

Story Exegesis of Parashat Balak



Jonathan Esterman MDiv

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Dr. Leonard Sweet

Portland Seminary

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The story I wish to illuminate and tell is found in Parashas Balak in the Torah. Parashas Balak is located in BaMidbar 22.¹ In many ways, this is a tale as old as time. Imagery found in the Torah, true as it can be. A prophet takes the center stage, barely prepared for the raw power he faces off against. The prophet wasn't the smallest bit afraid, which is of some dismay, and brings us full circle to the true family message of the beauty of a humble man and the terror of a vicious beast. We read the story ever just the same year after year, and find new meanings in metaphors that are ever a surprise, yet we nonetheless walk away from the event ever as before, just as sure of the tale as we are sure as the sun will rise.

It is a showdown, the best type of archetype stories that children love to hear, a showdown of the messenger of G-d and the messenger of the pagans. In a battle pit against one another, the messenger of G-d takes barely even a footnote in the actual story itself, yet the Jewish heritage and tradition to the story shows how critical a role this small indentation is. This is an antihero tale as well, as we see who the main villain is cast to be brings forth a twist and keeps to the how fate has been cast, unable to yield against infinite force against him. Just as it is a tale of the path to the happiest place in the world, it is also a counter-culture view from today's society. Whereas we have Gandalf the Grey standing against a fiery beast to declare that the evil shall not pass, we instead find the true origin: a tale of an evil man, in many ways an assassin for hire, doing his worst to try to stop the ultimate good from passing through the way. With no further ado, it is my honor to tell the tale, true as ever and often overlooked in the whole of history, of Parashas Balak, the story of a sorcerer hired to stop the Jewish people. Spoiler alert: he failed.

¹ BaMidbar (the desert) is known also as the Book of Numbers, despite the main events being in the desert and not necessarily about numbers.

The story opens with Balak, the son of Zippor. He saw what Israel did. They defeated the Amorites. As king of the Moabites, who stood in the way of Israel, he was fearful and took action. Ramban² notes that the story does not present him initially as king and that he was a mighty warrior promoted to the status of King because of the fear the Moabites had. Even worse, Rashi points out that Balak wasn't even a Moabite – he was a foreigner thrust into this position. Balak propositions Balaam, a renowned sorcerer, to curse the Israelites and prevent their eventual insurrection. How did Balak know to consult Balaam? These are questions that we must ask in the story for they show a greater narrative at hand – that HaShem guides every moment in history to be His Story. Moab was so afraid of the Jews, which outnumbered them, that they made peace with the Midianites to consult them about how Moses had succeeded thus far. The Midianites pointed out that Moses was a prophet and triumphed via his lips.³ To defeat this, Balak chose one known to curse with his lips. Thus, Balaam. Moab and Midian approached Balaam to inquire and hire him to curse the Jewish people. The curse Balak requested was just send the Jews another way. Balaam, however, was purely evil and the opposite of Moses. Even though he was lesser than Moses, he represented the evil to balance the light. Balaam sought the destruction of the Jews, and the proof is in the narrative. As Balaam divined what he should do, HaShem spoke to him directly on the matter and forbade a curse. Nonetheless, Balaam continued his path. Balaam plays himself off as the “intermediary,” but how he works with the delegates only leads to increase his potential reward and further inflame the wrath of G-d.

² The Artscroll Chumash contains commentary of the Rishonim, the early sages, along with the Torah portion.

³ Service of the lips, *avodah*, is a worship and praise. It would make sense but when dealing with Hebrew, a picturesque language, one must recognize particular words are specifically placed not for exegesis but for illumination in the narraphor.

Balaam panders on the proposition and finally wins his right to go with the delegates. He gets permission from HaShem to go and provide a blessing but he does not pass this along to Balak, in hopes of turning HaShem against Moses and win the defeat of the Jewish people. Along the way, an angel blocks the path to ward off Balaam's hope that he would be victorious in his curse. The she-donkey avoids the angel, as Rashi notes that animals can see the spiritual realm that humans cannot see (since we would be in constant fear if we were truly aware of our surroundings). The angel has a sword drawn, but this is not merely a sword, it is a clever metaphor. This metaphor symbolizes the rivalry between Jacob's "voice" of Torah and Esau's "sword." The angel blocked three times. Another metaphor: the three Patriarchs. The angel blocked to the right and to the left: had Avraham's progeny been to the side, Ishmael, they would have failed, but he stayed truth with Isaac. When the she-donkey could no longer move, we see Jacob and his offspring, who could not be cursed. The she-donkey spoke to show that G-d alone controls speech and that Balaam would have no choice but to bless. The she-donkey points out the three times she was struck for protecting her master, these three times a metaphor to the three festivals that were to come: Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot. Balaam threatened to kill her with a sword. Why? Could not a powerful prophet utter a single word of death? If not to a meager donkey, then how to a mighty nation? Balaam's eyes were then uncovered, further proof he was a false prophet since he could not plainly see a spiritual being. Balaam's persistence to travel is only fuel to the fire for the blessing he would have no choice but to give. So far, Balaam appears quite the fool, but not evil. Why then is he evil? As we have yet to see, since the story is not yet complete, there is more than meets the eye. Even here we learn a Jewish tradition of understanding that doesn't translate into the Christian Bible. We continually see it is a she-

donkey that has an interactive relationship with Balaam. Midrash tells us that this donkey was of special significance to the sorcerer as his carnal mate.

Moving forward, Balaam makes it to Balak. They exchange formalities and Balaam says he can only say what HaShem gives him to say. Here is where Balaam continues his evil ways – he tries to trick HaShem several times. Each idolatrous offering Balaam makes is located at one of the places where HaShem was angry against the Jewish people. Each time Balaam tried to incite G-d's anger against the Jewish people where they fell short, G-d used the moment to redeem and forgive the Jewish people of their fallen stature and turn the curse into a blessing. Three times Balaam tried to curse and instead blessed, a metaphor to the Patriarchs once again, that it is because of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob that the Jewish people have a covenant. Balaam then prophesied, truly for once, the future greatness of Israel. Even in the face of HaShem's overpowering strength, Balaam still persisted for his evil means.

In the midst of the silent true prophet, his oppositional force that is ever prevalent in the story but never needing to take the role himself (Moses), Balaam took the stage and arranged with Balak to lead the Jewish people to sin. Despite everything HaShem did to give Balaam and infinite level of grace, he threw it away and told Balak to have his people, the Moabites, do as they do best: engage in sexual sin to lead the Jewish people astray. It is with this final coup d'eta that Balaam was victorious, yet only for a brief moment. For at that time, there is always a deliverer for the Jewish people, from Genesis to the end of the world, every generation has a potential messiah, and in this moment Phinehas stepped forward and thrust the spear that halted the plague that took 24,000 Jewish souls.

Even in the darkest of moments, where it seems defeat is nigh, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. HaShem ended the plague with the declaration against sin. It would seem

that this is where the tale ends, but such is not truly the case. This story began before Balak and Balaam and ends long after they returned to dust. The Moabite nation dates back to Avraham, when Lot and his daughters lay carnally to continue their people. What the elder daughter did, according to Jewish tradition, was a sin with the best of intentions, and she did so honorably. The younger sister not so, naming her son the “son of my father.” The impropriety of the younger daughter cursed the Moabite people to be a generational curse of sexual sin. A Torah regulation came out of it to forbid the Jewish people from ever marrying a Moabite. Fast-forward to the Book of Ruth, which is read during Shavuos since it tells of David’s origin (and both his birthday and *yahrzeit*⁴ were on Shavuos, thus continuing the narraphor) and we see Ruth, a Moabite, marry Boaz and become part of the Jewish people, a convert. This was accomplished by a ruling made at that time that perhaps the Moabite curse could be redeemed by the honor of the older sister, thus giving Ruth as a redemption for the Moabite people to be part of the Davidic dynasty. As the Jewish people await the next king that continues in the line of David, this narraphor continues until the end of time itself. In another Jewish tradition, Micah 8 is matched to this Parashat as a word of prophecy tied to the tale of Balaam, where HaShem once again confirms His grace and mercy on the Jewish nation. In this final connected story to the greater narraphor, wrapping every metaphor together into the tale that we still weave together this very day.

Christians continue the metaphors of love, grace, mercy, and deliverance into the foundations of their faith system in their hope for their own form of a future messiah, weaved throughout every book and tale in their religious texts.

⁴ Date of passing.