



Numbers - Chapter Twenty Three

V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab (continues)

V.a Numbers 22:1-24:25 - Balak, Balaam, and Israel (continues)

V.a.iii Numbers 22:41-24:14 - Balaam blesses Israel three times (continues)

V.a.iii.1 Numbers 22:41-23:12 - Balaam's First Oracle (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

Balak is instructed to build seven altars and offer a bull and a ram on each as a sacrifice, while Balaam goes off to seek the will of God. God meets with Balaam and gives him an oracle to deliver back to Balak, which he does. Balak is not pleased with what he hears and believes that, if he takes Balaam to a different viewing point from which to observe the Israelites, he will then curse them.

The whole process is repeated with the same offerings. God again gives a word to Balaam which he delivers to Balak, whose response is the same as before and so the two of them move to yet another high place, with Balak still hopeful of his desired outcome.

¹ Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.' ² Balak did as Balaam had said; and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ³ Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stay here beside your burnt-offerings while I go aside. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me. Whatever he shows me I will tell you.' And he went to a bare height.

Numbers 23:1-3

Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me. This was to be a sacrificial offering to God worthy of a special occasion, such as the time the ark was brought into Jerusalem: *<<And because God helped the Levites who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams>>* (1 Chronicles 15:26), or the restoration of temple worship in the time of king Hezekiah: *<<They brought seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs, and seven male goats for a sin-offering for the kingdom and for the sanctuary and for Judah. He commanded the priests the descendants of Aaron to offer them on the altar of the Lord>>* (2 Chronicles 29:21).

⁴ Then God met Balaam; and Balaam said to him, ‘I have arranged the seven altars, and have offered a bull and a ram on each altar.’ ⁵ The Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth, and said, ‘Return to Balak, and this is what you must say.’ ⁶ So he returned to Balak, who was standing beside his burnt-offerings with all the officials of Moab.

Numbers 23:4-6

Then God met Balaam. God is both gracious and merciful to Balaam. Despite his intent to gain personal honour through service to Balak and his treatment of his donkey on his journey, God is still prepared to meet with those who call on him.

The Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth. It might come as a surprise to some that God spoke to and through someone as obviously wicked as Balaam. However, this shows that spiritual giftedness does not equal spiritual maturity or holiness of lifestyle. God spoke through a donkey in the previous chapter and now he spoke through an even bigger donkey.

However, those who truly desire to serve God should not be discouraged as he will give them the words to speak as well at times when it is needed: *<<Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak>>* (Exodus 4:12), *<<And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children’s children, says the Lord, from now on and for ever>>* (Isaiah 59:21), and: *<<When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit>>* (Mark 13:11).

So he returned to Balak, who was standing beside his burnt-offerings with all the officials of Moab. When Balaam returned, Balak and all the princes of Moab

were ready. They were ready to learn what their money bought them from Balaam.

⁷ Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

‘Balak has brought me from Aram,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:

“Come, curse Jacob for me;
Come, denounce Israel!”

⁸ How can I curse whom God has not cursed?
How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

⁹ For from the top of the crags I see him,
from the hills I behold him.
Here is a people living alone,
and not reckoning itself among the nations!

¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob,
or number the dust-cloud of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,
and let my end be like his!’

Numbers 23:7-10

Come, curse Jacob for me; Come, denounce Israel! God knew exactly what Balak wanted. He wanted a spiritual curse on Israel so that they could be defeated in battle. It would be God who would decide when to bless and when to curse: <<*See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse*>> (Deuteronomy 11:26), and it would be God who would remove them: <<*Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong*>> (Zechariah 8:13).

How can I curse whom God has not cursed? Yet, Balaam or any other prophet could not curse Israel if God had not cursed them. Therefore, Balak’s money was wasted. At least Balaam knew his limitations and the power of God.

Here is a people living alone comments on Israel’s sense of being a chosen people, different from other nations.

Not reckoning itself among the nations! Israel were the chosen people of God and were to keep themselves apart from the other nations as a guiding beacon for others to desire: <<*Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods?*>> (2 Samuel 7:23).

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the dust-cloud of Israel? Instead of receiving a curse, through Balaam God promised to bless Israel by making them a singular nation and blessing them with great size. The dust of Jacob alludes to the fulfilment of the promise to the patriarchs: <<*I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted*>> (Genesis 13:16), <<*and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring*>> (Genesis 28:14).

Let my end be like his is a prayer to be like Israel in life and death, which would partly fulfil the promise that in Abraham's descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed: <<*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*>> (Genesis 12:3), <<*and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice*>> (Genesis 22:18). Balaam concluded his first oracle, which is another word for a prophecy, with this longing. Balaam was one of the many who long to die the death of the righteous, yet have no desire to live the life of the righteous. The two go together!

¹¹ Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them.' ¹² He answered, 'Must I not take care to say what the Lord puts into my mouth?'

Numbers 23:11-12

What have you done to me? The king of Moab was understandably disturbed. He paid good money for a particular outcome, and it the opposite happened.

I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them. Balak must have been both bewildered and very angry at what was happening: <<*Then Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. Balak said to Balaam, 'I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times'*>> (Numbers 24:10), <<*but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand*>> (Joshua 24:10), and: <<*On that day they read*

from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them – yet our God turned the curse into a blessing>> (Nehemiah 13:1-2).

Must I not take care to say what the Lord puts into my mouth? Perhaps Balaam was disappointed also. It is not hard to sense a note of sorrow in this response of his. After all, he wanted to please his employer.

V.a.iii.2 Numbers 23:13-30 - Balaam's Second Oracle

Balaam's second blessing (vv.18-24) responds to Balak's complaint that Balaam should have cursed, not blessed, the people (v.11). Balaam observes that God does not change his mind, so the blessing already pronounced cannot be turned into a curse (vv.19-20). So the nation of Israel will remain free from disaster (v.21).

¹³ So Balak said to him, 'Come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only part of them, and shall not see them all; then curse them for me from there.'¹⁴ So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah. He built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.¹⁵ Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand here beside your burnt-offerings, while I meet the Lord over there.'¹⁶ The Lord met Balaam, put a word into his mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and this is what you shall say.'¹⁷ When he came to him, he was standing beside his burnt-offerings with the officials of Moab. Balak said to him, 'What has the Lord said?'

Numbers 23:13-17

Come with me to another place from which you may see them. Balak would not be thwarted by Balaam's response and believed that if he saw part of Israel from a different perspective, he might somehow change his response.

The portrayal of Balak taking Balaam to three different vantage points in order to get him to make a commitment to do what Balak wanted is also reminiscent of Satan tempting Christ (Luke 4:1-13).

¹⁸ Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Rise, Balak, and hear;
listen to me, O son of Zippor:

¹⁹ God is not a human being, that he should lie,

or a mortal, that he should change his mind.

Has he promised, and will he not do it?

Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?

²⁰ See, I received a command to bless;

he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.

²¹ He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob;

nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The Lord their God is with them,

acclaimed as a king among them.

²² God, who brings them out of Egypt,

is like the horns of a wild ox for them.

²³ Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob,

no divination against Israel;

now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel,

“See what God has done!”

²⁴ Look, a people rising up like a lioness,

and rousing itself like a lion!

It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey

and drunk the blood of the slain.’

Numbers 23:18-24

Rise, Balak, and hear. In this message, God rebuked Balak, and taught him about the divine nature, that God is not a man, that he does not lie or change his mind, that he always performs his word, and that he has all strength.

God is not a human being, that he should lie. Balaam, even against his selfish intentions, must speak God’s truth (v.26). Here, he is affirming that God’s truthfulness in general implies that his promises to Israel will also come to pass: *<<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began – in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our*

Saviour>> (Titus 1:1-3), and: <<**so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us>>** (Hebrews 6:18).

He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob; nor has he seen trouble in Israel. God also taught Balak about the people of God, Israel. He taught them that they were blessed, that they were walking in purity, that God was with Israel, had brought them out of Egypt, had protected them against all sorcery and divination, and that he would see them through to victory.

Acclaimed as a king among them. The king in view here is God himself, whose festivals are marked by shouts and trumpet blasts: <<**On the first day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. It is a day for you to blow the trumpets>>** (Numbers 29:1).

God, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for them. Wild ox in Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 is translated ‘unicorn’ in the KJV. The Hebrew word here, *reem*, occurs nine times in the OT. The idea behind the Hebrew word is either of one horn or a mighty horn. Some think it refers to a rhinoceros, others to a wild ox or a strong goat. It is not out of the question that a unicorn may be in mind, even though it is a mythical beast.

Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob. Because God is with Israel, attempts to attack them with magic will fail.

Look, a people rising up like a lioness. This is a frightening image of Israel’s military might and an indirect warning to Balak not to attack them.

²⁵ Then Balak said to Balaam, ‘Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.’ ²⁶ But Balaam answered Balak, ‘Did I not tell you, “Whatever the Lord says, that is what I must do”?’

Numbers 23:25-26

Then Balak said to Balaam, ‘Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.’ Balak now wants Balaam to remain neutral in this matter. Realising his plan to have Israel cursed is going to fail, Balak certainly does not want them to receive further blessing. However, Balaam holds the correct stance before God: whatever the Lord says, that is what I must do?

²⁷ So Balak said to Balaam, ‘Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.’ ²⁸ So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the waste-land. ²⁹ Balaam said to Balak, ‘Build me seven altars here, and

prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.’³⁰ So Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Numbers 23:27-30

Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there. Balak still believes that viewing Israel from a third vantage point will change Balaam’s mind so that he will at last curse them.