

Parashah One Hundred–Seventeen
Numbers 22:41–25:9; Isaiah 49:23–26; John 10:27–30

notes by Tim Hegg

The Balaam Oracles: “I will bless you . . .”

God had promised to bless Abraham and his offspring—to protect and bless the people He had chosen as His treasured possession. Now, in their travels toward the Promised Land, a devilish plot is concocted to destroy them. The enemy is unseen, high above the lowlands in which the nation traveled. Presenting a perfect picture of the battle that rages “in the heavenlies” (Eph 6:12), God and the forces of evil engage in hand-to-hand conflict. Not that there’s a genuine match—it’s more like a cat playing with a mouse. Balak, the sworn enemy of Israel, is trying his level best to inflict a curse upon Israel that will make her vulnerable to his attacks. But the professional diviner he has hired seems less than up to the task. Bilam (Balaam) is constrained to say only what God puts in his mouth. And what God does put in his mouth is prophetic utterances that are full of blessings for Israel, not cursing. This frustrates Balak to no end! He even tries to “un-hire” the sorcerer, but to no avail. Bilam, constrained by the divine power of God, continues to bless Israel each time, whether he wants to or not.

It is no wonder that the oracles of Bilam are cryptic and hidden: they are the language of a spiritual dimension that exists beyond our normal consciousness. Yet contained as they are in the Torah, they are ours to consider and study, and from which we are to derive both spiritual insight and Torah wisdom.

It is clear that the words which Bilam speaks are those put into his mouth by HaShem: “Then the Lord put a word in Bilam’s mouth . . .” (23:4 וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה דְּבַר בְּפִי בִלְעָם). These words are what have become known as “oracles,” or declarations of a divine nature.

First Oracle (23:7-10) Set Apart to God

When Bilam looks down upon Israel, he announces the “set apart” nature of God’s people. And what are the means by which she is set apart? First is the fact that God has set Himself to bless her—she is chosen for blessing. It is the fact that God chose Israel that sets her apart in the first place. “How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom Adonai has not denounced?” Here is the crux: those whom God is for, will be blessed. “If God is for us, who is (i.e., who can prevail) against us?” (Rom 8:31). So the most foundational question to ask in life is simply this: “is God for me?” And how may one know the answer to this? The logic is very simple. God is for His Son, Yeshua: “This is the Son of my love, in Whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). All who are identified with His Son (Paul uses the phrase “in Yeshua”), are therefore “in the Beloved One” (Eph 1:6) and may be assured that they are themselves, in God’s sight, beloved, and therefore the recipients of His ultimate blessing.

Thus, this sovereign act of God whereby He chooses to place His love and blessing upon Israel causes her to be set apart from all other people. It is not her ethnicity, nor even her own culture, but God’s sovereign decision to bless her that sets her apart. And the primary physical expression of this blessing is the Torah that God has given to her (Deut 4:5-8). Thus, God’s blessing upon Israel (who is defined by the Torah) is seen in the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, that his descendants would be numerous like the dust. God’s constant protection of Israel assures her longevity.

Second Oracle: (23:18-24) Victorious in God’s Faithfulness

The second oracle continues the theme of Israel’s blessing by noting that she will be victorious because God is faithful: “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?” (23:19). “Man” and “son of man” are paralleled, showing that “son of man” is used to mean “man as he truly is,” that is created by the hand of God. God is not the creature, He is the Creator. In man’s fallen state, he constantly tries to reverse

this fact, attempting to create God in his own image. God is known by His eternal truthfulness, man by his lack of truthfulness: “Let God be true, but every man a liar” (Rom 3:4). It is when we make the fatal error of thinking that God is like man, that we fall into the trap of idolatry. For when God is considered to be like man, the standard of righteousness is also determined by mankind: Psalm 50:17, 21 “For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you... You thought that I was just like you...” But God is faithful; Lam 3:22-23 “Adonai’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.” Thus, in God’s faithfulness the covenant is given and maintained (note the use of *הִפִּיל*, *hifil* of *קָרַם* in v. 19, “to cause to be established or raised up,” “to fulfill”). Rom 11:28-29 (speaking of Israel) “From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are *irrevocable*.”

Third Oracle: (24:3-9) Israel Blessed by God

The covenant blessings are likewise emphasized in the third oracle. Once again, Bilam refers directly to the blessings given to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one cursing you, I will curse.” This divine promise of blessing thus extends to the other nations in regard to how they relate to Israel. In the original blessing the success of God’s covenant blessings is hinted at by the fact that those who bless are many (it is in the plural) while those who curse are few (it is in the singular). While at any given point in history this may seem reversed (since so many have cursed Israel), yet in the end it will be seen that she is blessed above all nations, not because of anything she has accomplished by her own strength, but because God has maintained His faithfulness to her. Num 24:5 “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!” The Rabbis related this (anachronistically) to the synagogues, for they say that Bilam saw the men, covered with tallits, praying at the door of each family tent. Thus, this verse is incorporated into the liturgy at the beginning of the *shacharit* (morning) service. Indeed, Israel’s blessings (noted in this oracle by poetic language of agricultural bounty) are directly related to her willingness to worship God in her day-by-day existence. Her glory is in her being set apart by living out the Torah. And we should be reminded at this point that the Israel Bilam sees and blesses is a “mixed multitude” (Ex 12:38), meaning that Israel includes those of the nations who have joined themselves to her—there is no distinction. The native born and the sojourner together constitute Israel.

Thus God is for Israel, and any who would destroy her will therefore deal with Him. The figures of “horns” and the “lion” are poetic metaphors of strength and invincibility. As Israel walks in the ways of the covenant, she may be assured of divine protection.

Fourth Oracle: 24:15-19 The Promised Messiah

When the blessings of Israel are enumerated, the promise of Messiah must be included, for ultimately He is the pinnacle of her blessing—indeed, the very source of all her blessings. The “scepter” language of Gen 49:10f is incorporated in 24:17, along with hints at Gen 3:15 –

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth.

Bilam speaks of the coming Messiah, the scepter of Jacob. He is “not near,” meaning His appearance in the history of the world was in the distant future. He would come as a King, and no one would be able to stand against Him. “Sons of Sheth” is a poor rendering. It should rather be “sons of confusion,” the Hebrew *שֶׁח* being a contraction of *שָׁח* from the verb *שָׁח* (note the comments of Keil and Delitzsch, and cf. Jer 48:45, where we find *בְּנֵי שָׁח*, “sons of tumult” poetically parallel to “Moab”). Thus no walled city would be able to withstand His laying siege to it. Even the remnant of the city will fall to His sword.

Israel is therefore promised ultimate victory, not by her own power, but by the hand of Messiah. The

“star that arises from Jacob” is not some mere man (like Akiva’s Bar Kochbah) but the divine Messiah Who alone is able to bring the covenant to its final and glorious end. Israel’s final hope is in Him.

Oracles Five-Seven: (24:20-24) Israel Victorious

Throughout the course of history, the nations would attempt to overcome Israel, for defeating her is to defeat her God. Anti-Semitism is, in the first place, an attempt to rebel against the Creator, and bring Him into the control of humankind. Anti-Semitism is the very apex of rebellion against the Creator, for it is ultimately a rejection of Israel’s King, Yeshua. Yet no nation will prevail against Israel. God will win the day. All who come against her will, in the end, be crushed by His protective hand. “Alas, who can live except God has ordained it (מִשְׁמֹרֵ אֵל)?” (v. 23). God’s word is forever settled in heaven, and Israel is therefore secure. “For I, Adonai, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6).

This is the clear message of the *haftarah* portion chosen by the Sages to accompany our Torah *parashah*. All of the rage of the nations against His chosen people will come to naught, and the story of Bilam is a portend of this. “...I, Adonai, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Is 49:26). It is when Israel believes this with all of her heart and soul that her final salvation will be realized, and this too is the work of the Almighty.

It is likewise why the Apostolic portion (Jn 10:27–30) was chosen for this Shabbat, for there Yeshua reiterates the same, eternal promise of God’s unfailing salvation toward His people. Here, however, the story reveals its completion, for the promised salvation comes by the hand of Yeshua, the Shepherd of Israel. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” It is by the guardianship of Israel’s Shepherd that she is protected and ultimately saved. No man is able to “pluck them out of My hand,” for the Shepherd of Israel is, in fact, the eternal Almighty One: “I and the Father are one.”