

Numbers 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 24 of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered.

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel, like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters. His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brings him out of Egypt, and is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces, and pierce them through with his arrows.

He crouched, he lay down like a lion, and like a lioness who will rouse him. Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you. And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. And Balak said to Balaam, I called you to curse my enemies, and behold you have blessed them these three times.

Therefore now flee to your own place. I said I will certainly honour you, but the Lord has held you back from honour. And Balaam said to Balak, Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, 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 speaks, that will I speak.

And now, behold, I am going to my people. Come, I will let you know what this people will do to your people in the latter days. And he took up his discourse and said, The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty falling down with his eyes uncovered. I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. It shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed. Seer also his enemies shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly, and one from Jacob shall exercise dominion, and destroy the survivors of cities.

[2 : 49] Then he looked on Amalek, and took up his discourse and said, Amalek was the first among the nations, but its end is utter destruction. And he looked on the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said, Enduring is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock. Nevertheless, Cain shall be burned when Ashur takes you away captive. And he took up his discourse and said, Alas, who shall live when God does this? But ships shall come from Kittim, and shall afflict Ashur and Eber. And he too shall come to utter destruction. Then Balaam rose and went back to his place. And Balak also went his way. The story of Balaam continues into chapter 24, as Balak's third attempt to get Balaam to curse Israel crashes and burns like the preceding ones. Balaam now seems to enjoy a vantage point that enables him to see all of the tribes. He's standing on Peor, and the entire camp of Israel is now visible to him. There seems to be some shift in Balaam's approach at this point.

Whereas he had previously looked for omens, and the Lord had placed words in his mouth, now the Spirit of God comes upon him, and he goes into a different state. These words aren't placed into his mouth by the Lord, so much as they seem to arise within him under the Spirit's inspiration.

His introductory lines to his two oracles here describe his visionary state. The oracle of Balaam, the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered. The oracles that follow are not merely about God's blessing of Israel, as the preceding ones were, but they are about the future of the nation. They look far beyond the current situation. Like the blessings of Jacob in Genesis chapter 49, they anticipate what will befall Israel and other nations in the future and in the latter days. Israel will defeat the Canaanites. They will settle and prosper in the land and become a great and victorious kingdom.

Israel's settlement, as Balaam looks out upon it, is beautiful. He's looking out upon Israel's camp and the way it is organised tribe by tribe around the tabernacle. Israel has a well-ordered camp, described in the opening chapters of the book of Numbers. A camp with a symbolic order. Israel will be planted in the land, like great trees beside flowing water courses.

The imagery is that of a lush garden setting, a new Eden. Water flowing from buckets and seed in many waters is an image of fertility, both of nature and of humanity. And Balaam sees into the future, speaking of the rise of Israel as a kingdom and of the victory over Agag, king of the Amalekites, Israel's old enemies, from Exodus chapter 17. God brought Israel out of Egypt and he will grant Israel victory over all of its enemies. Verse 9 declares, he crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness, who will rouse him up? This recalls verse 24 of the previous chapter. 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. As we have already noted, this recalls Genesis chapter 49 verse 9. Judah is a lion's cup. From the prey my son you have gone up. He stooped down, he crouched as a lion and as a lioness, who dares rouse him? This first of all is kingly language. As the lioness or lion lifting itself up, it's the lion on the hunt. But in the third oracle, here, it is the lion that has settled itself after the hunt, and which no one dare disturb. This is Israel settled in the land, having won its victory and its spoils. Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.

[6 : 45] This concluding statement is one that recalls once more the blessing given to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 3. By this point, Balak is furious. He refuses to pay Balaam anything and tells him that he must flee, presumably lest he face the king's wrath and retribution. Balaam once again points out that he is not free to declare whatever words he wishes. He must declare the words that God gives to him. And on this occasion, he's not just had words dictated to him. These words have bubbled up from within by the inspiration of the spirit. He gives a further oracle concerning the latter days, looking further into the future. The latter days might be a reference to the future more generally, or to events at the conclusion of the age in which they are currently in. Once again, it's introduced with the same words talking about the state that Balaam is in, as the one whose eyes have been opened by the Lord. The prophecy of Balaam here especially seems to look forward to the reign of David and the dominance of Israel over the nations in the region in his days. David, about 400 years later, will fulfill these words. We might again be reminded of Genesis 49 and the blessing of Judah by Jacob in verse 10. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. The language of stars and scepters is the language of kingship. And the defeat of Moab, Edom, and Amalek, and other peoples that are spoken of here, are things that for the most part happened in David's reign. In 2 Samuel chapter 8 verse 2 and 11 to 15, we read of some of these victories. And he defeated Moab, and he measured them with a line, making them lie down on the ground. Two lines he measured to be put to death, and one full line to be spared. And the Moabites became servants to David, and brought tribute. These also King David dedicated to the Lord, together with the silver and gold that he dedicated from all the nations he subdued, from Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, Amalek, and from the spoil of Hadadiza, the son of Rehob, king of Zobah. And David made a name for himself when he returned from striking down 18,000 Edomites in the Valley of Salt. Then he put garrisons in Edom. Throughout all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became David's servants. And the Lord gave victory to David wherever he went. So David reigned over all Israel, and David administered justice and equity to all his people.

We should remember that Balak is the king of Moab. He has summoned Balaam to curse Israel. However, Balaam has just gone on to prophesy that Moab will be crushed at the hands of Israel in the future. This is definitely not what either Balaam or Balak wanted. This oracle is followed by three mini-oracles, bringing the full number of the oracles to seven. These oracles look beyond Moab and Edom to speak of other nations. The first declares that the tribe of Amalek, the great enemies of Exodus 17, will be decisively defeated. The second speaks of the Kenites, friends of the Israelites at this point.

Jethro was a Kenite, and Jael in Judges chapter 4, who crushed Sisera's head, is also a Kenite. However, they will face captivity to Asher, either Assyria or the Asherim, mentioned in Genesis chapter 25 verse 3, about which we know hardly anything else. In the concluding mini-oracle, ships will come from Kittim, Cyprus, and afflict Asher and Eber. Eber might be the Hebrews. This might refer to the invasion of the Sea Peoples in the 13th and 12th centuries BC. Read this way, these prophecies relate to the earlier years of the Kingdom of Israel and its foundational victories and the events within that region from that point on. Yet later passages in scripture also allude to these prophecies. Jeremiah chapter 48 verse 45 recalls verse 17 of this chapter.

In the shadow of Heshbon, fugitives stop without strength, for fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the house of Sihon. It has destroyed the forehead of Moab, the crown of the sons of Tumult. The forehead of Moab is also referred to in Balaam's oracle. Daniel chapter 11 verse 30 is another example.

For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged, and take action against the holy covenant. He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the holy covenant. The oracles of Balaam seem to have an initial and most immediate reference to the rise of the Davidic dynasty. They speak of the way that the throne of David and of Israel will be established over the other nations round about in the region, how God will establish his people through the kingdom of his servant David. But there seems to be something in these prophecies that look even further still. Many in looking at the prophecy of the star coming out of Jacob have seen the larger story of the Davidic dynasty in Christ coming into view. This is a common feature of biblical prophecy, where a prophecy can look towards an initial fulfilment and a primary fulfilment, but beyond that there can be an indication of a greater event that's down the line, something that is witnessed to in details of the prophecy, or sometimes an event, that's straining for a greater fulfilment. We will often find the New Testament writers reading the Old Testament in this sort of way, recognising prophecies that are initially fulfilled in the Old Testament, but which have a fuller realisation in the story of Christ. Having read this story of Balaam, we might wonder what on earth it's doing here. Why would we have this particular account of God blessing his people through this false prophet? As Jonathan Sachs observes, it seems to perform a number of purposes here.

[12 : 47] First of all, this is the blessing of someone who has every motive to curse them. It's a mercenary prophet who's being told by a king to go and curse the people and going to be offered a king's reward for doing so. And he's someone who has no great honour or loyalty to the Lord. He's not a faithful prophet. He has every reason to curse them. And yet he doesn't. God uses his mouth to bless his people.

This is an expression of God's power that no intent to harm them will succeed. It is also a very powerful way of expressing God's love for his people. If you want to praise someone, as Jonathan Sachs observes, the greatest praise can be found in the lips of enemies. Enemies are those who most want to speak ill of us, who most want to malign us. And yet, by using the lips of this enemy to praise Israel, God has given a far more powerful demonstration of the way he relates to Israel than if these words had been born on Moses' mouth. Finally, as they're about to enter the land, God reiterates in this most surprising way all the promises given to Abraham and these anticipations of the nation being established in this most glorious form with a kingly dynasty and dominance over all their enemies in the region. This is looking forward to the future and the full realisation of God's purpose for his people. As they stand on the brink of entry into the promised land, they are being prepared for

God's blessing to them. A question to consider, how does the Lord's relationship to Israel come into clearer focus through the story of Balaam?