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Balaam's First Oracle

22:41 to 23:12

Balaam's first oracle DIG: In this first oracle, what is Balak's desire? Balaam's desire? God's desire? How would each see the function of the seven altars and seven sacrifices? Why can't Balaam bring himself to curse Isra'el? What secures Isra'el's blessing forever? What truths about the people of Isra'el did God's message through Balaam reveal to Balak? In what ways are God's people separate from the world?

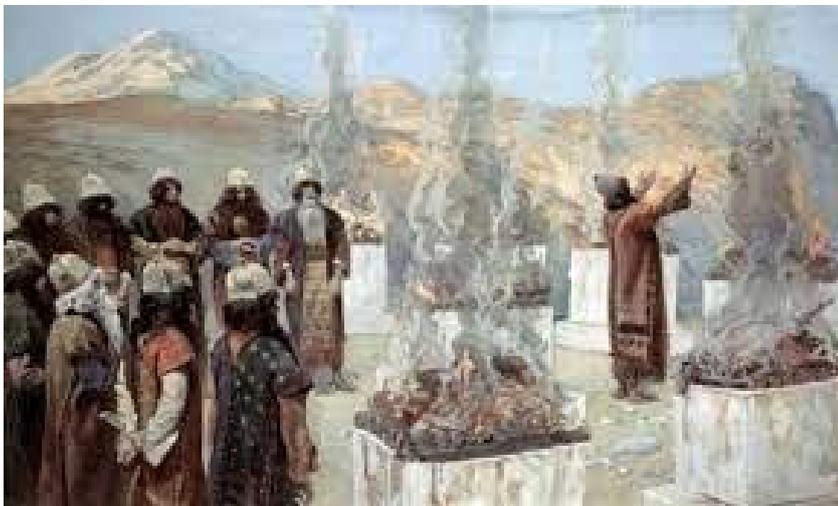
REFLECT: When you want to know God's will for your life, what do you do? When are your desires most likely to conflict with God's desires? Have you ever tried to convince God that your way is better? What was the result? What can you do to ensure that, unlike Balaam, you mold your desires to fit God's desires? How are you like the world? How are you separate from the world (First John 2:15-16)?

The first intervention on God's part corresponds to the first time the donkey turned aside; for just as God forced the donkey off the road, He forces Balaam to turn aside from cursing Isra'el (22:23).

The high places of Ba'al (22:41 to 23:6): The next morning after their meeting (to see link click [Dr - Balaam and the Donkey: Preparation for the first oracle](#)), Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Ba'al (22:41). The high places, very simply, were places of worship on elevated pieces of ground. High places were originally dedicated to idol worship (**Numbers 33:52; Leviticus 26:30**), especially among **the Moabites (Isaiah 16:12)**. These shrines often included an altar and a sacred object such as a stone pillar or wooden pole in various shapes identified with the object of worship (animals, constellations, goddesses, and fertility deities). It seems that, at times, high places were set up in a spot that had been artificially elevated, like the tower of Babel (see the commentary on [Genesis DI - The Tower of Babel](#)).

The Israelites, forever turning away from **God**, practiced **Molech** worship and built **high places for Ba'al (Jeremiah 32:35)**. Although **Solomon** built the Temple of **God** in Jerusalem, **he** later established idolatrous **high places** for **his** foreign wives outside of Jerusalem and worshiped with them, causing **him** the loss of the Kingdom (**First Kings 11:11**). **The people** were still sacrificing at the pagan **high places** before the Temple was built, and **Solomon** joined them. After **God** appeared to **him** in a dream at Gibeon, **the king** returned to **Jerusalem** and sacrificed offerings; however, **he** continued to waver between the two places of worship.⁴⁹⁰

In **Chapter 25**, we will see **the Midianites** and **Moabites** worshiping **Ba'al** (see [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)), a local **deity**, perhaps associated with the Canaanite **Ba'al** cult which will plague **Isra'el** in later years. **From there, the sorcerer could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp** (see [Am - The Camp of the Twelve Tribes of Isra'el](#)). But after **his** encounter with **ADONAI** on the road the previous day, **Balaam** understood the situation better than **Balak**. **Chemosh, Ba'al** and **the Ba'al of Peor** would be of no assistance.



Balaam said to Balak, "Build me seven altars here, and prepare me seven bulls and seven rams here." Balak did as Balaam said, then Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Through the means of **the sacrifices**, **Balaam** hoped to appease **the angry Deity** that had nearly decapitated **him** the day before. **The sorcerer** reasoned that **seven sacrifices** might change **God's** mind about the whole **cursing** thing. **Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand by your burnt offering while I go off. Perhaps ADONAI will come and meet me; and whatever He reveals to me I will tell you" (23:3). Then he went off**

to a bare hill. God met with him, and Balaam said to God, “I prepared the seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. But all of these were of pagan origin and were hardly impressive to YHVH. So the bribe failed. Then ADONAI put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said: Go on back to Balak, and speak as I tell you. So he went back to him and found him standing beside his offering, with all the Moabite rulers.⁴⁹¹ The scene is dramatic as Balaam returned to those who had sent for him. They were all standing by the seven altars and hoping for a word from heaven that would destroy their presumed foe. They received a word from heaven all right; but that word was far from what they expected.⁴⁹²

The first oracle (23:7-10): Hebrew poetry is not based on the concept of Western meter. The poetry of Isra’el was infused with rhythm, and the accentuation (with basically one “beat” per word) most likely signifies that pattern. The predominant feature of Hebrew poetic structure is the repetition of meaning in parallel expressions . . . or poetic parallelism. The biblical verse of poetry normally has two or more of these parallel units. The first line makes a statement, followed by the second line which elaborates on it in some manner. The words are not meant to rhyme, but are parallel in thought. **Thus, Balaam’s first oracle is written in seven tightly parallel couplets.** From atop the high places of Ba’al, Balaam looked out over a portion of the camp of Isra’el and spoke his oracle (Hebrew: *mashal*, usually translated as a proverb). At the beginning of the oracle, the speaker shifts from third to first person, with Balaam now speaking in his role as the oracle speaker.

(A) Balak brought me from Aram,

(A) the king of Mo’ab from the eastern mountains (23:7a). In the first couplet, Balak summons Balaam from his homeland, the country of Aram, which is northeast of Isra’el in northeast Syria and northwest Mesopotamia. This area is in agreement with the location of Pethor (22:5). Thus, the eastern mountains are the mountains that run through the eastern Syrian-Arabian desert up toward Pethor.

(B) Come, put a curse on Jacob for me;

(B) come and denounce Isra’el (23:7b). The second couplet gives the reason for which Balaam brought Balaam to Mo’ab: to curse and to denounce. The first of these verbs (Hebrew: *’arar*) commonly means to utter a curse and in the present context probably means something like to put under an evil spell. The second of these verbs (Hebrew: *za’am*) means to threaten or injure. When taken together the

two words indicate that **Balaam’s** job was to put **Isra’ael** under an evil spell that would threaten or injure **her**.⁴⁹³ These verbs work together to give the sense of anger and indignation. **Jacob** and **Isra’el** are regularly occurring pairs, and, of course, **they** are interchangeable words marking out **the people** of **God’s** covenant. In these words there is a call, deliberate or not, for **YHVH** to break **His** promise to the patriarchs.⁴⁹⁴

(C) How am I to curse those whom God has not cursed?

(C) How am I to curse those whom ADONAI has not denounced (23:8)? In the third couplet, we discover that **Balaam** couldn’t do what **he’d** been hired to do. **The blessing** of **Isra’el** was sacred and holy and **Balaam** had no power to attack **their blessing**. **God** forbade **him** to speak in **a curse** on **his people**, who were unlike **the nations** of the world.⁴⁹⁵ **Balaam** stayed true to **his** promise to **speak only what God allowed him to say**.

(D) From the top of the rocks I see them,

(D) from the hills I behold them (23:9a). In the fourth couplet, we are brought alongside **Balaam**, and with **him** look down at **the camp of Isra’el**. Along with **him** we affirm that these **people** are not like any other; **they** live apart to this very day, not a part of the families of **the nations**. **Their** distinction was in **their** relationship with **their God**. As **He** is holy, so **they** are holy.⁴⁹⁶ **Ha’Shem** has judged every ruler or nation that has caused **His people** to suffer, including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and, of course, Nazi Germany.

(E) I see a people who live apart,

(E) and do not consider themselves one of the nations (23:9b). In the fifth couplet, we are reminded that **Isra’el** is **a** separate **people**. This was true even when **Isra’el** dwelt among other **nations** and is a characteristic which defines them even to this day. **They** are fundamentally different. There should be no difficulty in distinguishing **them** from **the** other Gentile **nations**. The significance of this observation may refer back to the story of **Abraham** and **Lot**. When **Abraham** and **Lot** separated, the Torah tells us that **Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinners against ADONAI (Genesis 13:12-13). Lot failed to live apart** from the wicked culture around **him**. Unlike **Abraham** and **his** descendants, **Lot** found **himself** numbered among **the** Gentile **nations**.⁴⁹⁷

Isra’el’s great temptation was wanting to be like **the** other **nations**, and this is what led to **their** downfall and captivity. Instead of rejoicing in **their** uniqueness as

the people of the true and living God, they imitated their neighbors in their worship and conduct, and Ha’Shem had to discipline them. Instead of letting **God** rule as **their King, they asked for a king** like all **the other nations** (see the commentary on **the Life of King Sha’ul Bq – Give us a King**), and this brought **the nation** nothing but trouble and heartache.

Unfortunately, many people in the Church today have the mistaken belief that being like **the world** is the way to reach **the world**. They forget that the Church is **the people of God**, a very special **people**, saved by **His** grace. Instead of maintaining separation (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Bi – Do Not be Unequally Yoked with Unbelievers**), they promote imitation (**First John 2:15-16; Romans 12:2**), so that it’s becoming more and more difficult to distinguish **the people of God** from the people of the world. And yet, as Campbell Morgan famously reminded us, “The Church did the most for **the world** when the Church was the least like **the world**.”⁴⁹⁸

(F) Who can count the dust of Jacob,

(F) or numbered even a fourth part of Isra’el (23:10a)? The sixth couplet describes the outward sign of **Isra’el’s** election and **blessing of God**. The numerical strength of **Isra’el** (see **Ep – The Numbering of the Eleven Tribes**) was, of course, the reason why **the Moabites** were fearful and decided to call **Balaam** in the first place (**22:3-6**). **They** seemed as numerous as **the dust** on the ground. Here, **Balaam** sees that **their** strength was no mere accident, but was the sign of **Isra’el’s** separate status and **the blessing of YHVH**. **The Israelites** were divided into **four** great **camp**s, north, south, east, and west (**Numbers 2**). It seems that **Balaam** could only see **one** of those **camp**sites, or **a fourth part of Isra’el**, as it were, from **the high places of Ba’al (22:41)**.⁴⁹⁹

(G) May I die as the righteous die!

(G) May my end be like theirs (23:10b)! After describing **his** target, **Balaam** was expected to deliver a devastating **curse** upon **them**. It should have spelled out some nasty, horrid death for **the Israelites**. Something like a plague, starvation, or military defeat. Instead, the seventh couplet closes **the oracle** with a personal reflection by **Balaam**. Here, **Balaam’s** wistful desire was to share in **Isra’el’s** **blessing! He** who had come to **curse the people of God** wished **himself** to be **blessed** along with **them (Genesis 12:3)**.⁵⁰⁰ The irony was so thick **he** could eat it with a spoon! You don’t die **the death of the righteous** unless you live the life of **the righteous**, and that was something **Balaam** wasn’t prepared to do. **His** love of money so controlled **his** life that **he** would do *anything* to obtain great wealth.

Balaam died with the wicked when **Isra’el** defeated **the Midianites** (see [Fq - Report of the Battle](#)), and **he** joined Hitler and many others in eternal judgment.⁵⁰¹

Balak’s response to Balaam (23:11-12): **Balak’s** furious response came as expected, since, as **the king of Mo’ab**, **he** had spent so much time and money personally working toward the desired end of condemning **Isra’el** to destruction. **Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me?! I brought you to put a curse on my enemies; but, here, you have done nothing but bless them!”** He took **Balaam’s** actions and words as a personal and professional affront, yet **his** words expressed the reality of the situation. **God** would **curse** any who would try to destroy **His people**. Then **Balaam** reminded **Balak** of what **he** had been communicating from the beginning. **Must I not take care to say just what ADONAI puts in my mouth?**⁵⁰²

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that what **You** say, **You** will always do. Thank **You** for adopting those who **love** and **trust You** to be **Your** children. **But whoever did receive Him, those trusting in His name, to these He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12 and Ephesians 1:5). Your** Word is totally reliable (**Second Corinthians 1:20**). **You** are always everything that I could possibly need. **You** are my **shield** when I am in a battle. **ADONAI is my strength and my shield. My heart trusts in Him, and I was helped. Therefore my heart leaps for joy, and I will praise Him with my song (Psalms 28:7). You** are my **rock** when I need a safe place to run to for protection. **There is none holy as ADONAI, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God (First Samuel 2:2). You** are my wisdom when I don’t understand or know what to do. I can **trust** in **Your** Word.*

*Praise **You** for **Your** everlasting **love!** “**Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love. (Jer 31:3b).** I know I can **trust You** with complete confidence! Thank **You** for **Your** promise that **You** will take me to **Your** wonderful eternal heavenly home of peace and joy, to live with **You** eternally. **Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:1-3). You** are so wonderful! In **Messiah** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*