

Numbers 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 23 And Balaam said to Balak, Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams. Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram.

And Balaam said to Balak, Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you. And he went to a bare height. And God met Balaam.

And Balaam said to him, I have arranged the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram. And the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.

And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse and said, From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel. How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom God has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him.

[1 : 10] Behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.

And Balak said to Balaam, What have you done to me? I told you to curse my enemies. And behold, you have done nothing but bless them. And he answered and said, Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?

And Balak said to him, Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them, and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there.

And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Balaam said to Balak, Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the Lord over there.

And the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak. And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him.

[2 : 14] And Balak said to him, What has the Lord spoken? And Balaam took up his discourse, and said, Rise, Balak, and hear. Give ear to me, O son of Zippor. God is not man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless. He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.

He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt, and is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel. Now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, What has God wrought? Behold a people! As a lioness it rises up, and as a lion it lifts itself.

It does not lie down until it has devoured the prey, and drunk the blood of the slain. And Balak said to Balaam, Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.

[3 : 19] But Balaam answered Balak, Did I not tell you? All that the Lord says, that I must do. And 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. So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the desert. And Balak said to Balaam, Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.

And Balak did as Balak had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. The story of Numbers 23 continues the farcical elements of the previous chapter, and can best be understood when closely related to them.

Balaam's donkey resisted him on three occasions in the previous chapter, as the way was blocked by the angel of the Lord. Balaam wished that he had a sword in his hand to kill his donkey, even while the angel of the Lord stood with a drawn sword in his hand, ready to kill him.

Finally, the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she spoke to Balaam as Balaam struck her. The donkey pointed out that she was typically compliant, and asked why Balaam struck her three times.

[4 : 26] Now, the humour and the irony of this story is intentional, and the strangeness of the narrative is not accidental. Why do we see a donkey speaking? Because we are supposed to see that Balaam is the donkey in chapter 23, the Lord opened the mouth of the dumb donkey.

A few verses later, Balaam himself says to Balak, Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak. Like the donkey is a dumb animal, the prophet is unable to speak unless his mouth is opened by the Lord.

In chapter 23, Balaam the donkey has his mouth opened and he speaks. However, as Balaam's donkey frustrated his master, so Balaam frustrates his master, Balak, who, like Balaam, is oblivious to the nature of the Lord's involvement in the situation.

The speaking of the donkey is exceedingly surprising. But the surprising speech of the donkey is connected to the speech of the unfaithful prophet, which should be no less surprising.

Many people read the story of Balaam's donkey and shrug and think, maybe strange things just happened in Bible times. But this is to misread badly what's going on. The speaking donkey is not just a weird thing.

[5 : 38] It's a sign. If the Lord can use a dumb, unclean beast to speak, he can also use a mercenary prophet like Balaam. Balak drives Balaam, much as Balaam drove his donkey, until finally both were stopped by the angel of the Lord.

Among other things going on in this chapter, we are seeing a challenge to pagan ways of thinking about God. Balaam approaches God as a being that he can manipulate. If Balaam just makes the right statement, accompanied by the right sacrifices from the optimal vantage point, God will go along with his will.

Like Balaam drove his donkey, oblivious to the angel of the Lord, so Balaam stubbornly drives Balaam against the will of the Lord that is stubbornly blocking his path, each time finding that Balaam goes astray from his purpose like an uncooperative beast.

Balaam is trapped between a stubborn and a blind owner and the will of God, much as his donkey was in the previous chapter. Balak plays out the same plan three times with worsening results. Again, this is similar to what we see with the donkey. The humour of the situation, as the same litany of events occurs three times over, drives the point home. No one can successfully resist God's will.

[6 : 52] No one can successfully manipulate God's will for their personal ends. God is not man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind. Balaam himself had approached the Lord in a similar manner in the preceding chapter, believing that if he went back to God enough times, he might get an answer more to his liking, when God's will had already been made amply clear to him the first time.

Within this chapter, Balak approaches sacrifice as if it were a work of divination. If he simply follows the ritual scrupulously enough, he can get his way. In such a theology, sacrifice is a sort of technology for controlling God.

Sacrifice and ritual are conceived of as a sort of magic, rather than as a sort of enacted prayer to a personal God. Balaam himself comes from such a culture of divination, as we see at the beginning of chapter 24, where we're told that he generally looked for omens, a practice that's forbidden to Israel.

Well, Balaam delivers the first two of his prophetic oracles in this chapter, both of which have an ancient poetic form. The poetry can be seen in parallelisms. So, from Aram, Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

There's a parallelism there. And you can see, the king of Moab corresponds with Balak, from Aram, with, from the eastern mountains. And then again, come curse Jacob for me.

[8 : 15] And that parallels with, come, denounce Israel. Balaam makes clear, speaking by the spirit, that he cannot curse a people that God hasn't cursed. There are times when it might seem that the prophet is a sort of magician, able to bless and curse at will, able to bring the magical power of his words, to use those words to bring people low or lift them up.

And this is precisely what Balak wants from Balaam. He wants a person who can manipulate reality with his words. However, true prophecy is the bearing of God's powerful word. The power is not the prophets, but the power of God's Holy Spirit within him.

The false prophets were always telling people what they wanted to hear. And this is what Balak wants. He wants a prophet who will tell him what he wants to hear and use words to manipulate reality to his advantage.

Balaam's prophecy is a remarkable one. He speaks of the uniqueness of Israel. Israel is a people dwelling alone, not counting themselves among the nations. They've been set apart from the nations, the nations that were divided at Babel.

They are a people chosen by God and set apart, called out of the other nations to be a people special to the Lord. This, of course, reminds us of the calling of Abraham. And the uniqueness of Israel is important.

[9 : 30] They are a specific, set-apart people, but they aren't simply one of the peoples. They are a people that dwells alone, a people that is other to all of the other nations.

They are a people, but they are not one of the peoples. They are a singular people, not a people that is simply one of many distinct individual peoples. The character of Israel's identity as a people that dwells alone is part of how they bear witness to a God who is unique, but not simply one of the gods, a God who dwells alone, high above all other rulers, powers, or thrones.

They cannot be numbered for their multitude. Again, this is a fulfilment of the promises given to Abraham. Genesis chapter 13 verse 16. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.

Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his. Balaam wants to be associated with the blessed nation of Israel, reminding us once again of Abraham's blessing in Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 3.

Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

[10 : 49] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Abraham will be made a blessing, and Balaam's statement here is a sort of invocation of the blessing of the people of God upon himself.

He wants their fate, he wants to be like them. After the utter failure of the first attempt to curse Israel, Balak tries again. Perhaps they weren't standing at a good enough vantage point, and the ritual didn't work for that reason, it just didn't take.

All the rigmarole is repeated again, highlighting its comical nature. But again it fails. The prophetic poem that follows again reiterates the Lord's blessing upon his people, but underscores the theological point.

God neither lies nor changes his mind. His purpose is sure, and his intent is to bless Israel. The Lord is the king in the midst of his people, dwelling in the tabernacle, in the centre of the camp. He has brought them out of Egypt, and he fights for them against their enemies. Enchantments and divination, Balaam's typical stock and trade, can't work against the will of the Lord.

[12 : 00] The Lord has bound himself to Israel by covenant, and Balaam, the prophet for hire, the man of no loyalties, cannot go against this. The nations will marvel at what the Lord will achieve through Israel, and this is something that we see coming to pass in Joshua chapter 2.

Joshua chapter 2 verses 9 to 11, Rahab declares, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction.

And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you. For the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above, and on the earth beneath.

Balaam concludes the oracle with a comparison of Israel to a lioness or lion, which recalls the blessing of Judah by Jacob in Genesis chapter 49 verse 9. Judah is a lion's cub.

[13 : 05] From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down. He crouched as a lion and a lioness. Who dares rouse him? Balak at this point is annoyed with Balaam.

Better to say nothing at all than to give such an extreme blessing. He wanted a curse, and instead he gets this extravagant blessing. Like Balaam, Balak cannot hear the word no from God.

Balaam himself is a man whose no does not really mean no. It's merely the start of a negotiation.

Balak and Balaam presume that the Lord is like them, that if you come to God enough and negotiate with him enough, and maybe offer him enough, that he will come round to your point of view.

But God is not a man who lies, or like a man who would change his mind. A question to consider. In what ways can you hear the blessings of Abraham in the second oracle of Balaam, along with the first?

Why might the reminder of the blessings of Abraham be important at this juncture in the story?