

A Brief Note on an Interlude

Parsha Balak is mainly devoted to the telling of a very odd story – the travails of Balaam and his talking donkey. It is a curious story – reminiscent of the story-telling narratives of *Sefer Bereshit*, with their emphasis on people over events. However, its most distinctive feature is not what is written but what is described; the story about Balaam takes place apart from the camp of the Israelites and neither they nor Moses are directly involved in it, or even made aware of Balaam's attempts to harm them. An orthodox approach means that this was a story told by God to Moses, after the fact, and was meant to be read by future generations.

The Israelites had begun their campaign to conquer the Promised Land and had quickly overrun the lands of the Amorites. The Moabites believed they would be the next to succumb to this army of liberated slaves, whose numbers far outnumbered them. Balak was the king of the Moabites. In order to gain the advantage, Balak intended to hire a mercenary – not a trained warrior, but rather a man with strange powers. That man was Balaam the son of Beor.

Balaam hailed from the land of Aram in the Euphrates valley. Aram is the place from where Abraham's kin lived and is the place where Isaac and Jacob found acceptable spouses that were not Canaanite. Early commentators noted that he was the grandson of one of the Torah's notorious scoundrels, Laban. Laban was not only Abraham's nephew but he had the distinction of becoming Jacob's father-in-law, twice over.

Balaam was not only possessed of a proud pedigree, he had a very useful talent - whoever he blessed indeed then appeared to be blessed and whoever he cursed was then accursed. The Torah acknowledges Balaam as an authentic prophet who had communicated with the one God, the God of Israel. Interestingly, this is the first attestation that God's presence existed apart from the Children of Israel, though His reputation was widely known.

At first Balaam was very reluctant to accept Balak's retainer and immediately sought God's counsel. The Torah records God's response: "*You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people; for they are blessed*". However, Balak was persistent and Balaam could not decide and beseeched God for direction. Eventually God relented: "*If the men come to summon you, arise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you - that shall thou do*". In the morning Balaam saddled his she-donkey and went with Balak's men.

Then, and quite inexplicably, God's wrath flared against Balaam for going to Balak. An angel was sent to stop Balaam. This confrontation is the oddest of the biblical stories and features a talking donkey. Talking animals and men with the ability to talk to animals are quite common throughout folklore. In the Torah however, the only other instance is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Needless to say, the donkey was more perceptive than his master, and Balaam is again warned to speak only as God will instruct him.

Balaam informs Balak that he will only speak that which God will tell him – there could not be any guarantee that he will curse the Israelites. Balak seems unperturbed and confidently escorted Balaam to a plateau overlooking the Israelite encampment. There he

followed Balaam's instructions and has seven altars built, on which he then sacrificed seven bulls and rams.

That done, and after consulting with God, Balaam blessed the Children of Israel. This sequence repeated itself again, and then again – three times in all - and still Balaam continued to bless the Israelites – because, as he patiently explained to Balak – he could only declaim that which God had uttered. [1]

The story is laden with ambiguity, but it is foremost a light and humorous tale of an enemy of Israel getting their just comeuppance. God, with Balaam as his right hand, schemed to rob the Moabites of a fortune, and further publicize that God had chosen Israel to be His nation. Moreover, the narrative provides a restful interlude from an otherwise depressingly harsh story of Israel's struggle to understand and appreciate God's expectations of them. Later generations would know that while God appeared overly harsh in His treatment of the Israelites, they were always His beloved amongst the nations.

Parsha Balak, Shabbath July 8, 2006

1. In the last of the three blessings Balaam declaims the most famous of his words: "*How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel!*" Till this day, Jewish liturgy begins with that exultant phrase uttered by this mysterious seer, "*Ma Tovu Ohalaicha Yaacov*".