



Numbers - Chapter Twenty Four

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)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Four

Balaam delivered his third oracle directly under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, an unmistakable blessing on the people of God. This angered Balak further; he had hired Balaam to curse Israel, not bless them. Balaam was adamant that he could do no other than to obey God.

Before Balaam departed for home he uttered a fourth oracle, warning Moab of a future Israelite king, the Messiah, who would rise up to rule over every nation. He concluded with three shorter oracles against Moab's neighbours.

V.a.iii.3 Numbers 24:1-14 - Balaam's Third Oracle

Balaam's third blessing (vv.3-9) is distinguished from the first two; refer to the comment made on 22:41-24:14. The mention of the Spirit of God empowering Balaam (v.2) underlines the validity of this blessing, as do the opening lines of the blessing itself: 'the man whose eye is clear,' 'who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty' (vv.3-4).

¹ Now Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, so he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face towards the wilderness. ² Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the spirit of God came upon him, ³ and he uttered his oracle, saying:

'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,
4 the oracle of one who hears the words of God,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
who falls down, but with eyes uncovered:
5 how fair are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
6 Like palm groves that stretch far away,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes that the Lord has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.
7 Water shall flow from his buckets,
and his seed shall have abundant water,
his king shall be higher than Agag,
and his kingdom shall be exalted.
8 God, who brings him out of Egypt,
is like the horns of a wild ox for him;
he shall devour the nations that are his foes
and break their bones.
He shall strike with his arrows.
9 He crouched, he lay down like a lion,
and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,
and cursed is everyone who curses you.'

Numbers 24:1-9

So he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens. Apparently, on the two previous occasions, Balaam tried to bring forth a curse on Israel, but he could not. Now he stopped using these false and artificial aids, and just let the Lord speak to him and through him.

Then the spirit of God came upon him. These were not Balaam's words but those of God delivered by the power of the Holy Spirit, who would come upon individuals in OT times to enable the individual to prophecy or perform some deed on behalf of God. Thus Balaam can rightfully state: the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty.

OT examples of the Holy Spirit operating within a person include Joseph: <<Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find anyone else like this – one in whom is the spirit of God?'>> (Genesis 41:38), King Saul: <<And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled>> (1 Samuel 11:6), and others: <<The spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded>> (2 Chronicles 15:1), and: <<Then the spirit of God took possession of Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada; he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus says God: Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has also forsaken you'>> (2 Chronicles 24:20). This was the same Spirit that was with the great prophets: <<The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners>> (Isaiah 61:1), <<The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones>> (Ezekiel 37:1), <<But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin>> (Micah 3:8); and it was this same Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism: <<And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God'>> (John 1:32-34).

How fair are your tents, O Jacob? This picture of Israel's future prosperity in Canaan uses imagery drawn from the Garden of Eden; refer to Genesis 2:9-10. This beautiful prophecy speaks of Israel's blessed abundance and the dominance over the neighbouring nations that God will give to Israel. Most of all, it speaks of the abiding blessing of God on his people Israel, and he directly rebukes Balak for trying to curse Israel.

This reference to tents is not just for literal tents but for any dwelling places as the people would build up their towns and cities. Dwellings are often referred to as tents in prophecies. Isaiah refers to a tent in terms of enlarging the kingdom of God: <<Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes>> (Isaiah 54:2).

Water shall flow from his buckets. This continues the image of well-watered gardens, of God tending to his people: <<*my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches*>> (Job 29:19), and: <<*They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper*>> (Psalm 1:3).

His seed shall have abundant water. Although this clause is difficult to interpret, it may refer to the fertility of the land or to the growth of Israel's population. Others link this to Christ and the living water, i.e. the Holy Spirit, that will flow from him and through them: <<*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified*>> (John 7:37-39).

His king shall be higher than Agag seems to be a prediction of Saul's defeat of Agag, the king of Amalek, Israel's oldest enemy (Exodus 17:8-16 and 1 Samuel 15:1-9), although it may also refer to an otherwise unknown king. A wider view is that of Christ who is a king higher than all other kings throughout all generations.

God, who brings him out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for him. Verses 8-9 reiterate 23:22-24 and add a reference to the patriarchal promise given in Genesis 12:3 and 27:29. Verse 9 implies, of course, that Balak, by demanding a curse on Israel, will himself be cursed. This logic inevitably leads to the final blessing on Israel, which ends with an explicit curse on Moab (vv.15-19).

He crouched, he lay down like a lion, and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? This statement is very similar to the prophecy and blessing given by a dying Jacob over the descendants of his son Judah, from whom the lion of the tribe of Judah would come: <<*Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up?*>> (Genesis 49:9).

Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you. It has become worse for Balak as each of the first three prophecies have been delivered. In the first one, Balaam fails to curse Israel; in the second, he blesses Israel, and in the third, he curses Balak! How much worse can it get for the king of Moab?

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Now be off with you! Go home! I said, "I will reward you richly", but the Lord has denied you any reward.' ¹² And Balaam said to Balak, 'Did I

not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, ¹³ “If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the Lord, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the Lord says, that is what I will say”?

Numbers 24:10-13

Balak said to Balaam, ‘I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times. Balak’s anger was strong, i.e. he struck his hands together: <<*For he adds rebellion to his sin; he claps his hands among us, and multiplies his words against God*>> (Job 34:37), and: <<*All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem; ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?’>> (Lamentations 2:15), and he chastised Balaam for his apparent failure to do what he had been paid to do.*

I said, “I will reward you richly”, but the Lord has denied you any reward. Balak said that he would not pay Balaam because Balaam would not curse Israel. Balaam would be out of pocket because he had hoped to be paid for his work, but he had remained true to the commands God had given him: I would not be able to go beyond the word of the Lord, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the Lord says, that is what I will say.

¹⁴ So now, I am going to my people; let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come.’

Numbers 24:14

So now, I am going to my people. Balaam was preparing to return home but before he goes he offers Balak one further piece of free advice: let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come: <<*Then Jacob called his sons, and said: ‘Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come’>> (Genesis 49:1). This was given in the form of his fourth oracle.*

V.a.iv Numbers 24:15-25 - Balaam’s Fourth Oracle

This oracle begins like the previous one with Balaam clearly stating that he is delivering the words of God. However, it rapidly becomes a prophecy about the rise of the Davidic dynasty, which conquered the surrounding peoples, including Moab (2 Samuel 8:2-12). The Davidic dynasty would, of course, result in the arrival of the Messiah.

Balaam unexpectedly adds three short, cryptic oracles against the nations (vv.20-25), which function as backhanded encouragement to Israel; her future will be secure through the destruction of her enemies.

¹⁵ So he uttered his oracle, saying:

‘The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,

¹⁶ the oracle of one who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered:

¹⁷ I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near —

a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the borderlands of Moab,
and the territory of all the Shethites.

¹⁸ Edom will become a possession,
Seir a possession of its enemies,
while Israel does valiantly.

¹⁹ One out of Jacob shall rule,
and destroy the survivors of Ir.’

²⁰ Then he looked on Amalek, and uttered his oracle, saying:

‘First among the nations was Amalek,
but its end is to perish for ever.’

²¹ Then he looked on the Kenite, and uttered his oracle, saying:

‘Enduring is your dwelling-place,
and your nest is set in the rock;

²² yet Kain is destined for burning.

How long shall Asshur take you away captive?’

²³ Again he uttered his oracle, saying:

‘Alas, who shall live when God does this?’

24 But ships shall come from Kittim
and shall afflict Asshur and Eber;
and he also shall perish for ever.’

Numbers 24:15-24

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel. This passage is a beautiful prophecy of the coming Messiah. Balaam could see him, but in some future time. Jesus is here prophetically called a star and a sceptre; he is glorious like a star, and has all authority to rule, as pictured by a sceptre. Sceptres are symbols of kingship: <<*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his*>> (Genesis 49:10).

It shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. King David and then eventually the Messiah will rule over all nations that surround Israel. Here, God spoke about the neighbouring nations of Israel (Moab, Edom, Amalek, and the Kenites) and their future through Balaam. The Shethites should probably be identified with nomads who lived in Canaan. The Shutu, possibly a reference to Shethites are mentioned in Egyptian texts from 1900 BC.

Seir is an alternative name for Edom.

The survivors of Ir. Ir means city and could be short for the city of Moab, mentioned in 22:36. In this case this prophecy ends with another prediction of Moab’s subjugation by the Davidic dynasty.

First among the nations was Amalek, but its end is to perish for ever. The first oracle predicts the defeat of the Amalekites, which was the first battle of the Israelites and is recorded in Exodus 17:8-16; then by Saul in 1 Samuel 15:18 and also by David in 1 Samuel 30:17.

The second oracle predicts the defeat of the Kenites by Asshur. The Kenites were on good terms with Israel: <<*The descendants of Hobab the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad. Then they went and settled with the Amalekites*>> (Judges 1:16), and: <<*Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh*>> (Judges 4:11). Asshur is probably a tribe that lived in northern Sinai: <<*Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim*>> (Genesis 25:3), and: <<*He made him king over Gilead, the Ashurites, Jezreel, Ephraim, Benjamin, and over all Israel*>> (2 Samuel 2:9), not the well-known Assyria. However, nothing further is known of their attacking the Kenites.

Verses 23-24 are quite obscure. The passage appears to be a reference to the Philistines arriving on the coasts of Canaan from Kittim in the Twelfth Century BC. They afflicted Asshur and Eber before themselves coming to utter destruction at the hands of David, i.e. he also shall perish for ever. All these prophecies therefore seem to find their focus in the time of David. Christians have seen them as extending beyond the time of David to the time of the Second David, Jesus Christ, to whom all nations will bow: <<*May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service*>> (Psalm 72:8-11), and: <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*>> (Philippians 2:9-11).

²⁵ Then Balaam got up and went back to his place, and Balak also went his way.

Numbers 24:25

Then Balaam got up and went back to his place. However, this is not the end of the story of Balaam, for it is later discovered that he advised Balak to send women to seduce Israel and lead them away from allegiance to God (31:16), which is confirmed by: <<*But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication*>> (Revelation 2:14). God's judgement came on Balaam in the war against Midian in Numbers 31:8.

Balak also went his way. Credit should be given to Balak for one thing; he knew where the strength of Israel was. He did not seek to defeat Israel through military strategy or new weapons. He knew it was a spiritual battle, and if Israel won the spiritual battle, they would certainly win the military battle.

Christians should walk in this same awareness. If they did, they would give more time and attention to building their spiritual strength, in having a close walk with Jesus. They should not allow the likes of Balak to be more perceptive about spiritual things than they are.