

The Prophecies Of Balaam (Part Two)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," March-April 2003

The inclusion of four prophecies or oracles attributed to the Mesopotamian soothsayer Balaam has troubled some Bible students through the years. Not only was Balaam a polytheist, he led Israel into sin by suggesting that Moab's women seduce the Israelites into sexual immorality and idolatry, bringing about 24,000 Israelite deaths (Numbers 25:1-9; 31:16). Why would God leave the sayings of such a vile man in His Book?

Part of the reason stems from what Paul writes in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." With the exception of Jesus Christ, all of those through whom God has spoken have been sinful. For the most part, God has chosen to work through "vessel[s of] honor", that is, men and women who have submitted to Him and lived righteously (Romans 9:21; II Timothy 2:20-21), but on occasion, God has spoken the truth through dishonorable vessels to display His power and bring Him glory (see John 11:49-52).

Another reason is that the incident involving Balaam is more important than most people think. It was the final test of Israel before entering the Promised Land, and they—typically—failed it. Nevertheless, throughout Balaam's oracles, God stresses that He will fulfill His promises to Abraham. Despite the rebellions of Israel, God will not only make Israel great and prosperous, but He will also complete His plan—even to the coming of the Messiah as King of kings (Revelation 19:11-16). Through this incident, we see in Balaam that even His enemies must yield to God and the outworking of His plan.

Third Prophecy

As we saw in the previous article, Balaam's first two prophecies focus on the soothsayer's inability to curse what God has blessed. Israel is a special people to God, destined for greatness, and God is its King, working out Israel's redemption from Egypt and its subjugation of the peoples in and around the Promised Land. He concludes by saying Israel is like a hungry lion that will not rest until the hunt is over.

Angry that Balaam is blessing rather than cursing Israel, his employer, Balak, takes the diviner to the top of Peor, a high place, and they again offer a bull and a ram on seven altars (Numbers 23:25-30). This time, however, Balaam figures out that God will not communicate with him through any kind of augury, divination, or sorcery, so he merely waits for God to speak, "and the Spirit of God came upon him" (Numbers 24:2-3). After a long preamble, Balaam says:

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens by the riverside, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters. He shall pour water from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters. His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.

God brings him out of Egypt; he has strength like a wild ox; he shall consume the nations, his enemies; he shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who will rouse him?

Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you. (Numbers 24:5-9)

As in the previous oracles, the third begins with the certainty of Israel's future prosperity and power. "Cedars beside the waters" is a strange illustration because normally, cedar trees do not grow beside rivers. However, it makes the point that God will override even the natural order of things, if need be, to bless Israel. Conversely, aloes grow best in arid places, suggesting that Israel will have the best of both worlds. Geographers have long noted that, for its size, the land of Israel is one of the most geographically and climatically diverse areas on earth.

In verses 6-7, there are four references to water. Water, of course, is a prime necessity for life, and an abundance of water set the stage for prosperity. A well-watered land ensures abundant crops with enough left over for water's myriad other uses. These verses intensify the assertion of Israel's future abundance—in stark contrast to the semi-arid high plateau upon which Balak and his people lived.

The water imagery shifts in the second clause of verse 7 from the land's abundance to the people's fertility. The thought is that Israel's population would grow so great that its people would expand into other areas, whether by migration, colonization, or conquest. Balak's dream of defeating a weakened Israel, God says through Balaam, is pure fantasy.

Besides that, Israel's king—whether he is God Himself (as in Numbers 23:21) or a human monarch—will be far more powerful than Agag. Some have thought that this is a prophecy of the Amalekite king Saul defeated and Samuel slew (I Samuel 15). However, others believe "Agag" to be a royal name or title among the Amalekites, much like "Pharaoh," "Hadad," and "Abimelech" were to the Egyptians, Syrians, and early Philistines. In effect, Balaam is saying that, by comparison, Israel's kings will come to dominate the rulers of even the strongest nations of the time.

Verses 8-9 reiterate Israel's future military power, but the emphasis is that its power flows from God Himself. God began matters by bringing Israel up from Egypt, and He will continue to provide Israel's strength. Thus, the rhetorical question arises, "Who will rouse him?" If God is backing Israel to the hilt, who can challenge them?

Finally, the oracle ends with a paraphrase of Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you." This is a reminder that God made promises to Abraham, and He will fulfill them. As God says in Isaiah 55:11, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Fourth Prophecy

Balak, of course, is furious with Balaam for thrice predicting such a rosy future for Israel. The soothsayer reminds him that he warned him from the start that he "could not go beyond the word of the Lord, to do either good or bad of [his] own will; but what the Lord says, that [he] must speak" (Numbers 24:13). It is difficult to decide which of these two characters is more ludicrous: Balaam, for thinking that God would give in and let him curse Israel—or at least put in a good word for Moab; or Balak, for listening to and putting up with Balaam!

As if trying to mollify his employer, Balaam adds, "Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people *in the latter days*" (verse 14), but his words are hardly comforting to the Moabite king:

I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly. Out of Jacob one shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city. (Numbers 24:17-19)

In this oracle, the time setting jumps forward to the end time and the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings. His words certainly touch on His first coming, but the thrust of the passage is on His royal power to defeat and rule the enemies of Israel. It shows Edom and Moab (and later, Amalek; verse 20) taking the brunt His wrath at His return (Isaiah 15-16; 34:5-7; Jeremiah 48:1-47; 49:7-22; Lamentations 4:21-22; Ezekiel 25:8-14; 35:1-15; Obadiah 15-21; etc.). These peoples are singled out because of their open hostility toward Israel and represent all nations who oppose God.

The opening words of Numbers 24:17 emphasize the long-range nature of this final prophecy. The coming of the Messiah is "not now" and "not near"; indeed, it would be 1,400 years until His coming as the Son of Man and another 2,000 years or more until His return as King. The symbols of "a Star" and "a Scepter" are both ancient and widespread figures for monarchs, and some scholars feel that at least the star symbol may represent Deity (many ancient monarchs were considered gods or the gods' offspring). In Jesus Christ's case, this would be true.

"While Israel does valiantly" (verse 18) may have a physical-spiritual fulfillment much like Daniel 11:32: "The people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." It can also be linked to Zechariah 12:8: "In that day the Lord will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; the one who is feeble among them in that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the Angel of the Lord before them" (see also 9:13; 10:5). Certainly, in the context of judgment on Edom, Obadiah 18 is relevant: "The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame; but the house of Esau shall be stubble; they shall kindle them and devour them, and no survivor shall remain of the house of Esau" (see also Amos 9:11-12).

The first part of Numbers 24:19 is a clear reference to Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49:10: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, . . . until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." The second half of the verse is better in the New International Version: "[He will] destroy the survivors of the city." To which city this verse refers is not known. Some postulate Petra as the chief city of the Edomites, while others take it generally as any city of Edom. The latter view is preferable, as the thrust of the passage is that this great Ruler will possess and rule over everyone—no one will escape His judgment.

Balaam then gives three short prophecies concerning a few nearby peoples:

Then he looked on Amalek, and he took up his oracle and said:

"Amalek was first among the nations, but shall be last until he perishes."

Then he looked on the Kenites, and he took up his oracle and said:

"Firm is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock; nevertheless Kain shall be burned. How long until Asshur carries you away captive?"

Then he took up his oracle and said:

"Alas! Who shall live when God does this? But ships shall come from the coasts of Cyprus, and they shall afflict Asshur and afflict Eber, and so shall Amalek, until he perishes."

So Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place; Balak also went his way.
(Numbers 24:20-25)

How was Amalek "first among the nations"? There is some contention whether it means the most powerful among the surrounding nations or the first of the nations to oppose Israel once they left Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16). Whatever the case, their primacy would be stripped from them, and before long, they would cease forever as a nation.

Another question is the identity of the Kenites. Again, they could be one of two peoples: a Canaanite tribe, representing all those whom Israel would displace (Genesis 15:19), or the family of Moses' father-in-law Jethro, a Kenite who was priest of Midian (see Exodus 3:1; Judges 1:16; 4:11). The latter seems to be the better choice, as Balaam's prediction is actually more positive than it first appears. Verse 22 is better read, "Kain shall not be given up to destruction until Asshur carries it away captive." Through this oracle, God is blessing the Kenites for their loyalty to Israel, a trait that persisted in at least one of their branches, the Rechabites (I Chronicles 2:55; Jeremiah 35). Part of the Kenite people may have been taken captive in the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 721-718 BC, and the rest of them certainly went into captivity to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar (he inherited the title "King of Asshur" from his father Nabopolassar, who had conquered Assyria in 609 BC).

Last of all, Balaam gives a general oracle that may have Balaam's own people, Eber, as one of its targets! He says in verse 24, "But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, and they shall afflict Asshur and shall afflict Eber; so they [literally, *he*] also shall come to destruction" (NAS). *Kittim* is the normal Hebrew word for what we call Cyprus, but it can also stand for other maritime peoples of the Mediterranean, notably the Greeks and later the Romans. Both of these empires marched through the eastern and western Semitic peoples Balaam groups together under the names Asshur and Eber.

This prophecy succinctly shows the succession of empires to come to power and fall like waves of the ocean. Just as Israel, Judah, and the Kenites fell to Assyria and its successor, Babylon, so would these empires fall. Greece and Rome too would also perish after their periods of hegemony, and so it would be until the "Star . . . out of Jacob" puts down all rule and sets up His Kingdom forever (Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14, 26-27).

Meaning to Us

Perhaps the most significant point to emerge from the sequence of Balaam's oracles is its synopsis of much of God's plan. It begins with the setting apart of Israel, with allusions to the promises made to Abraham, and God bringing them out of Egypt and bringing them into the Land of Promise. It then moves to God's blessing of Israel both physically and spiritually, highlighting the greatest blessing of all, Jesus Christ as Savior and King. Finally, it alludes to the destruction of all human opposition and the setting up of God's Kingdom. What a witness God made through this pagan Mesopotamian sorcerer!

Under inspiration of God's Spirit, Balaam introduces his last two oracles in an interesting way:

The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened; the utterance of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes opened wide. (Numbers 24:3-4; see 15-16)

In short, God reveals His plan to those whose minds He opens to His truth (see Daniel 12:9-10; Amos 3:7; I Corinthians 2:9-11; I Peter 1:20-21). Conversely, those whose eyes God has not opened wide are blind to what God is doing (Isaiah 6:9-10; 29:9-14; 42:18-20; Luke 4:18; John 9:39-41; Romans 11:7-10, 25; II Corinthians 3:14-16). We can be glad that God's Spirit has not just fallen upon us but is in us, guiding us into all truth and revealing God's mysteries as needed (John 14:17, 26; 16:13-15).

"With eyes opened wide," we can trust and heed "the prophetic word made more sure . . . as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts" (II Peter 1:19).