

NUMBERS – PART 3

On the Plains of Moab

Chapters 22-36

CHAPTERS 22-24: Oracles of Balaam

The third section of Numbers opens with four oracles spoken by a pagan seer or prophet named Balaam.

King Balak fears and hates the Israelites. *“Soon this horde will devour all the country around us as an ox devours the grass of the field”* (22:4). In time, Balak and others will learn that the devouring ox is not Israel, but the God who stands behind Israel. Balak does not trust his own army to defeat the Israelites so he plans to weaken Israel by spiritual means. Once Israel is cursed and weakened, Balak hopes a military victory will follow. So Balak hires a professional seer or prophet, named Balaam, to put a curse on the Israelites. We know from the book of Genesis, especially in the story of Isaac and his sons, that blessings and curses were efficacious and once spoken could not be revoked (Gen 27:33).

Messengers from the Moabites and Midianites are sent with money to Balaam. Balaam asks them to spend the night, and in the morning he will respond *“as the Lord speaks to me”* (22:8). In their first encounter, God forbids Balaam from cursing the Israelites for they are blessed (22:12). Accordingly, Balaam tells the messengers that he cannot go with them to the Israelites *“for the Lord has refused to let me go with you”* (22:13).

Thinking that Balaam can be bought for the right price, King Balak sends a second delegation of higher level officials who bring with them a “blank check” and the message: *“...whatever you ask of me, I will do”* (22:17). Again Balaam tells his visitors to spend the night while he consults with God. *“The sacred writer was teaching his audience that Balaam was completely dependent on the all-powerful God of Israel. His control of events extended beyond the borders of Israel; the will of God and not the spoken word of any prophet was the decisive factor. And the will of God could not be coerced by a fee!”* (JBC p.95). This time, God tells Balaam he can go with the visitors *but* with the condition to *“do exactly as I tell you”* (22:20).

The talking donkey (22:22-40). *“But now the anger of God flared up at him for going, and the angel of the Lord stationed himself on the road to hinder him as he*

was riding his ass...” (22:22). Why would the angel block the prophet when God had granted him permission to go with the men? Scholars do not know what to make of this incident but it seems somehow that Balaam’s actions were out of line (22:32).

The story becomes a bit humorous when the donkey perceives something that Balaam the prophet cannot see, i.e., the angel blocking his path. As the donkey refuses to move, Balaam beats him a few times. Then the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey whereupon it starts a dialogue with Balaam concerning the harsh treatment. Finally, the donkey lies down as if to say “I’m through with you” and rebukes Balaam for not trusting him (22:28). God lets Balaam see the angel who tells the prophet: *“...It is I who have come armed to hinder you because this rash journey of yours is directly opposed to me”* (22:32). Immediately, Balaam recognizes that he has sinned. He volunteers to return home, but the angel tells him to go visit Balak but to only *“say what I tell you”* (22:35). Commenting on this incident, the editors of the JBC state: *“The writer used this ancient bit of folklore for a theological purpose – i.e., to drive home the lesson of God’s never failing providence over his people. God’s control over nature was so complete and his word was so powerful that he could even use a dumb beast as the bearer of his word. The incident is not meant as a sober historical account of an ass who once complained to his owner. The narrator’s purpose was doctrinal; he has inserted into his narrative, even at the risk of disrupting its smooth flow, a popular and somewhat humorous episode, because he saw in it the means to teach an important theological lesson”* (p.95).

Finally, Balak meets Balaam who reminds him that he can only speak what God puts into his mouth (22:28).

Pause: Who in our time might remind you of Balak? In what way might we be like him? Have you felt as Balaam? Were you trying to be obedient to God and yet he seems to be mad with you?

The four oracles

Balaam is taken to a high place where he can see Israel, but before he can pronounce a curse on them,

God ‘pulls a quick one’ on him, turning what would have been a curse into a blessing.

The first oracle (22:41-23:12). When Balak and Balaam arrive at the location for the first oracle, Balaam moves off to the side to consult with God. During their encounter, God puts an “utterance in Balaam’s mouth.” While the first oracle does not contain an explicit word of blessing, neither does it curse Israel. During the oracle, Balaam exclaims: “*How can I curse whom God has not cursed*” (23.8). The oracle stresses that Israel is a people that lives apart from other nations; they are unique because they belong to God.

After each oracle, Balak becomes increasingly upset and frustrated. “*It was to curse my foes that I brought you here, not to bless them*” (23:11). Balaam responds that he can only speak what the Lord puts in his mouth.

The second oracle (23:13-26). Balak tries again to get Balaam to curse his enemies, but Balaam draws his attention to Israel’s invincibility. Powerful images are used to speak of Israel’s strength: “*a wild bull of towering might*” (v.22) and “*a lioness that devours its prey*” (v.24).

The third oracle (23:27-24:13). Balaam is shown the whole of Israel encamped and he exalts the Lord for his abundant blessings on his chosen people. His oracle speaks of the power and strength of Israel. This makes Balak so angry that he fires Balaam. “*Be off at once, then, to your home...*” (24.11).

The fourth oracle (24:14-25). Before he leaves for home, Balaam speaks an unsolicited fourth oracle that announces Israel’s victory over the people of the region. This oracle also foresees a great king arising from Israel, accompanied by the sign of a great star: “*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel*” (v.17). This text is read during the Advent season as one of the many Old Testament verses that point to the coming of a future messiah.

Pause: In this story, Balak is trying to manipulate Balaam into doing something bad? Can you think of any examples of how this happens today?

CHAPTER 25: Two more stories of rebellion

When Balak’s attempt to weaken Israel with a curse fails miserably, he comes up with a new way to

immobilize the Israelites. Following Balaam’s advice, he sends the young ladies of Moab to seduce the men of Israel and to draw them into the worship of their gods. The plan meets with great success (v.2). God becomes so angry that he orders the public execution of those guilty of the sins of promiscuity and idolatry (vv 3-5).

The zeal of Phinehas (25:6-15). When Phinehas (Aaron’s grandson) discovers an Israelite and a Midianite woman involved in sexual misconduct, he stabs both of them to death. Because of the zeal he has shown for God’s honor which is also an atonement for the Israelites, God pledges an everlasting priesthood for him and his descendants. But while we can praise Phinehas for his fervor for keeping his people holy, we obviously don’t need to agree with the way he expressed his zeal, which resulted in the death of 24,000 Israelites. This is the end of the generation that left Israel, journeyed through the wilderness for forty years and rebelled constantly against God. None of them, except Joshua and Caleb, will enter the Promised Land.

CHAPTER 26: The second census

The older rebellious generation, having all died (see 14:28-35), scholars view the second census as the beginning of a new generation in Israel. This new census takes a count of those who have grown up in the wilderness of Egypt and who, hopefully, have learned some lessons from watching their parents rebel against God and pay the ultimate price.

The purpose of the census is to determine the proportionate size of each tribe in preparation for the land assignment that will follow (vv 52-56). As with the first census, its purpose is also to keep track of all the men twenty years and older who are fit for military service.

CHAPTER 27: Joshua becomes the leader of the new generation

The daughters of Zelophehad show some spunk by coming before Moses, the high priest Eleazar, the princes, and the whole community, to present a legal inheritance question. As their father, who had died in the desert for his own sins, left no sons, the daughters appeal to Moses and the community to let them have the land that was supposed to be allotted to their father (v.4). These ladies surely are models of young, confident women who knew how to fight for justice. Their plea got a positive answer.

Verses 12-23 describe the transfer of leadership from Moses to Joshua. God tells Moses that he will not lead the people into the Promised Land because of his disobedience at the waters of Meribah (20:1-13). The tradition of the Book of Deuteronomy explains Moses' death outside of the land as attributable to the sins of the people and not to his own sins (Deut 1:37, 4:21).

Moses does not sulk or get mad with God over his decision. He accepts it. His concern is for the people who have given him so much trouble. He does not want them to be like sheep without a shepherd (v.17).

Joshua, one of the spies who came back from Canaan with a positive report, has been a close assistant of Moses for some time. The imposition of Moses' hands on Joshua before the people and the new high priest Eleazar is a public acknowledgement that Joshua is now to be the leader of the new generation of Israelites.

Pause: What leadership role(s) have you filled in life? What is most challenging about a leadership role?

CHAPTERS 28-29: Regulations for public worship for the days and seasons of the year

In his commentary on Numbers, Dennis Olson frames chapters 28-29 in the following way: *“For the second generation of Israelites who stand poised to enter the land of Canaan, the focus moves from creating order in space (the focus of chapters 2-4) to creating order in time. Numbers 28-29 depicts a systematic program of offerings and sacrifices that mark boundaries of time through the cycle of days, weeks, and the year. The quantities of required offerings and their assigned dates are given for daily morning and evening sacrifices (28:3-6), the Sabbath offerings (28:9-10), the offerings on the first of the month (28:11-15), and offerings for various festivals (28:16-29:40)”* (p.170).

(For more on the contents of these two chapters, see the Colledgeville commentary on Numbers.)

CHAPTER 30: Validity and annulment of vows

Certain members of the community, through vows or pledges made to God, promise either to abstain from certain activities (e.g., Nazarite vows in chapter 6) or to dedicate some sacrifice or other offering to God or God's service. Most of this chapter deals with situations in which a woman's vow may or may not be

made void by the objection of her father or husband. In ancient society, the ultimate responsibility for fulfilling vows made by a woman could rest upon her father or her husband. But the central concerns of these laws are that all obligations and pledges made to God be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 31: Holy war against the Midianites

God tells Moses to select an army to attack the Midianites and “execute God's vengeance on them.” Moses does as he is told. When the battle is over, every Medianite male adult and child is killed and so are all the women who seduced the Israelite men into promiscuity and apostasy, and their towns are set on fire. The only ones spared are the girls and the herds and stock. What are we to make of such a reprehensible event?

In the Bible, the battle against the Midianites is called a *holy war*, ordered by God to destroy the enemies of God. As far as the Israelites are concerned, the Midianites are a wicked and sinful people. Association with them endangers Israel's commitment to God. Hence, it is better that they be wiped off the face of the earth. Killing all those captured in battle prevented any temptation for the Israelites to intermarry and be converted to pagan ways. In slaughtering whole villages or people, the Israelites believe that this is what *God* wants them to do. In future Old Testament books, we will discover that God's plan for his people is peace—not war (Is 2:2-4). The holy war is only a temporary measure in Israel's history, confined to the conquest of Canaan. There is nothing in the prophets or elsewhere that shows that Israel was ever urged to go into a holy war.

Verses 19-24 deal with post-war purification rituals. Verses 25-54 recount how the extensive booty is shared proportionally with all the people.

Pause: Even in our day, people still believe that God wants them to use violent means to defeat infidels and other evil people, e.g., blowing up an abortion clinic. What are your thoughts on this?

CHAPTER 32: Reuben and Gad request that they settle outside the Promised Land

Reuben and Gad, leaders of two Israelite tribes, ask Moses if they and their flock can settle in the rich farmlands of the Transjordan area rather than cross over to the Promised Land where they do not know

what awaits them. Moses is not happy with their request as it could quickly undermine God's plan for the Israelites to have the land of Canaan (v.7). It was Israel's refusal to cooperate with God's plans that sent them wandering in the desert for forty years.

In verses 16-33, Reuben and Gad come up with a compromise solution which Moses accepts.

CHAPTER 33: Stages of the journey to the Plains of Moab remembered

This chapter lists and describes all the places where Israel stopped to camp on its journey through the wilderness from Egypt to their present location in the Plains of Moab. They are told that on entering Canaan, they must drive out all the inhabitants and destroy all the symbols of their pagan religion. Canaan is God's gift to Israel and it must have nothing in it contrary to God's covenant relationship with Israel.

These last three chapters of Numbers consist of laws and instructions from God for the people to follow when they enter into Canaan. It is an indication that the conquest of Canaan is near at hand.

CHAPTER 34: Details of land boundaries

Chapter 34 lays down the *ideal* boundaries of the Promised Land. It seems the Israelites never achieved control over the outlined boundaries, or if they did, it was only for a short time.

CHAPTER 35: Levitical cities and cities of refuge

Since the Levites are assigned no land, each Israelite tribe must give them living space. The tribes are to provide forty-eight towns for the Levites to live in. Because the Levites' job is to guard the holiness of God and the sanctuary, their towns are to be scattered throughout the Promised Land. Of the forty-eight cities assigned the Levites, six are to be set aside as places of refuge. Such cities are needed because ancient customs of justice call for revenge in the event of the death of a relative. Verses 16-29 lay down the rules governing murder and manslaughter.

CHAPTER 36: Property of Heiresses

The daughters who appeared in 27:1-11 with an inheritance question are featured again in this final chapter with another inheritance issue: What if they married men from other tribes of Israel, would they be able to keep their land? The answer is no. Moses tells

the ladies that they can marry anyone they please, provided he is from their own tribe (v.6).

Conclusion

The Book of Numbers is a wonderful example of God's providential care for his people. Despite their constant grumbling and loss of faith in God, he kept caring for them, sustaining them with food and water, and leading them to victory against hostile forces. Another lesson we can take from this book is that sin and rebellion against God may temporarily delay God's plan for humankind but it cannot stop it from going forward.

Pause: What message are you taking with you from your study of this book of the Bible?

RESOURCES

- Colledgeville Commentary on Numbers, Helen Kenik Mainelli
- Interpretation Series on Numbers, Dennis Olson
- The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition, (pp 80-85)
- Walking with God, Gray & Gavins (pp 95-107)