

BALAK

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Balak



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

NUMBERS 22:2-25:9

Parashat Balak / פרשת בלק

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

We're well into the drama of Israel's journey through the wilderness and, frankly, it's not looking good. Are they "cursed"? Perhaps. It may have felt like that if you had heard that you were going to die in the wilderness. But did God's original promises to Abram remain intact despite Israel's "misadventures" in the wilderness?

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

Let's consider 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 what happens when we decide to live for God (or idols). WHAT IF our "natural" relationships are metaphors for our spiritual and existential connection to the object of our worship?

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

This word 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*.



OVER VIEW

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. *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

Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Balak* / פרשת בלק | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

What God has blessed, let no man curse. God began the nation of Israel with a specific promise to Abram: “My desire is to bless those who bless you, but whoever curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). This promise is predicated on God’s faithfulness, not by any action of Israel. Though the Lord would certainly reward His people’s righteous living (and chastise their wickedness), the nation is blessed.

This sovereign blessing serves as a witness to God and His goodness. As we read, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). Let’s put it plainly: Israel doesn’t have a stellar track record. Nevertheless, God has always remained faithful to her, fulfilling His promise, and preserving a righteous remnant. Even in today’s iteration of nationhood, the modern State of Israel echoes its ancient past.

For example, this week’s *parsha* describes a neighboring king—Balak, the king of Moab (modern-day Jordan)—who sought to destroy Israel. He attempted to achieve this nefarious purpose via a proxy: Balaam the prophet (from modern-day Syria). Balaam had a reputation for possessing supernatural power in his words (*cf.* Numbers 22:6b). Balak was convinced this “seer” could stop a whole nation in its tracks. Although Israel was able to escape from Egypt, the mightiest kingdom at that time, Balak thought Balaam was potent enough to curse this same people, thus bringing them to their knees.

Balaam told the king that he would consult God and see what He would have him say. God made an emphatic statement, “Do not go with them! Do not curse them, for they are blessed!” (Numbers 22:12). One might not think too much of these words, given what we know already from Genesis 12. However, when viewed from a chronological perspective, God’s command to Balaam shines an especially bright light on His faithfulness.

You may have never considered this before, but the nation of Israel already was, on a fundamental level, *cursed*. In Numbers 13, we read about the report of the ten spies, which resulted in divine judgment upon the entire Israelite people. Those whom the Almighty liberated from slavery in Egypt, as Balak heard, He now sentenced to die in the desert. This development led to a mutiny within the leadership initiated by Korah (*cf.* Numbers 16). By the time we reach the Balaam story, Moses, whom the Lord sent to confront Pharaoh, was “cursed” with being denied entrance to the land of Canaan because he acted in anger rather than speak to the rock (*cf.* Numbers 20). Furthermore, the Children of Israel behaved so egregiously that God sent poisonous snakes to teach them a lesson (*cf.* Numbers 21). Frankly, I’d argue that “blessed” is not the right term to describe Israel at this juncture in their story.

Yet the people *were* blessed. How was this possible? Simply put, God had blessed them. God created them for His purpose, affording a distinct status independent of their behavior. Even today, although the modern State of Israel is not necessarily walking on the path of righteousness, it remains blessed. Though it makes mistakes, the nation is blessed. Although most people in Israel do not yet know Messiah *Yeshua*, the country is blessed. The people of Israel are blessed because God has blessed them. Let us pray that more will bless that which God has blessed.

New Testament Tie-In

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.¹ There is a fundamental truth here: our sins and moral failures are fundamentally expressions of a failure to worship the true God *alone*.

Numbers 25:3 leads us to a fascinating "New Testament Tie-in." We read that this combination of immorality and idolatry resulted in Israel 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*)

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*).

This intersection between Torah and the apostolic writings is sobering yet surprisingly encouraging. 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 was² (and is!) God's dwelling place.³ 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 (*cf.* 2 Corinthians 11:2). 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 *with* us in a Tabernacle or Temple. We face temptation like Israel did, 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 [אמונה] / “firmness, fidelity, faithfulness”

The main character in this week’s parsha is Balaam, Beor’s son, who was “a prophet or soothsayer from northern Mesopotamia.”⁴ A Moabite king with very clear (and nefarious) intentions hired Balak: “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.”⁵

This comparison between Moses and Balaam is worth considering. The name Balaam means “not of the people.”⁶ 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* (אמונה). We read in Numbers 12:7, “Not so with My servant Moses. In all My house, he is **faithful [ne’eman]**” (*emphasis added*). *Emunah* conveys firmness, faithfulness, fidelity.⁷ One of the more well-known verses featuring this word is Habakkuk 2:4, “the just shall live by his **faith [be’emunato]**” (קַיִן *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.”⁸

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

- Aleph / א (1)
- Mem / מ (40)
- Nun / נ (50)

This root word has several derivatives, but one is especially significant (and familiar!) in the context of *Yeshua* being the “greater than Moses” (*cf.* Deuteronomy 18:18). 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** [אמן]” (2 Corinthians 1:20 NKJV *emphasis added*).

FUSION

Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

אמונה

אמונה / *emunah*: N. FEM. **firmness, fidelity, steadiness, truthfulness, faithfulness.** *Refers literally to steadiness or firmness and abstractly to the quality of reliability, especially as possessed by God or to those who are in right relationship with God.*

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; 2 Chr 31:18) or describes the character of someone living rightly before God (1 Sam 26:23; Prov 12:22). The most significant theological use of *emunah* is Hab 2:4, often translated "the righteous will live by his faith." In this verse, *emunah* likely refers to the integrity that characterizes a righteous person's way of life. The word may also indicate the constancy of something, as when Moses' hands were *emunah* ("steady") until the sun set (Exod 17:12).

taken from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

fusionglobal.org

THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

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

- From Little League baseball to our careers, life is often a "meritocracy." This mentality is so pervasive that it can shape our understanding of God and His Word. How do you feel about Israel ultimately being blessed because of God's faithfulness rather than her goodness?
- 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 demands they may have placed on your life.

GLOBAL

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Pinchas* / פרשת פינחס

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

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

¹ 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.

² See John 1:14; 2:19-22

³ See Ephesians 2:22

⁴ Elmer B. Smick, "Balaam," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 252.

⁵ *Sifrei*, Deuteronomy, *VeZot HaBerakha*, 357.

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

⁷ Jack B. Scott, "116 מנח," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 52.

⁸ Jonathan Sacks and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2015), 219.