Parashah One Hundred and Sixteen

Numbers 22:2–40; Micah 7:16–20; 1Peter 5:5–7

notes by Tim Hegg

Balaam - Prophet or Sorcerer?

The section before us this Shabbat begins what has been called "The Balaam Oracles." These roughly comprise Numbers 22-24 and consist of seven oracles or *mashals* cast in prophetic tones: (1) 23:7-10; (2) 23:18-24; (3) 24:3-9; (4) 24:15-19; (5) 24:20; (6) 24:21-22; (7) 24:23-24. Our text is the prologue, describing in narrative fashion the background to the seven oracles.

This section has been considered one of the most difficult in the Torah to interpret and apply. Not only is the Hebrew archaic and poetic, but circumstances that surround the narrated events are clouded and mysterious. Yet despite the interpretive difficulties, these words contain the eternal and unchanging revelation of God to us.

Balak, king of Moab, sees Israel coming and is fearful. He recognizes that he is no match for their numbers and military strength. So we don't have trouble identifying Balak—we know where he stands. He is the enemy of Israel. But Balaam (בּלִיטָם, Bil'am) is another story. Is he friend or foe, prophet or sorcerer, worshiper of Israel's God or pawn of the Evil one?

The Sages almost universally consider Balaam as evil. He is referred to as "evil Balaam" (b. Ta'anit 20a; b. Sanhedrin 105a; 106a-b; b. Avoda Zera 4a; b. Zevachim 116a; b. Nidah 31a; Mid. Rab. Gen xix.11; xcix.7; Mid. Rab. Ex xx.5; xxx.20; Mid. Rab. Num xx.6, 11) and grouped with villans like Cain, Korach, Doeg, Ahithophel, Gehazi, Absalom, Adonijah, Uzziah and Haman (b. Sota 9b; cf. b. Sanhedrin 90a; 105a; Mid. Rab. Gen xx.5; Mid. Rab. Num xiv.1). His supposed repentance ("I have sinned, 22:34) is viewed by the Sages as mere manipulation: "He said it because he was a cunning villain and knew that nothing can prevent retribution except repentance, and that if anyone, having committed a crime, says, 'I have sinned,' the angel has no power to touch him' (Mid. Rab. Num xx.15). Yet he is called the wisest of the pagans and grouped with Job and Jethro as one to whom many went for counsel (b. Sota 11a; Mid. Rab. Ex i.9). Some Sages believed Job was his father (b. Bava Batra 15b). Clearly Balaam is an enigma for the Sages.

The problem is plain: on the one hand Balaam is involved in what appears to be sorcery (i.e., curses, divination) while on the other hand he is engaged in conversation with God, and appears to submit to His demands. What is more, God apparently puts words in his mouth, much like He does for His own prophets. Yet in the end, Balaam gives counsel to Balak which brings about Israel's demise. He clearly acts as an enemy of Israel!

Moreover, in the on-going revelation of Scripture, Balaam is clearly portrayed as evil and as Israel's enemy:

The sons of Israel also killed Balaam the son of Beor, the diviner, with the sword among the rest of their slain. (Josh 13:22)

...forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; (2Pet 2:15)

Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. (Jude 1:11)

But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam,

who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. (Rev 2:14)

In the end, Balaam was known as a sorcerer and one who was compared with the rebellion of Korach. It is interesting that Peter brings in the concept of "loving the wages of unrighteousness." This was also a teaching of the Sages, that Balaam willingly engaged in evil in order to gain riches (b. Sanhedrin 106a).

We may also note several more subtle indications that Balaam is presented in our text as the messenger of Satan. First, in v. 6, Balak gives us what apparently was commonly known and asserted about Balaam: "For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (יַדְעָתִּי אָת אֲשֶׁר־תִּבַרֶךְ מְבֹרֶךְ וָאֲשֶׁר תִּאֹר יוּאָר). This is clearly a reference to the words of HaShem to Abraham, found in Gen 12:3, "And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (ואברכה מברכיד ומקללד אאר). Here, the blessing and cursing is the work of HaShem. What characterized Satan from the beginning is his desire to attribute to himself what could only be the work of the Almighty. Apparently Balaam had done the same thing. Secondly, Balak's message to Balaam, which he sent by way of the messengers, was this: "Come, curse ארר), 'arar) them for me." But when Balaam reports Balak's message to God (v. 11), he changes the verb: "Come, curse (קבב, qabav) them for me." The verb קבב qabav is not as strong as the verb originally used (ארר, 'arar), and in the Torah, every other use of the verb ארר 'arar relates to God's actions, not man's. Again, in the Torah, the verb קבב gabav is only used in the Balaam oracles, and appears always to have a connection to magical arts. Thirdly, in v. 12, God makes it clear to Balaam that the people of Israel are blessed, meaning that He has blessed them. As already noted, this hearkens back to the Abrahamic covenant, and the divine purpose to bless the descendants of Abraham. Balak's request to Balaam is therefore construed in our text as a request to overcome the work of the Almighty. This, likewise, is the strategy and purpose of Satan.

Even the very fact that Balaam has audience with the Almighty appears at first to present an enigma in our text. One has the clear impression that given the opportunity, Balaam would have gladly cursed Israel, but he was restrained by God. Balaam is involved in the world of spirits, for he is called "a diviner" (הַקּוֹסֶם, haqoseim). So we wonder why a sorcerer would have access to God. But we know that this parallels the activities of Satan, who (along with the "sons of God") also obtains an audience with God in the Job controversy, as he "presents himself to God" (Job 1:6) seeking permission from the Almighty to afflict Job. We may also note the text in Rev 12:10, which indicates that the "accuser" of the saints accuses them continually "before our God." Thus, in the mysterious workings of the heavenly battle, Satan does have an audience before the Almighty.

Yet the obvious limits of Balaam are apparent in our text. For instance, his knowledge of God is vastly deficient, for he seems unaware of the existence of Israel as God's people, for he simply says (following the words of Balak) that they are a "people who have come out of Egypt." How could he understand who God truly is without knowledge of God's people Israel? For at this point in world history, only Israel had received God's divine self-disclosure. One could know about God as the Creator and Ruler of the universe through the created world, but one could not know about God as the only true God except through contact with Israel. Furthermore, apart from contact with Israel and her Torah, one could not know how He intended to be worshipped. The sacrifices offered by Balak and Balaam must have been pagan in origin. God had already ordained His prescribed

method of sacrifice as worship: at the Tabernacle, in the hands of His ordained priests. With all of these apparent "mixed messages," it is clear that Balaam is not informed about God through the special revelation He has given to Israel, and could not therefore be a true worshipper of God. We should conclude that Balaam is a pagan diviner who has direct connections to the spirit world, but who has himself been deceived about the true nature of Israel's God. Of course, he, like the demons themselves, knows that the God of Israel is all powerful, and controls all things. But he seems unaware of the covenant making nature of God.

We therefore are given, in these "Balaam Oracles," a very interesting "peek" into the realm of "spiritual warfare." I do not mean the kind of "mania" that goes by that title in our day, in which every negative aspect of life in our fallen world is ascribed to demons and evil attacks of Satan. There is, for instance, no biblical foundation for attributing addictions to the "spirit of drugs" or melancholy to the "spirit of depression." While it is clear that the evil one loves to use drugs and depression to defeat people, things like these are usually the result of sinful choices (not always by the one who is affected by these). All too often, "the devil made me do it" is an excuse to deny one's own responsibilities in the choices one has made. In fact, I would say that some of what goes on in our times under the guise of "spiritual warfare" verges on idolatry. Instead of engaging the realities of the spiritual realm in which true battles are fought, many people today use the "warfare prayer" like an amulet, to "ward off evil spirits." This kind of thing is actually one of the enemy's weapons and must please him.

But there can also be a wrong reaction to the nonsense of the "spiritual warfare" movement prevalent in our times. This is the over reaction that negates the reality of spiritual warfare all together. We know that battles are being fought in the realm of the spirits, and that in some way we are engaged in this battle. Note Eph 6:12—

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

This is a real battle, and we are in the midst of it. And I believe that if we look closely at the "Balaam Oracles," we learn some important things about this battle.

First, there have always been those who appear to have a connection with God, and who even appear to obey Him, who in fact, are the enemies of God and His people. Balaam understood that God existed, and that His will was sovereign. James tells us that the demons also "believe in God and tremble" (James 2:19). But Balaam has no regard for God's ways—he despises God's covenant, because He disregards God's covenant people. Obviously, some who may be true believers in God have been ill-taught and as a result, have a skewed view of God's chosen people, Israel. But what I do mean to say is that sometimes God's enemies are self-deceived into thinking that they can have a true relationship with the Almighty while at the same time hating His chosen people Israel. One cannot love the Father and hate His children. Such a person is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1John 2:9,11; 3:15; 4:20).

Secondly, since Balaam has no connection with Israel, he likewise has no knowledge of the Torah given to Israel. If he had, he would have known that God had made a covenant with the people of Israel, and that He had sworn to bless those who bless them, and curse the one who curses them. In our text, it appears that Balaam's intent is to curse God but the Holy One restrained him. It was not that he knew about God's covenant promises and was willing therefore to reckon with the real-

ity of that covenant. Rather, he must have considered the God of Israel to be just one of the gods (even if one of the more powerful). However, when the truth of God is known through His eternal revelation of the Scriptures (Torah), He is confessed as the only God, and all others are seen as false fabrications of man's depraved imagination. As we know, in reality all false gods are actually demons (cp. 1Cor 10:20-21). Therefore all true worship must conform to His revelation—all else is of no value. And at the heart of this worship is the recognition that God has entered into covenant with one nation, and with one nation only, the nation of Israel.

Thirdly, we learn that the enemies of God, including the demonic powers of a diviner, are limited. In our text, even a dumb donkey is aware of spiritual realities that Balaam is not. We err if we attribute to Satan and his helpers the powers of omniscience and omnipotence. They are not all knowing, nor are they all powerful. Their weapons are that of deception and lies, with which they hope to instill fear. What is more, they hope to coerce us into thinking that only if we use some formula against them, can they be subdued. In other words, they want to trick the unlearned into using "magic," the very thing by which they gain their victories. Balaam was restrained from cursing Israel, but not because Israel used some special formula or did some prescribed incantation. Israel is entirely unaware of what is going on, at least that is how the text presents it. The battle is happening beyond her, on the heights of the mountains overlooking her travels. She simply moves on as God had instructed her. God has promised to protect her and guard her as long as she walks in His ways. As long as Israel obeys her Master, she has nothing to fear. Her duty is to walk in righteousness. When she does, God protects her and gives her the victory. Granted, at times God directs her into the battle, and gives her the necessary means for gaining the victory. He does this, perhaps, to remind her that there is, in fact, a battle going on. But the majority of the time, Israel "wins" the battle by obeying God. When she does, she can expect His blessing.

We should never be lulled into the false notion that there is no battle. It rages continually, and will rage until our final foe is forever cast away. But we should also recognize that our greatest warfare weapon is not a special prayer or chant; not fervent singing or dancing, but a steady, consistent commitment to walk in the ways of the Lord, trusting His word that He will protect and bless those who love Him.

When the messengers of Balak return, and inform him that Balaam had refused to come, he does the "reasonable" thing: he ups the wages. Sending messengers of even greater prestige, he gives a "blank check" to Balaam—whatever he wanted for his services would be provided. Balaam replies by explaining that it is simply not in his power to curse the people as Balak requests, regardless of what the price was. Yet an interesting turn-about occurs: in a dream God gives Balaam permission to go with the messengers of Balak (v. 20). Why would God now give permission when formerly He restricted Balaam from going? There are two possible answers. First, it is possible that God allowed Balaam to go in order to prove, not only to him, but to us as well, that the forces of evil against God's people are inevitably defeated by His powerful hand. The Sages reckon this to be the case, noting that in giving Balaam the opportunity, he still was unable to curse Israel, and that when a person is intent upon sinning, the Holy One may allow him to go in his sinful ways (b.Makkot 10b; Mid. Rab. Num 20.12; b.Shabbat 104a; b.Sota 38b). A second interpretation is possible, namely, that God allowed Balaam to go as long as his intentions were to bless rather than curse Israel. When giving permission in the night vision (v. 20), this emphasis is given: "...but only the word I speak to you shall you do." Yet when Balaam does go, his heart was to curse Israel, and it is for this reason that God stands against him. In other words, permission to allow Balaam

to accompany the messengers of Balak was given in order to disclose his true intentions.

The story of the angel of the Lord who stood in Balaam's way, and the speech of Balaam's donkey, is given for several reasons. First, to show that God remained faithful as Israel's guardian. Even as Balaam goes to do his evil work, God is in control. Secondly, the evil "power" with which Balaam was endowed is shown to be impotent. The donkey has more spiritual awareness than does the celebrated soothsayer! For the angel of the Lord, entirely unknown by Balaam, is comprehended and heeded by the animal. The donkey knows more than the diviner. It is always the way of the enemy to deceive people into thinking that he knows far more than he does. Satan's knowledge is incomplete, but he seeks to be known as comprehending all things.

It should not unsettle us when the biblical text has a mute animal talking. If the Almighty is able to bring water from a rock, He certainly can bring the sound of a human voice from an animal. God may accomplish His will in ways unthinkable by man. Moreover, this event powerfully demonstrates that until God is willing to "open the eyes," man is unable to understand and know Him and His works. Balaam, with all of his soothsaying powers, is still blind to the ways of God unless God reveals the truth to him.

When Balaam and the messengers finally arrive, Balak's welcome is laced with rebuke: "Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?" (v. 37). Balaam's answer is to the point: "Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak." Had Balaam learned his lesson? Perhaps, for throughout the ensuing oracles, Balaam continues to affirm his inability to curse Israel, and the necessity to fill his oracles only with that which God allowed. We may have here an illustration of the way in which God is able to use even the evil of men to accomplish His purposes.

Our *parashah* ends with the notice that Balak offered sacrifices and sent some of the meat to Balaam. This parallels the Peace offering (cf. Ex 18:12; Lev 7:11f; 1Sam 9:23–24) in which the meat of the sacrificial animal is shared among the worshiper and his guests. But these sacrifices were surely done in a pagan manner, offered to pagan gods, and not to the God of Israel. These sacrifices form the background for the remaining oracles, which, though carried out in the sphere of pagan worship and intentions, will be overcome by the Almighty and turned into blessing for Israel. Once again, the emphasis is that God is the One who guards Israel and secures her blessings.

This is likewise the emphasis of the *haftarah* (Mic 7:16–20). The welfare of God's chosen people proceeds from His covenant faithfulness to them: "He delights in unchanging love" (חֶפֶּד הֹנִא , chesed). His "lovingkindness" (חֶפֶּד, chesed) is unfailing because He is faithful to His covenant promises. Israel's success and ultimate blessing is neither in the hands of the nations, nor in her own abilities, but in the unchanging God Who keeps His word. Moreover, God's grace is always evident in His covenant faithfulness, for He "pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession" (v. 18). The idea of "passing over the rebellious act" (עבֶּר עֵל־פָּשַע) is not that of disregarding sin, or somehow pretending it does not exist. Rather, the meaning is that He does not mete out to the transgressor the due penalty for his sin but, having His justice satisfied by punishing a substitute, is able to be both "just and the justifier" of those who have sinned (Rom 3:26, cf. Ps 85:10). The covenant penalty for those who break the covenant is death (portrayed by the sacrificial animals utilized in the enactment of the covenant, cf. Gen 15:9f), and yet the innocent Partner of the covenant rather takes upon Himself the penalty of death, and therefore frees the guilty partner from the curses of the covenant: "You will give truth to Jacob and unchanging love

to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old" (v. 20).

This is the connection to the Apostolic portion coupled with our *parashah*. God's grace is given to the "remnant of His possession" (Mic 7:18). He stands against (resists) the proud but gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34, cf. James 4:6). The heart of Balaam is evident in that God "took His stand in the way against him" (Num 22:22). The faithful remnant of God's people is characterized by their willingness to humble themselves before God, to accept His ways and not their own, and to acknowledge their need of Him. In so doing, they put themselves under His care, and receive from Him the protection and blessing He promises. As we shall see, as long as Israel remained faithful to her God, she was protected by Him. But when she (sadly) gives way to unfaithfulness in participating in the idolatrous worship of her neighbors, she removes herself from the protecting hand of the Almighty, and is defeated.

Thus, the biblical perspective on spiritual warfare is clear. Our weapons are not those of our own design, but consist of faith and faithfulness. Putting on the armor of the Lord (Eph 6:13f) means walking in obedience to Him, following in the footsteps of our Messiah, realizing that He is our fortress and that we are safe only as we live in the reality of being "in the Messiah."