & said: “The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, ⁴The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees

the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open:

5“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! **6**Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens by the riverside, Like aloes planted by the LORD, Like cedars beside the waters. **7**He shall pour water from his buckets, & his seed *shall be* in many waters. “His king shall be higher than Agag, & his kingdom shall be exalted.

Agag was the title of the king of the Amalekites who at this time were one of the mightiest forces in the area to contend with.

8“God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones & pierce *them* with his arrows.

9“He bows down, he lies down as a lion; & as a lion, who shall rouse him? Blessed *is* he who blesses you, & cursed *is* he who curses you.”

This is a repeat of what God had promised to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12.

Right at this moment, what Balak ought to have done was stand there, repent of his intent to harm Israel, & blessed the nation instead of seeking to curse them.

If he had, then he would have blessed his own nation.

I challenge you to take a look at history & chart those nations which have blessed & assisted Israel.

They have been blessed themselves.

Then look at those nations which have cursed Israel – they have been cursed & fallen into ruin.

Even great & mighty empires; Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome.

When England treated the Jews well, they were blessed.

When they turned on the Jews, their Empire cracked & fell apart.

The blessing of our nation is largely dependent on our posture toward Israel.

Listen – we know that because of the moral pollution & decadence of our nation we are deserving of God’s judgment.

The ONLY reason why that judgment may be delayed is because we are the world’s largest supporter of Israel.

If that changes, then I hold out little hope for our nation.

We must pray for 2 things – 1) National repentance & revival & 2) Continued support for Israel on the part of our federal government.

10Then Balak’s anger was aroused against Balaam, & he struck his hands together; & Balak said to Balaam, “I called you to curse my enemies, & look, you have bountifully blessed *them* these three times! **11**Now therefore, flee to your place. I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor.”

The clapping of his hands was a way to break off the blessing. Balaam would have kept on going but Balak interrupts & angrily threatens him.

Then Balak makes it clear that the reward he’d promised Balaam is forfeit.

12So Balaam said to Balak, “Did I not also speak to your messengers

Balaam says – “Look buddy, this is what I told you! I can’t make a curse or

blessing – only to announce what is cursed & blessed. It's not my fault!"
"Did I not also speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying, ¹³'If Balak were to give me his house full of silver & gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD, to do good or bad of my own will. What the LORD says, that I must speak?' ¹⁴And now, indeed, I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the latter days." ¹⁵So he took up his oracle & said: "The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, & the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened; ¹⁶The utterance of him who hears the words of God, & has the knowledge of the Most High, *Who* sees the vision of the Almighty, *Who* falls down, with eyes wide open: ¹⁷"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, & batter the brow of Moab, & destroy all the sons of tumult.

A prophecy that found partial fulfillment in David & Solomon, but will find ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah who will rule all nations.

¹⁸"And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, While Israel does valiantly. ¹⁹Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, & destroy the remains of the city." ²⁰Then he looked on Amalek, & he took up his oracle & said: "Amalek was first among the nations, But *shall be last until he perishes.*"

David finished off the Amalekites.

²¹Then he looked on the Kenites, & he took up his oracle & said: "Firm is your dwelling place, & your nest is set in the rock;

²²Nevertheless Kain shall be burned. How long until Asshur carries you away captive?"

The Kenites were one of the Canaanite peoples who were defeated & exiled by Assyria.

²³Then he took up his oracle & said: "Alas! Who shall live when God does this?

²⁴But ships *shall come from the coasts of Cyprus, & they shall afflict Asshur & afflict Eber, & so shall Amalek, until he perishes.*"

Balaam is looking down the corridor of time & announcing sweeping changes on the nations which were the power-centers of that region in that day.

²⁵So Balaam rose & departed & returned to his place; Balak also went his way.

CONCLUSION

While this appears to be the end of the story for Balaam & all is well, the fact is, before Balaam took his leave of Balak, he gave him a little piece of counsel about how to defeat Israel.

But we'll have to save that for our next study.

Rob McCoy next week – then on the 30th, Charley will pick it up at ch. 25 and will

reveal what Balaam told Balak.

[1]

Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.