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Balaam's Second Oracle

23: 13-26

Balaam's second oracle DIG: Why is Balak back again giving it the old college try? What does he know about Balaam or God that leads him to believe either one can be bought? What is God's answer to this presumption of Balak's? What do you see as the central message or key verse of this oracle? How does the blessing of this second oracle compare in scope to the first one? What is Balak's response to this greater blessing? What truths about the people of Isra'el did God's message to Balaam reveal? What can we learn from Balaam's first two oracles that is relevant today?

REFLECT: When are God's decrees hardest for you to accept? How is God not like a parent or a spouse or a politician who can, and do, change their minds? How do your reactions at these times help you to understand Balak in this story? If you could give Balak one piece of advice, what would it be? What will you do to ensure you follow your own advice? In verse 25 Balak admits that this whole exercise is backfiring. When have you felt like Balak in this regard? How can you avoid situations like that in the future? How might the story of Balak and Balaam help you to do just that, "the next time?"

The second intervention on God's part corresponds to the second time the donkey was turned aside (22:24-25); just as the Angel of ADONAI forced the donkey against the vineyard wall, once again, God forced Balaam to turn aside from cursing Isra'el (22:23).

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 second oracle is written in eleven tightly parallel couplets.** At the beginning of **the oracle** proper, the speaker shifts from

third to first person, with **Balaam** now speaking in **his** formal role as **the oracle** speaker.

Disappointed, but not deterred, **King Balak** took **Balaam** to the top of another **mountain**. **He said to Balaam, "All right, come with me to another high place where you can see the Israelites" (23:13a)**. Obviously **the king** thought that a change in locations would change **his** luck. **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, to see link click [Dl](#) - 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** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon [Bx](#) - Solomon's Wives**), causing **him** the loss of **his** 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.⁵⁰³

God met Balaam (23:13b-16): So Balak took Balaam through the field of Tzofim to the top of the Pisgah Mountain Range, some 2,600 feet above sea level, the very place where **Moses** would view **the whole Land** before **he died** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy [Gj](#) - The Death of Moses**). Again, **they built seven altars and offered** the bribe-sacrifices of **a bull and a ram on each altar**. **The king** declared: **You will not see them all but only the outskirts of their camp. And from there, you can curse them for me**. Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand here by your burnt offering, while I meet the LORD over there." YHVH met Balaam, put a Word in his mouth and said, "Go on back to Balak, and speak as I tell you." Rather cursing Isra'el, God's Word was a message for **Balak**.

Balak met God (23:17-24): So Balaam went back and found Balak standing by his burnt offering, along with all the Moabite rulers. Balak asked him, "What did ADONAI say" (23:17)? It is remarkable that **Balak, the Moabite king**, would even

inquire of **the God of Isra'el**. But **Balaam** had given **him** no choice, so **the mouthpiece of the Most High made his pronouncement (23:18a)**:

(A) Get up, Balak, and listen!

(A) Turn your ears to me, son of Zippor (23:18b)! Ha'Shem called the king to attention, preparing him to receive the coming remarkable pronouncement. The naming of **Balak** in the second line as **son of Zippor** is a fine example of parallelism.



(B) God (El) is not a human being who lies,

(B) or a mortal who changes His mind (23:19a). **Balaam** is **himself** a foil for **God**. **The sorcerer** was constantly shifting, evading, vacillating - **he** is the prime example of the distinction between **God** and **mortal human beings**.⁵⁰⁴ Through **the mouth of Balaam**, **El** explains to **Balak** why **Isra'el** cannot be **cursed**. Three times in **his oracle (23:19a, 22, and 23b)** the word for **God** is **El**, which derives from the basic word for **deity** in Semitic languages. Most often the term in the TaNaKh occurs in the plural form **Elohim**, denoting the power and majesty of **the One True God**.⁵⁰⁵ **God is not** fickle. Having already promised to **bless Isra'el**, **He** could not reverse **Himself**. **The LORD** cannot **change His mind**. Unlike **mortal human beings**, **He** cannot be manipulated by black magic or dictated to by sorcerers, even those of the stature of **Balaam**. **He is the Creator**, not a **creature**. It is **people** who are unreliable and fickle, **God** is neither. Therefore, any attempt to place a **curse** upon **Isra'el** was, and is, utterly futile. We already know that **YHVH** has declared a **blessing** on **Abraham** and **his descendants (Genesis 12:2-3a)**.⁵⁰⁶ Moreover, **God** doesn't lie, so **God** always keeps **His** promises; **He** doesn't change, so **His** character remains the same. **He** isn't weak, so **He** is able to fulfill what **He** promises. **He** was, and is, faithful to **the people of Isra'el** and continues to reign throughout history as **their King**.⁵⁰⁷

Here we have an antimony, **God** disciplines **Isra'el**, yet **God** blesses **Isra'el**. An **antimony** means **two things that are mutually exclusive, but both are true**. For example, the Trinity in an antimony, where you have **God** as being three distinct people, **Father, Son,**

and **Spirit**, yet the Bible teaches that **God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)**. The antimony here is that sometimes Scripture clearly says that **God never repents (First Samuel 15:29; Malachi 3:6; Romans 11:29; James 1:17)**. But sometimes it does say that **God does relent (Genesis 6:6)**. **God's** larger purpose does not fail, but **His** relationship with mankind will vary with certain individual cases. For example in **Exodus 32:14**, **ADONAI relented about the disaster He had planned for His people** after the intercession of **Moses**. Now it is obvious that in **God's** overall plan, **He** would never destroy **Isra'el** because of **His** covenantal promises **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**. But the means of **the people's** survival included **Moshe's** intercession. **Jeremiah 18:8** says: **If a nation turns from evil, which prompted Me to speak against it, then I relent concerning the disaster I had planned to inflict on it**. But this also was part of **God's** overall plan, so the **change** is only apparent on a human level. The same thing is true in **Jeremiah 26:3**. And in **Amos 7:3 and 6** we read how the prayer of **Amos** averted a divine judgment, but that also was part of **God's** overall plan. This can also be seen in **Jonah** when **the Ninevites repented and God relented** (see the commentary on **Jonah Az - Jonah's Anger at the LORD's Mercy**).⁵⁰⁸

(C) When he says something, He will do it;
(C) when He makes a promise, He will fulfill it (23:19b).

(D) Look, I am ordered to bless;
(D) and when He blesses, I can't reverse it (23:20). These two verses explain **23:19a** in greater depth. What **YHVH** has said will come true without fail, and what **God** has said is that **Isra'ael is blessed (23:7-10)**. This concept, of course, would contradict **Balak's** understanding of **God**. **The king's** whole motive in moving the site of **the second oracle** was to force **El** to change **His blessing** into **a curse**. As a result, **Balaam** rebukes **Balak** for **his** idea of **God**, and in essence, tells **the king** that **his** plan was doomed. No **human - sorcerer** or otherwise - can contradict the revealed will of **God**.⁵⁰⁹

(E) He has not planned misfortune, or evil, for Jacob,
(E) no trouble is in store for Isra'el (23:21a). At first blush the wording of this verse is seemingly farfetched. The whole course of **Isra'el's** experience in the wilderness was one **misfortune** after another. Yet, it was evidently **their** standing before **Him** that is in view here, rather than **their** sinful nature. **God** didn't have to **plan for their misfortune, they** were perfectly capable of handling that on **their** own! Nevertheless, with **God** in **their** midst, **they** were safe from utter destruction.⁵¹⁰

When **God** looked upon **Isra'el**, **He** didn't see any **evil**; and therefore, had reason to judge

them. They were a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), even though He had to discipline them for their unbelief and disobedience (see the commentary on Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children). Believers today are God's chosen people (Ephesians 1:4), hidden in Messiah (Colossians 3:3), clothed in His righteousness (Second Corinthians 5:17 and 21), sealed with the Ruach (Ephesians 1:13b-14) and seated with Him in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:4-6). Because we are in Messiah, God sees us as His own special people (First Peter 2:5, 9-10), and He loves us unconditionally, and eternally (see the commentary on The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer). Once again, God turned the curse into a blessing!⁵¹¹

(F) Elohim their God is with them,

(F) and the shout for a King is among them (23:21b). As 23:21a is negative, 23:21b is positive. What set Isra'el apart was not **their** population, **their** power, or **their** perseverance over the past forty years; what set Isra'el apart was their **God**. Isra'el was, and is **blessed**, because **ADONAI** goes with **them**. Opposed to **king Balak**, **YHVH** is **the King** in the midst of **Isra'el**. The word translated as **shout** in Hebrews is *teruah*. It is the same word commonly used for the *shofar* blast. Therefore, the second line could be translated as **the trumpet blast of the King is among them.**⁵¹² This was a joyful **shout for a King**, and **their King** was not in some far-off, remote place, but was in **their** very midst. **The Divine Presence** was, of course, in **the Tabernacle** (see **Exodus Hh - The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle**), with **the camp of Isra'el** around **Him.**⁵¹³ And, of course, in **the far eschatological future**, **Messiah** will rule and reign as **King of Isra'el** during the Messianic Kingdom.

(G) God (El) has brought them out of Egypt,

(G) He gives them the strength (Hebrew: *toaphah*, meaning **horns**) **of a wild ox (23:22).** It was **God** who gave **the Israelites their** victories, beginning with **their exodus** from **Egypt**. **The nation** was like **an ox** in **its strength**, in particular the powerful and protruding **horns** of the animal, and like **a lioness** and **a lion** in **its** determination to catch **its** prey and kill it. Therefore, no **sorcery** could succeed against **God's people** because **He** was at work in **them** and through **them.**⁵¹⁴

(H) Surely, no one can put a curse on Jacob,

(H) no black magic will work against Isra'el (23:23a). **The oracle** specifically speaks against **Balaam** being able to put **a curse on Jacob**. **Isra'el** did not need **sorcerers** or magicians to have success against **their** various enemies. **Balaam** speaks here from **his** fearsome experience. Those who practiced **black magic** try to determine the will of **God** through the casting of lots via dice or darts, the consulting of domestic deities, or in reading

the patterns animal entrails via liver dissection or intestinal examination. The denial regarding **Isra'el's** possession or adherence to **black magic** is remarkably contrasted with the positive praise of what **God** has done on behalf of **Isra'el**.⁵¹⁵

(I) For now it can now be said of Jacob,

(I) Oh, what wonders God (El) has done for Isra'el (23:23b)! As **23:23a** is negative, **23:23b** is positive. The second line builds the crescendo of thought, erupting in this compelling confession: **Oh, what wonders God has done for Isra'el!** This verse is the key to all of **Balaam's** pronouncements. He had come to use **his black magic** on **Isra'el**, but in the end, **he** wanted **his end to be like theirs (23:10b)**. **He** had come to bring a **curse**, but he found **them blessed**. **He** had come to use **his sorcery**, but **he** found **it** ineffective. **God** was in control, and **Balaam** was **His** puppet in this spiritual battle.⁵¹⁶

(J) These people rise up like a lioness,

(J) like a lion raising himself up (23:24a). Rather than delivering a **curse**, **Balaam** compares **the camp of Isra'el** (see [Am - The Camp of the Twelve Tribes of Isra'el](#)) to a **lion**, rising up to pounce upon its prey. **The lion** imagery points back to **Jacob's blessing** over **Judah** (see the commentary on [Genesis Lg - The Scepter Will Not Depart from Judah Until He Comes to Whom It Belongs](#)).⁵¹⁷



(K) They will not lie down until they have eaten up the prey,

(K) and drinks the blood of the slain (23:24b). As a **lioness**, **Isra'el** was about to **rouse herself** and would soon bring **her** foes to destruction. **She** would not rest until the enemy was devoured; its **blood** licked clean at the end of the chase. The effectiveness of **the lion** image was not lost on the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**. Witness the seal from Megiddo with the figure of a **roaring lion**, inscribed, "Belonging to Schema, servant of Jeroboam." The use of the image of **the lion** was a way of speaking of **Isra'el's** destiny as the warrior of **God**.

The remnant of Jacob will be among the nations, in the midst of many peoples, like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among flocks of sheep, which mauls and mangles as it goes, there is no one to rescue them (Micah 6:8).⁵¹⁸ As long as **Isra'el** walked with **God** and obeyed **His** will, **they** were an **undefeated nation** and **God** did great **wonders** for **them**.

And this is the victory that has overcome the world . . . our faith (First John 5:4). The battles **God's people** fight today are not with flesh and **blood**, but with **Satan's** demons (see the commentary on [Ephesians Ca - The Spiritual Battle](#)), and we can't win the victory in our own strength. We must first see ourselves as **the people of God**, purchased by **the blood of Messiah**, indwelt by **the Spirit of God**, and **more than conquerors through Messiah (Romans 8:37)**. Our protection is **the whole armor of God** (see [Ephesians Cb - The Armor of God](#)), and our chief weapons are **the Word of God** and **prayer** (see [Ephesians Ci - Praying at All Times](#)).⁵¹⁹

Balaam's warning (23:25-26): **Balaam** declared that just what **Balak** feared would happen: **Isra'el** would destroy **their** enemies and nothing could stop **them**. At that news, **Balak** appeared incredulous and was angry once again by **Balaam's** defiance of **his** request to curse **Isra'el**. **He** gasped: **Obviously, you won't curse them. But at least don't bless them** already!" In other words, "Shut up!" **Balak** preferred silence to the words of **blessing**. But **Balaam**, once again, reminded **the king**, "**Didn't I warn you that I must do everything ADONAI says?**" **Balak** was now growing weary of hearing this (**22:38, 23:3 and 12**). I am sure it reverberated through **his** heart and mind, but **he** would hear it again after **the third oracle (24:13)**.⁵²⁰

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for **Your** promise to **bless** those who love **You**. **Your** promises are as a solid rock that can always be counted on. **You** allow **trials** into my life, but they are allowed for the purpose of **blessing** me by giving me an opportunity to be shaped by **Your** loving hand and result in praise and glory. **These trials are so that the true metal of your faith (far more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire) may come to light in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Messiah Yeshua (First Peter 1:7).***

*It is always wise to **trust Your** hand of love and mercy, even when the skies look dark, for **You are Almighty and the God of compassion. For ADONAI Elohim is a sun and a shield. Adonai gives grace and glory. No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly. ADONAI-Tzva'ot, blessed is the one who trusts in You (Psalms 84:11-12).** There is **evil** in this world, but **You** can turn what someone means for **evil** - into*

*good! **Yes, you yourselves planned evil against me. But God planned it for good (Genesis 50:20a).** Praise and thank **You** for **Your** great and merciful love for me. **For God Himself has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5c).** You never sleep, never yawn (**Psalms 121:4**); but are always watching over me with a father's tender heart of compassion, seeking to guide and **ble**ss me as I obey **Your** Word. What a comfort it is to trust in **Your** almighty power and tender love at all times! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*