

Parashat Balaq בלק

Torah: Numbers 22:2–25:9

Haftarah: Micah 5:6–6:8

And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey — to teach him that the mouth and the tongue are in His power; that if he sought to curse — his mouth was in His power (Bamidbar Rabbah 20.12).

While Israel Played ...

General Overview

If the previous parasha was entitled “Mini-Mysteries,” then the one this week should be entitled “Mega Mystery.” For who could ever explain God speaking to and through a donkey? As tempting as it is to try to solve this enigma, we will, nevertheless, resist. Instead, for the sake of brevity, we will attempt to give a general overview of the whole parasha.

Perhaps a better title for this week’s commentary could be something like, “While Israel Played” Indeed, Numbers 25:1 tells us that while Israel was at Shittim, they played the harlot with Moabite women. The bulk of this parasha centers on what God was doing behind the scenes in order to make it possible for Israel to take possession of the Land.

Exposition

What the Holy One was doing will be the topic of this week’s commentary. Thus, while Israel played the harlot with the Moabite women on the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (25:1 ff.) ...

- I. God was spreading Israel’s reputation among the nations.
- II. God was stifling Israel’s enemies.
- III. God was sanctioning the supernatural.
- IV. God was surrounding Israel with His Grace.
- V. God was speaking.

In this excerpt from Parashat Balaq, we will focus on section III, God Was Sanctioning the Supernatural.

III. God Was Sanctioning The Supernatural

Israel was in Shittim on the Plains of Moab playing the harlot with both women and idols. However, the God of Israel was hard at work behind the scenes protecting Israel’s very existence. There were powers of darkness that wanted Israel to be destroyed. The medium of their evil was through the potential curses of their servant, the sorcerer Balaam. In addition, there were human foes who also sought their demise. While Israel was busy imbibing the ways of the world, the Lord was astounding the world with His supernatural power. There were three ways in which God demonstrated the supernatural.

A. Turning Curses into Blessings

The first demonstration of God's magnificent power was to turn potential curses into blessings. Given the description above of Balaam's abilities and character, this was no mean task. However, to understand the importance of it we need to look for a moment at the nature of a blessing and the nature of a curse.

There is a reasonable amount of material written about the subject of cursing and blessing, all expressing various viewpoints. There is a strong pull by some to suggest that the power of blessing/cursing comes in the very words themselves. It works itself out in that the words provide great impetus and encouragement for the Powers of Darkness (demons) or the Powers of Light (God's angels) to accomplish their assigned tasks. This has been popularly expressed in recent years in Frank Peretti's books.¹

Jewish commentator, Nechama Leibowitz, expresses another plausible outlook. She argues in favor of a slightly different approach. Citing various scholars to support her point, she suggests that, "it is not necessarily demons nor angels who were/are encouraged by the blessings/curses, but human powers." Given the extent of popular belief in the power of curses and blessings and what a sorcerer could accomplish in uttering them, Leibowitz cites Abravanel saying,

Had Balaam cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have picked up courage and gone to battle with Israel on the strength of the curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master ... and would lose all desire to fight His people.²

However, Leibowitz also expresses another equally fascinating viewpoint about the blessings and curses. She says that the Lord

was concerned to protect all His creatures from error. He does not want to be instrumental in bolstering superstition. Had Balaam cursed Israel, the Moabites would certainly have assumed that the reason why the Israelites refrained from attacking them was due to their effect, and not because the Almighty had forbade them.³

Despite how one views the matter of curses and blessings, at the very least, we can say that while Israel was playing in the plains of Moab, God was protecting them in ways beyond human comprehension. He was doing this by stifling the powers of the demons who wanted to consume Israel, and by stifling the idolatrous nations who wanted to devour them as well. It was a mighty, supernatural protection against attacks from the vicious and powerful forces of darkness whose sole intent was to destroy God's people, thereby foiling His plans.

B. The Angel

The second supernatural demonstration was the sending of the angel in 22:22. Balaam was making a journey to play into the hands of Balaq, the king who

¹ We do not mean to suggest that Peretti's books have no value. On the contrary, we think they provide a wonderful representation of the reality of spiritual warfare and we would highly recommend them to anyone.

² Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 305.

³ *Ibid.*

desired to curse Israel. God warned him not to go, but despite his assurance to the Lord that he would speak only that which God told him, verse 22 says, “But God was very angry when he went.” Balaam, his mind set on making the journey, was then confronted along the way by the appearance of an angel, sent by God “to oppose him” (22:22).

Anytime an angel appears in the realm of human existence, it is a supernatural event, but this one certainly stands out as one of the most memorable. For, while the angel was sent to deal with the human Balaam, nevertheless, it was not he who saw the angel, but his donkey! Moreover, it was not just a singular appearance; the angel manifested himself several times. On each occasion, the human was oblivious to him, but the animal wasn't!

The lesson here is profound. Here was a man bent on doing evil. He came into direct contact with the realm of the supernatural — and did not even notice it. Instead his donkey saw it! In like manner, how many of us do not see what God is doing or hear what He is saying because we are set on acting according to our flesh, ignoring what the Spirit wants to do?

C. The Donkey

Perhaps the most famous supernatural demonstration by the Holy One in this parasha is the talking donkey. There are, of course, the skeptics who insist that it is foolish to assert that an animal can have dialogue with a human. Some suggest that it was a prophetic vision. Others, such as Luzatto, assert that,

The ass did not actually utter any words, but made a plaintive sound which implied protest ... Balaam, in his anger, answered the ass much as any man might shout at his beast of burden.⁴

Despite all of the rationalizations, we must let this passage stand as it is. For one thing, although the text does not specify this, we must remember what an affect this would have had on a pagan sorcerer. His own awareness of his spiritual inability to see the angel would have been amplified by hearing the Most High speak through one of the lowliest of animals. Beyond that, however, any one skeptical about the reality of a talking animal needs simply to ask himself: Why not? If there is a Most High God Who made the heavens and the earth including all that is in them, surely it must be within His capability to miraculously cause a donkey to speak.

The lesson to Balaam, as well as to us, is that the Holy One is Sovereign of this universe. As such, only He has the power to determine what should be said and what should not be said. If He has decreed that only blessings should have come from the mouth of Balaam, or that a donkey may speak human words, it is His prerogative to do so, and no one may challenge Him or thwart His will. In short, it is as the Midrash says,

“And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey” — to teach him that the mouth and the tongue are in His power; that if he sought to curse — his mouth was in His power.⁵

⁴ Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 298.

⁵ Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12