



THIS WEEK’S TORAH PORTION

NUMBERS 22:2-25:9

Parashat Balak / פרשת בלק

In this week’s guide...

The **COMMENTARY** breaks down the connections between worship, morality, family life, and national survival in the context of “cultural assimilation.” The claim that “private” morality is entirely separate from “public” life might seem harmless, but this week’s Torah portion suggests otherwise. American secularists tout the notion of “religious beliefs” being entirely relegated to private life, as if that’s possible—this *parsha* suggests otherwise. At the heart of it all is **worship**. The first commandment is first for a reason, after all..... 1

Our **NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN** takes a deeper dive into the nature of worship. No, we’re not talking about worship *music* (a concept that the ancients would have struggled to comprehend)—we’re examining the affects of worshipping God (versus idols). Our “natural” relationships serve as potent metaphors for our spiritual and existential connection to the object of our worship. God’s desire for His “image bearers” has always been the same, but because of *Yeshua* we all have an unprecedented invitation to intimacy with our Creator!..... 2

The **HEBREW WORD STUDY** explores a word that establishes a striking contrast between this week’s antagonist (Balaam) and Israel’s great prophet (Moses). The rabbis have asserted that there’s significance in the meaning of the name “Balaam.” The contrast is established by God’s description of Moses as “faithful” in Numbers 12. And, of course, there’s a mind-blowing, direct “language link” to the New Testament’s description of *Yeshua*..... 3

OVERVIEW

There are a few stories from the Hebrew Bible that enjoy an especially famous standing in the hearts and minds of Sunday School students everywhere, and this week’s portion features one of them: the donkey that spoke. *Balak* provides an account of the Gentile seer named *Balaam*, hired by the Moabite king (for whom this portion is named) to curse the Children of Israel. The bulk of the reading involves *Balaam*’s three “oracles,” but concludes with an awful scene of idolatry and death.

FUSION GLOBAL WITH RABBI JASON
Weekly Torah Portion – *Parashat Balak* / פְּרַשְׁתַּת בְּלָק
Numbers 22:2-25:9

COMMENTARY

by Staff Contributor

The easiest way to defeat a people group is by giving them the necessary tools to destroy themselves. Dozens of once mighty and unconquerable civilizations have imploded due to assimilation and moral corruption resulting in complete societal breakdowns. One way this rears its ugly head is through the collapse of the family unit. Most men and women who are products of broken homes inevitably end up with broken and disastrous lives. Unfortunately, perpetuating abuse, abandonment of offspring, and demoralizing addictions often lead to crime and disease filling their lives. This bleak picture can erode a society's moral values, leading to the degradation of successive generations, and ending in societal collapse.



This week's *parashah* finds us in the aftermath of Israel's miraculous salvation from an Egyptian superpower and the surprising defeat against the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. Fearing they were next, the Moabite and Midianite political leaders devised a plan of pre-emptive attack.ⁱ Realizing the folly of a full-frontal attack, Balak, the Moabite king, conspired to target the spiritual fabric that served as Israel's strength. He hired Balaam, a renowned necromancer and idolatrous prophet, to curse Israel. Balaam sought to find a sinful chink in Israel's spiritual armor. But instead of seizing upon a moral failing of the newborn Israelite nation, he was only able to utter its praises.

After a few of Balaam's failed attempts, the *Torah* describes a curious incident: “Balaam...did not resort to sorceries as at the other times but turned his face toward the wilderness. Lifting up his eyes, Balaam saw Israel dwelling by tribes...[and] he uttered his oracle and said: ‘How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwellings, O Israel!’” (Numbers 24:1-2, 5). What was so “lovely” about Israel's dwelling? The sages conjectured that Balaam saw that the entrances of Israel's tents were staggered rather than aligned.ⁱⁱ This setup highlighted Israel's modesty by allowing each family to enjoy a measure of privacy. We might support this observation with the tactic Balaam eventually employs to drag a segment of Israel's population into idolatry.



The Women of Midian by James Tissot

Once Israel settled in the Moabite plain of *Shittim*, it began assimilating into Moabite culture and adopting its values and beliefs. We read that “the people began to have immoral sexual relations with women from Moab. Then they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, so the people were eating, and bowing down before their gods” (Numbers 25:1-2). Not only did Israel not heed the Almighty's stark warning against assimilating into the surrounding nations, but its political leaders began to normalize it publicly.ⁱⁱⁱ This development ultimately led to the outbreak of a plague that took the lives of almost four percent of the Israelite population^{iv} until drastic (lethal) measures were put in place to stop the spread.^v

We should let this episode serve as a cautionary tale. May our lives epitomize *Yeshua's* “high priestly” prayer that His people would *be* in the world but not *of* it: “I am not asking that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Make them holy in the truth” (John 17:15-17).

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN

by Staff Contributor

This week's *parsha* concludes with a tragic account of the consequences of Israel's decision to "have immoral sexual relations with women from Moab" (Numbers 25:1). The flow of the text suggests that this sexual immorality was directly linked to idolatry, as the next verse states that the Moabites "invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, so the people were eating, and bowing down before their gods" (v. 2). To further cement this link, we should note that Baal was a fertility god.^{vi} There is a fundamental truth here: our sins and moral failures are merely expressions of a failure of worship—more specifically, a failure to worship the true God *alone*.

Verse three leads us to a fascinating "New Testament Tie-in." We read that this combination of immorality and idolatry resulted in the Israelites being "bound to Baal of Peor." Many English versions translate this phrase, "Israel *joined* himself to Baal." Some versions use words like "attached" or "aligned." More on this in a moment, but for now, let's focus on the fact that the Torah describes Israel in a singular tense. This detail makes sense in light of God's description of the nation in Exodus 4:22, "Israel is My son, My firstborn." The Moabite women seduced the men of Israel—God's son—resulting in a coupling, which brings us back to translations. One translation reads, "Israel **yoked himself to Baal of Peor**" (Numbers 25:3 *ESV emphasis added*).

This expression makes an appearance in Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What harmony does Messiah have with Belial? Or what part does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement does God's Temple have with idols? For **we are the temple of the living God.** (2 Corinthians 6:14-16a *emphasis added*)



Bronze figurine of a Baal,
14th–12th century BC

At the time of the events in Numbers 25, Israel's center of worship was the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. You will recall that God called for its creation "so that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). The Ancient of Days, the Creator who was from the beginning and is outside of time and space, "condescended" to dwell in a badger-skin tent! Just before commissioning the Tabernacle, God sealed a covenant with Israel with language that is striking in its resemblance to a marriage covenant: "So Moses came and told the people all the words of *ADONAI* as well as all the ordinances. All the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words which *ADONAI* as spoken, **we will do**'" (Exodus 24:3 *emphasis added*).

The combination of the realities of the Torah and the words of the Apostle paints a sobering yet encouraging picture. The Tabernacle of Moses is long gone, as are Israel's magnificent Temples. We don't despair though because they were types and shadows pointing to *Yeshua*, whose body was^{vii} (and is!) God's dwelling place.^{viii} Not only "were [we] immersed into *Messiah Yeshua*" (Romans 6:3), making us a part of His Body, we are betrothed to Him as His bride. As the story of God's faithfulness to His people—from the patriarchs to today—continues to unfold, things keep getting better! The God of Abraham now dwells *in us* by faith, not a Tabernacle of Temple. We still face temptation but do so with a "new covenant," one in which God promised He would "put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33 NASB). We are now yoked to Him—from the inside, out.



HEBREW WORD STUDY: *emunah* אֱמוּנָה /)”lufhtiaf“(

by Staff Contributor

The main character in this week’s parsha is Balaam, Beor’s son who was “a prophet or soothsayer from northern Mesopotamia.”^x Balak, a Moabite king with very clear (and nefarious) intentions hired Balaam: “Come now, curse this people for me, because they are too strong for me! Perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them away from the country” (Numbers 22:6). After a bit of a slow start, this Torah account initially presents Balaam in a relatively positive light. He insisted on declaring “only the message which God puts into my mouth” (Numbers 22:38b). Apparently, Balaam was a prophet of renown in the Gentile world. As the sages note, “In *Israel* there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Balaam.”^x



Balaam and the Angel, Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)

This comparison between Moses and Balaam is worth considering. The name Balaam means “not of the people.”^{xi} Ultimately, he lived up (down?) to that name in that he exhibited no loyalty other than to himself. Balaam was clearly a gifted seer, but he lacked the character required to be committed (even to one’s hurt). When you have “a people,” you are vulnerable and will be challenged to deny yourself for the good of others. Moses’ life stands in stark contrast to Balaam’s. Consider the description of Moses in Hebrews 11:24-25,

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. Instead he **chose to suffer mistreatment along with the people of God**, rather than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (*emphasis added*).

What character quality did Moses possess that set him apart? *Emunah* (אֱמוּנָה). We read in Numbers 12:7, “Not so with My servant Moses. In all My house, he is **faithful**” (*emphasis added*). *Emunah* conveys firmness, faithfulness, fidelity.^{xii} One of the more well-known verses featuring this word is Habakkuk 2:4, “the just shall live by his **faith**” (KJV *emphasis added*). Despite this common translation, Sacks notes that “in biblical Hebrew [*emunah*] is better translated as ‘faithfulness,’ ‘reliability,’ ‘loyalty.’ It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.”^{xiii}

As we consider that explanation, Moses’ embodiment of *emunah* clearly points us to *Yeshua*-Jesus. The root from which *emunah* is derived is:

- א / aleph (1)
- מ / mem (40)
- נ / nun (50)



TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Balak

This root word has several derivatives, but one is especially significant (and familiar!) in the context of *Yeshua* being the “[greater than Moses.](#)” Through Moses—the “faithful” (*emunah*) servant—God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. As God-in-flesh, *Yeshua*—the “Suffering Servant”—rescued us from slavery to sin. This is why the Apostle Paul declared that “[all the promises of God in \[Yeshua\] are Yes, and in Him Amen \[אָמֵן\]](#)” (2 Corinthians 1:20 NKJV *emphasis added*).

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the Tree of Life Version.

Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

אֱמוּנָה

אֱמוּנָה / *emunah*: n. fem. firmness, fidelity, steadiness, truthfulness, faithfulness.

This noun is commonly used to describe aspects of God’s character (Deut 32:4; Psa 36:5; Isa 11:5) that elicit trust from those who know him. People may also be characterized by *emunah*, which either indicates their general integrity and trustworthiness (Prov 28:20) or describes the character of someone living rightly before God (1 Sam 26:23; Prov 12:22).

taken from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

fusionglobal.org

THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- The temptation to assimilate to the surrounding, Godless culture was a pitfall for the Children of Israel and has been a continual issue for God's people through the centuries. Do you experience this temptation? How were you able to face it successfully (or not)?
- Life is easier when we are free from commitments that might introduce inconvenience or hardship. We see this in the prophet-for-hire, Balaam. We see this inverse in the life of Moses who, "chose to suffer mistreatment" with the Israelites. Our relationships are opportunities to grow in and reveal godly character. Take time this week to reflect on the ways your most demanding relationships have shaped you for the better, despite the challenges they may have placed on your life.

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Pinchas* / פְּרִשֵׁת פִּינְחָס

TORAH

Sunday / Numbers 25:10-26:4

Monday / Numbers 26:5-51

Tuesday / Numbers 26:52-27:5

Wednesday / Numbers 27:6-23

Thursday / Numbers 28:1-15

Friday / Numbers 28:16-29:11

Saturday / Numbers 29:12-40

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*): Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

New Covenant Reading: John 2:13-22

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Balak

¹ Numbers 22:2-7

² See b.*Bava Batra* 60a

³ Numbers 25:4-6, 14

⁴ See Numbers 25:3, 7-9. To put this number in perspective, we can compare it to the current outbreak of COVID 19, which to date has killed 0.3% of those in the United States.

⁵ See Numbers 25:4-9

⁶ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*](#), electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Nu 25:3.

⁷ See John 1:14; 2:19-22

⁸ See Ephesians 2:22

⁹ Elmer B. Smick, "[Balaam.](#)" *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 252.

¹⁰ *Sifrei*, Deuteronomy, *VeZot HaBerakha*, 357.

¹¹ "H1109 - Bil'ām - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1109/kjv/wlc/0-1/>.

¹² Jack B. Scott, "[116 בלעם.](#)" ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 52.

¹³ Jonathan Sacks and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Lessons in Leadership: a Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2015), 219.