



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Balak** (בַּלָּק, "Balak")
- **Chapters: Numbers 22:2-25:9**



בְּרִיךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Chukat) ended with the description of events that occurred some 38 years after the "Sin of the Spies." The Exodus generation had finally died out, and the new generation was getting ready to enter the Promised Land. Both Sihon, the king of the Amorites, and Og, the king of Bashan, had tried to prevent the Jewish people from passing through their borders to get to the Promised Land, but both kings were decisively defeated by Israel.

This week's Torah portion is named after a Moabite king named Balak. The Israelites were camped east of the Jordan River, near the border of the land of Moab. When Balak considered how the Israelites had defeated the Amorites, he began to fear they would try to take over the entire region, and therefore he sought alliance with the nation of Midian to create a united front. The Midianite princes explained that since Moses used the Name of the LORD to strike down enemies in battle, king Balak should seek the services of a Midianite magician named Balaam, since he knew the Divine Name and could use it to invoke a curses against Israel. Balak then sent messengers to Balaam offering him a lucrative reward if he would come and curse the Israelites.

After hearing the king's request, however, Balaam sent the messengers back to Balak with the reply that God had told him not to curse the Jewish people, for they were blessed. Upon hearing this, Balak delegated his highest dignitaries to return to Balaam and to offered him great honor and financial rewards if he would reconsider. When Balaam consulted with God the second time, he was allowed to go, though he was warned to speak only whatever God commanded him.

The very next morning, Balaam saddled his donkey and began making his way to Moab. As he journeyed, however, his donkey saw the Angel of the LORD blocking the way. As she balked and brayed, Balaam beat the animal until God gave her a voice to rebuke him. God then opened Balaam's eyes to see the Angel, who repeated the warning to speak only as he was directed.

When he finally arrived in Moab, Balaam instructed king Balak to build seven altars and to offer a ram and a bull on each one in a sacrificial rite. As Balaam went to consult with the LORD, God "put a word in his mouth" that forced him to proclaim God's words of blessings upon Israel. When Balak heard this, he was exasperated and took Balaam to a different place, hoping that the prophet would be enabled to curse the Israelites from there. At each place, however, Balaam blessed the Israelites, to the great consternation of Balak. Finally, king Balak dismissed Balaam, but before he returned to Midian, Balaam prophesied the destruction of Moab and the surrounding nations.

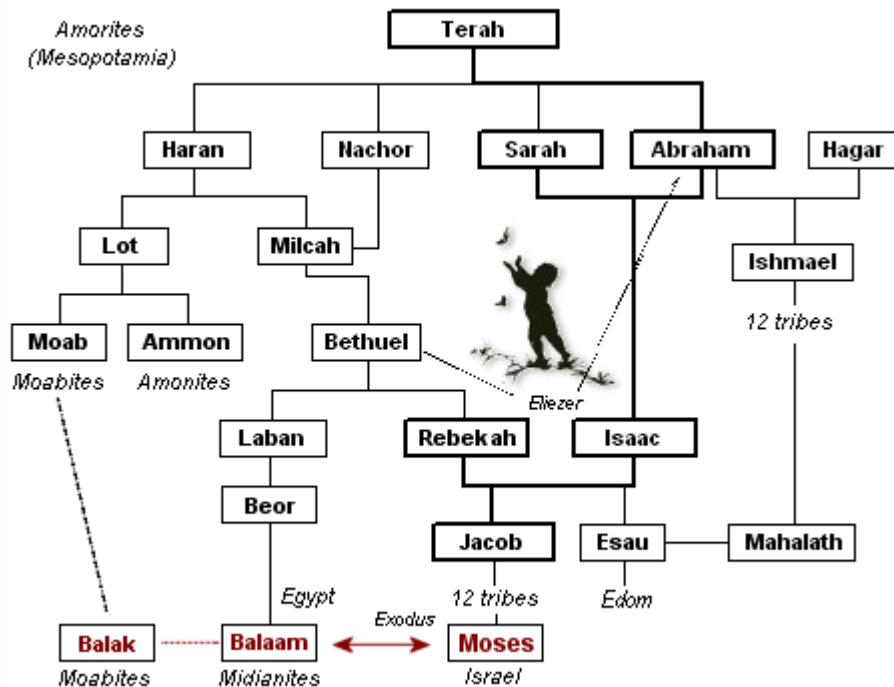


Though God miraculously had overruled his tongue so that he was unable to curse Israel, Balaam remained perverse in his heart and plotted with Balak about how to weaken the people by enticing them to sin (Num. 31:6). Balaam reasoned that if he was successful, Israel’s blessing would be withdrawn and the LORD would then judge them for their transgression. Apparently Balaam brought young Midianite women to the edge of Israel’s camp to offer themselves to the Israelite men on the condition that they worship Baal Peor, a local semitic deity. When the Israelite men began cavorting with the women, God immediately ordered the leaders of the people to be slain.

In punishment for their idolatry, a plague broke out and the Moses instructed the judges to kill all those who “yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.” Before the order was carried out, however, a prince from the tribe of Simeon (i.e., Zimri) publicly took a Midianite princess into a tent set up near the Tabernacle. When Pinchas (Phinehas), the son of Eleazar (and grandson of Aaron) saw this, however, he took up a spear and impaled them both, thereby stopping the plague among the people. In this way, Balaam finally succeeded in cursing the Jewish people, and 24,000 Israelites died.

Who was Balaam?

“Balaam son of Be’or” (בַּלְעָם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר) was from Aram (ancient Mesopotamia), the place of Abraham’s extended family. According to Jewish tradition, Jacob’s wicked uncle Laban had a son named Beor who became the father of Balaam. In other words, the “cursing prophet” was none other than the grandson of Laban and therefore a distant relative of the Jewish people:



Note that the name “Beor” first appears in connection with a king of Edom (Gen. 36:32), which suggests that Balaam might have once been a king of the Edomites (descendants of Esau). Note, however, the phonetic similarity to *Peor*. If Beor and Peor are the same, then Balaam was actually a prophet of *Baal Peor*, a local Semitic god.



Parashah Questions

1. Why does the Torah say that the king of Moab was afraid of Israel? ¹
2. Moab and Midian were ancient enemies. Why did Balak seek an alliance with Midian? ²
3. Why did Balak call for Balaam? ³
4. Where did Balaam live? ⁴
5. What does the name “Balaam” (בַּלְעָם) mean? ⁵
6. How did the princes of Moab and Midian appeal to Balaam? ⁶
7. When God first spoke to Balaam after the messengers came, what did He tell him to do? ⁷
8. After he learned that Balaam refused to come, what did king Balak do? ⁸
9. What did Balaam do after Balak’s messengers made their second appeal? ⁹
10. What was God’s response after Balaam left for Moab? ¹⁰
11. What did Balaam’s donkey see as they rode along the way? ¹¹
12. How many times did Balaam’s donkey try to warn him of danger? ¹²
13. What miracle happened when the donkey was struck by Balaam with his staff? ¹³
14. What did Balaam say to his donkey? ¹⁴
15. What did the donkey say back to Balaam? ¹⁵

¹ Because he heard how Israel defeated the Amorites and because Israel was so numerous. He was afraid that Israel would swarm the land of Moab and “lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.”

² He sought to create a united front to fend off the Israelites. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend...”

³ He believed he had special powers to curse in the name of the LORD, and wanted him to curse the Israelites (22:6).

⁴ In Pethor (פְּתוֹר), originally thought to be near the Euphrates River in Aram (Pitru), though later archaeology locates it near the Jordan River (Deir Alla texts found in Jordan, 1967). (Num. 22:5;13)

⁵ It is thought to mean “not of the people,” or lord (“baal”) of the people (“am”). It comes from the verb *bala* (בָּלַע), which means to “swallow down” or to “confuse.”

⁶ They carried “the fees for divination (קְסָם) in their hand” (22:7). In other words, they appealed to Balaam’s greed.

⁷ God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed” (22:12).

⁸ Balak sent a larger and more honorable delegation to Balaam imploring him to come curse the Israelites.

⁹ He consulted with God in the night, who said to him: “Go with them; but only do what I tell you.” Balaam then rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab (22:19-21).

¹⁰ God’s anger was kindled and “the Angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary” (22:22).

¹¹ The donkey saw the Angel of the LORD (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) with a sword drawn in his hand standing in their way.

¹² Three times: First she veered off the path; then she crushed his foot against the wall; and finally she laid down.

¹³ The donkey spoke in protest: “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”

¹⁴ He accused the donkey of “mocking him” and wished that he had a sword in his hand so he could kill her.

¹⁵ The donkey said, “Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?” When Balaam replied, “no,” his eyes were finally open and he saw the Angel of the LORD.



16. What did the Angel of the LORD say to Balaam? ¹⁶
17. After Balak first met Balaam, what did he do? ¹⁷
18. How many times did Balaam instruct Balak to build altars and to offer sacrifices? ¹⁸
19. After Balaam offered sacrifices on behalf of Balak the first time, what happened? ¹⁹
20. Despite Balaam's oracle of blessing, Balak took him to the top of Mount Pisgah to curse the Israelites. What message did Balaam receive this second time? ²⁰
21. What was the location of Balak's last attempt to curse the Israelites? ²¹
22. In Balaam's final oracle, he prophesied of the latter days (acharit hayamim). How did he describe the coming of the Messiah and his reign? ²²
23. What was "Baal Peor"? ²³
24. When the Israelites were later seduced by the Midianite women, God sent a plague among the people. Who saved them and how? ²⁴
25. Why did God forbid the Israelites from destroying the Moabites (Deut. 2:9)? ²⁵
26. According to Jewish tradition, how was Balaam able to curse people? ²⁶
27. Balak said to Balaam, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed" (Num. 22:6). So why didn't he just ask Balaam for the blessing of prosperity and protection? ²⁷

¹⁶ "Why have you struck your donkey these three times?" The Angel then told Balaam that his way was perverse and were it not for the good sense of the donkey, Balaam would have been killed. When Balaam asked if he should return back home, the Angel said to continue to Moab, but to be careful to "speak only the word that I tell you."

¹⁷ He offered sacrifices of oxen and sheep to an unknown god (22:40).

¹⁸ Three separate times Balaam instructed Balak to erect seven altars upon which were offered a bullock and a ram upon each (for a total of 21 altars and 42 sacrifices).

¹⁹ God met him "in a high place" and gave him an oracle that Israel could not be cursed.

²⁰ "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.... The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them... There is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel."

²¹ It was from Mount Peor, a place of gross idolatry, that God took hold of the false prophet's tongue and made him repeat the promise given to Abraham: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (Num. 24:9; Gen. 12:3). From here Balaam also said, "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel," which is the opening line of the daily *Mah Tovu* prayer recited at synagogues around the world.

²² A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel,

²³ An ancient semitic god of the "openings" associated with excrement and exposure... Baal means "lord" and the Hebrew stem (פִּעַר) means "open," used to refer to both the mouth and bowels. Perhaps there is a connection with Baal Peor and Beelzebub, the "lord of the flies."

²⁴ Pinchas (Phinehas) ben Eleazar, the grandson of Aaron, impaled a tribal leader who was consorting with a Midianite woman with one blow, and that immediately quelled the plague.

²⁵ Because Ruth was to descend from Moab, and her merit preserved the entire nation.

²⁶ He was a master accuser who appealed to God's righteousness and judgment.

²⁷ Balak was being insincere and flattering Balaam. He understood that Balaam was really a destroyer.



28. What extraordinary quality did Balaam see in Israel? ²⁸
29. Why were 3,000 killed for the sin of the Golden Calf, but eight times as many (24,000) killed for the sin of Baal Peor? ²⁹
30. What did Cain, Korach, and Balaam all have in common? ³⁰
31. Did Balaam really repent before the Angel of the LORD (Num. 22:34)? ³¹
32. Two animals spoke in the Bible. One was Balaam's donkey. What was the other? ³²

Discussion Topics

1. What do you think is the *overall* message of this portion of the Torah?
2. How are we to understand Balaam? Describe his character. Was he a true or a false prophet? How does the New Testament characterize him (see 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 1:11; Rev. 2:14)?
3. Who do you think was more culpable – king Balak or Balaam?
4. Balaam's prophecy of a star coming from Jacob is "dual aspect" - "I see him, but not now," this is David; "I behold him, but he is not near," this is King Messiah... Discuss.
5. Discuss the irony of how God took hold of Balaam's tongue to make him repeat the promise given to Abraham: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (Num. 24:9; Gen. 12:3).
6. Balaam describes Israel as a "people who dwell apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9). Later, we read, "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel" (Deut. 32:8). Discuss how God's unique promises to Israel fit into your Christian theology...

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Pinchas** (Numbers 25:10-30:1)
- Read the Haftarah (1 Kings 18:46-19:21)
- Read the New Testament (Romans 11:2-32)

²⁸ When he saw the tents of the camps not facing one another, he understood how the people respected one another's privacy. The quality he saw was *tzeniut*, or "modesty."

²⁹ The sin of Baal Peor involved both idolatry (*avodah zarah*) and immorality / promiscuity (*zenut*).

³⁰ Jealousy which led to self-destruction.

³¹ Not really. The wicked "repent" temporarily until the threat goes away (think of Pharaoh, etc.).

³² The serpent in the orchard (Gen. 3).