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Balaam's Third Oracle

23:27 to 24:14

Balaam's third oracle DIG: Based on these three oracles, how would you describe Balak's view of God? Do you think Balaam has changed since the first oracle? How so? Which Jewish king is referred to in this prophecy? How is Balaam remembered in the Bible (Second Peter 2:15 and Jude 11)? What do you see as God's purpose in giving these oracles to someone as greedy or as pagan as Balaam? This oracle emphasizes the contentment of God's people in their own land. What reasons did they have for contentment? Who do you think these oracles were aimed at? Balak? Balaam? Isra'el? Explain.

REFLECT: Do you think that God wishes for you all the goodness that he decrees for the Israelites in these oracles? Why or why not? In what ways has He blessed you this past year? How does that make you feel? Do you always believe that God wants only good for you? When is the most difficult time to believe that? If you could believe this at all times, how would it change your prayer life? Your view of God? What is one thing God has given you that moves you toward contentment? How could Balaam have such a powerful experience with ADONAI and still not have saving faith? What can you learn from this?

The third attempt at cursing Isra'el corresponds to the third time ADONAI blocked Balaam's way. Just as the donkey lay down under Balaam, refusing to go any further, so, too, the LORD intervened a third time putting His words in Balaam's mouth to speak a third message of blessing over Isra'el (22:26-30).

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 third oracle is written in one triplet and ten 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.

The setting of the oracle (23:27 to 24:2): Disappointed, but not deterred, **King Balak** took **Balaam** to the top of another **mountain**. **He said to Balaam, "Come now, I will take you to one more high place" (23:27).** 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 [DI](#) - The Tower of Babel**).

The Israelites, forever turning away from **God**, worshiped **Molech** 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** to lose **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.⁵²¹

You would have thought that **Balak** would have given up by now, but evil is persistent, so **he** decided to have **Balaam** make one last attempt to **curse Isra'el**. **King Balak said to Balaam, "Come now, I will take you to one more place. Perhaps it will please God for you to put a curse on them from there."** But, **God** had just spoken to **king Balak** directly and explained in no uncertain terms that **Isra'el** was **blessed** and could not be **cursed**. However, **Balak** had ignored the warning and **took Balaam to** another **high place** of a local god on **the top of Peor, overlooking the desert**. Again making the foolish assumption that changing locations would change **his** luck. **Once more, Balaam said to Balak, "Build me the obligatory seven altars here, and prepare me seven bulls and seven rams."** The same old pagan customs continued. **Balak did as Balaam said and offered a bull and a ram on each altar (23:27-30).**

Balaam did three things differently when giving this third **oracle**, then **he** did in the previous two. First, **he** didn't leave **Balak** and **the rulers by themselves**; secondly, **he**

didn't even think about using **sorcery** because **he** knew it was useless; and thirdly, **the Spirit of God** took control and put **the words** in **his mouth**.

But despite the token efforts of **seven** more **altars** and **fourteen** more **sacrifices**, **Balaam** had already given up. **He realized that ADONAI was determined to bless Isra'el**, because **God** had already declared that **no black magic would work against Isra'el (23:23a)**. **Instead, he raised his eyes and saw Isra'el encamped tribe by tribe**. Then **YHVH** intervened, taking control of **Balaam**, the **LORD** put **His Words** in **his mouth** as **the Spirit of God came upon him (24:1-2)**. In regard to the two former **oracles**, it says that **ADONAI** put **a Word** in the mouth of **Balaam (Numbers 23:5 and 15)**. In the present case **the Spirit of God came upon him**. The same expression is used of **the messengers of king Sha'ul (First Samuel 19:20)**, and of **king Sha'ul himself (First Samuel 10:9-12)**. The prophecy of **Caiaphas (John 11:46-52)** affords another instance of the sovereign power of **the Spirit** as displayed through the medium of wicked men. From this we can conclude that **the Spirit of God** can use anyone whom **He** wants to use for **His** purposes.⁵²²

As **Sha'ul** had **his** experience on **the road to Damascus** (see the commentary on **Acts Bc - Sha'ul Turns from Murder to the Messiah**), so also, **Balaam** had **his** experience on the road to **Mo'ab**. In both cases there was **Divine** revelation. In the case of **Sha'ul**, the revelation was one of grace; in the case of **Balaam**, it was one of judgment. But both revelations included the protection of **the true people of God** from those who wished to do **them** harm.⁵²³

The oracle: the beauty and strength of Isra'el (24:3-9): **Balaam's** third **oracle** followed the same style of parallelism and repetition established in the first two **oracles**, but this one is far less mechanical than the previous two. It erupts like an explosion of poetry, rich with rhyme, meter and metaphor. Instead of following the rigid pattern of parallel couplets, this third **oracle** begins with a triplet, each line starting with a phrase: **the oracle**. **And he made his** third **oracle**, saying:

(A) This is the oracle of Balaam, son of Beor,
(A) the oracle of a man whose eyes have been opened
(A) the oracle of him who hears the words of God (24:3-4a). These **verses** form the introduction to **the oracle**; with one exception they are identical to **24:15-16**. Despite its formal drumbeat of pomp and circumstance, these introductory lines of **the oracle** are supposed to be amusing to the reader. **Balaam** described **himself** as **a man whose eyes have been opened, who sees a vision of what Shaddai sees**. Yet we remember well that

his donkey saw **the Angel of ADONAI** far more clearly than **Balaam** did. **He** claimed to be a man **who hears the words of God**, yet we recall that **His donkey** had to tip **him** off that **God** had something to say.⁵²⁴

(B) who sees a vision of what Shaddai sees,

(B) who falls down with eyes wide open (24:4b). When **YHVH** had stood in the way of **the donkey** for the third time, **Balaam's eyes** were **opened** at last. **Then the LORD** **opened Balaam's eyes, so that he could see the Angel of ADONAI standing in the way with His drawn sword in his hand, and he fell on his face.** Here, **Balaam**, once again **(22:31)**, **fell face down** as a result of being in the presence of **God**. This was a common occurrence when people were faced with the living **God**. **Abraham fell on his face** when **YHVH** appeared to **him** (**Genesis 17:1-3, 17**); **the people fell on their faces** when **fire came out from before the LORD** (**Leviticus 9:24**); **Moses and Aaron fell on their faces** (**Numbers 14:5, 16:20-22**); **Joshua fell on his face** (**Joshua 5:14**); **Ezeki'el fell on his face** (**Ezeki'el 44:4**), and **Dani'el fell on his face** (**Dani'el 8:17**); **three apostles fell on their faces on the mount of transfiguration** (**Matthew 17:6**), **a man full of leprosy fell on his face before Yeshua** (**Luke 5:12**), and **a healed leper fell on his face before Messiah giving Him thanks** (**Luke 17:15-16**), and finally **the twenty-four elders in heaven fell on their faces worshiping ADONAI** (**Revelation 11:16**). You would think that such a remarkable experience with the living **God** would have brought **Balaam** to a place of submission and faith, but it did not. It only shows that an unbeliever can intellectually come to a knowledge of **the LORD** and yet not step over the line from knowledge to faith (see the commentary on **Hebrews A1 - How Shall We Escape If We Ignore So Great a Salvation**). **Balaam** is the Judas Iscariot of the Torah. Both received so much revelation; both spoke to **God**; and both sold their gifts for money.

(C) How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,

(C) your dwellings, O Isra'el (24:5)! **Balaam** compared **Isra'el's** future settlements in Canaan to the strong trees growing by life-giving streams of **water**. **He** offered a pulsating description of **Isra'el**, so beautiful that it has become a permanent part of Jewish liturgy. As **Balaam** was looking down at **the tents** in the wilderness, **the Spirit of God** gave **him** a vision of future cities with homes and buildings.

(D) They spread out like valleys,

(D) like gardens by the riverside (24:6a). In an attempt to describe **his** vision of **the camp** of **Isra'el**, **Balaam** launched into a four-line series simile which describes **Isra'el** as a lush, **well-watered garden** with **aloes** and **cedar trees** planted by **the water**. **He** described **the blessings** that **YHVH** would bestow upon **the people of Isra'el** in **their**

future dwelling in **the new Land**. These words are among the most treasured in the Torah regarding **the blessings** of ADONAI upon **His people**.

The image of **Isra'el** as a **well-watered garden** planted by **the LORD**, is another picture that takes us back to **Genesis 13**. There we find **Lot**, the forefather of **Mo'ab**, quarreling with **Abraham**, the forefather of **Isra'el**, over pastureland. It says: **Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valleys of the Jordan, that it was well-watered everywhere . . . like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt are you to Zoar (Genesis 13:10)**. Lot chose those **well-watered valleys** for **himself**, but that choice proved to be **his** undoing.

Now things have come full circle as the descendants of **Abraham** are described in much the same terms. **They** were **camped** in the plains of **Mo'ab** beside the Jordan river, across from Jericho. As **Balaam** looked out over these **encampments**, **he** observed that **they** were like **the well-watered valleys** of the Jordan, described as **valleys that spread out, like gardens by the river**. They were **like the garden of the LORD** in as much as they were **planted by the LORD**.⁵²⁵

(E) like succulent aloes planted by ADONAI,

(E) like cedar trees beside the waters (24:6b). In a crescendo of phrases, the geographical and floral aspects refer to the highly prized bodies of **water** that **Isra'el** would possess in great abundance in **the Promised Land**. Some, more concerned with scientific accuracy than poetic imagery, have been concerned with **cedar trees pictured beside the waters**. This is poetry not botany. **Cedars** do not grow **beside rivers**; **they** grow in the mountains. So why would **Balaam** liken **Isra'el** to one here? **Cedars'** strength is exceptional without a **river** running nearby, but **Isra'el** will be even stronger, like a **cedar beside a river**.

(F) Water will flow from their buckets,

(F) their offspring will have plenty of water (24:7a). Here is the image of a man with two pails hanging from his shoulders, **overflowing** with **water**. Again, **water** is being used as a symbol of great fruitfulness. Although the reference could again be to the fertility of **the land**, resulting from the abundance of rain, it more probably refers to a growing population. **Drink the water from your own cistern, fresh water from your own well. Let what your springs produce be dispersed outside, streams of water flowing in the streets; but let them be for you alone and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain, the wife of your youth, be blessed and find joy in her (Proverbs 5:15-18)**. Although **Isra'el** may already be too many to count (23:10a), **Balaam** declares **they** will multiply even more.

(G) And their future King will be greater than Agag,

(G) and His Kingdom high and lifted up (24:7). Here, **Balaam** first broached the topic of **Isra'el's** future **King**, a theme **he** develops more fully in **the** following **oracle**. **Their King**, promised by **God** to **the patriarchs (Genesis 17:6 and 16, 35:11)** **will be greater** than a **king** considered great in ancient times. **Sha'ul**, the first **king of Isra'el**, defeated **Agag**, the **king of the Amalekites (First Samuel 15:8)**, and this **word of Balaam** would appear to be foretelling of the eventual destruction of **Isra'el's** oldest enemy (see the commentary on **Exodus Cv - The Amalekites Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim**). Moreover, during **the** promised **Messianic Kingdom**, **the land of Isra'el** will become like **the garden of Eden** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Gk - The Desert and the Parched Land Will Be Glad**).⁵²⁶

(H) God, who brought them out of Egypt,

(H) gives them the horns of a wild ox (24:8a). **Isra'el's strength** came out of **God's strength**. Verses 8 and 9 depict **Ha'Shem** leading **Isra'el** out of **Egypt** like a conquering army, decimating any enemy who would stand in **their** way. In **the** second **oracle** we learned that **God gave Isra'el the strength** (Hebrew: *toaphah*, meaning **horns**) **of a wild ox (23:22)**. Now, **24:8-9** are an expansion of **23:24** of **the** second **oracle** (see **Du - Balaam's Second Oracle**). The term **horns of a wild ox** is a biblical, poetic idiom for **strength**, pride and power. **God** is described as going before **Isra'el** like **horns of a wild ox**. **The horns of the fearsome beast** gore and tear anyone foolish enough to get in **its** way. So, too, **Ha'Shem** will go before **Isra'el**, goring and removing anyone who would oppose **His people**.

You will recall that **Balak** had already compared **Isra'el** to an **ox**. **He** had said: **This horde will lick up everything around us, the way an ox licks up grass in the field (22:4)**. In **his** simile, **he** compared **Isra'el** to a *shor*, meaning *a domesticated ox*. In this **oracle**, however, **he** compared **Isra'el** to a *reim*, a far more dangerous **wild ox**. It is like the difference between a barnyard pig and a wild boar.⁵²⁷

(I) He will devour hostile nations,

(I) And will break their bones into pieces, and pierce them with his arrows (24:8b).

In both **the second** and third **oracles**, **Balaam** compares **Isra'el** to a **lion**. In **the** second **oracle**, **the lion** is seen as rising, crouching as if to pounce, devouring **its prey** and lapping up **its blood** before **laying down** again **(23:24b)**. This will be the case during the conquest of **the Promised Land** (see the commentary **Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**). The animal images are not over yet, though.



(J) Like a lion He crouches and lays down,

(J) as a lion, who dares to provoke him (24:9a)? In the days that followed the conquest of Canaan, **Isra'el**, in **its own land**, will be like a **lion/lioness** resting, unconcerned and satisfied, yet still dangerous and fearsome. **The nations** around **Isra'el** will **rouse it** at **their own peril**. The image of **the lion, laying down**, is taken directly from **Jacob's blessing** over **Judah**. **You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness - who dares to rouse him (Genesis 49:9)?** Therefore, we should take it as a reference to **the Messianic King** (see the commentary on **Revelation Ce - The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David Has Triumphed**).⁵²⁸

(K) May those who bless Isra'el be blessed,

(K) and those who curse Isra'el be cursed (24:9b)! At last Balaam ends the oracle with a final concise statement which summarizes all three failed attempts to **curse Isra'el**. The irony cannot be missed. In **his** actions, **Balaam** brings a **curse** upon **his** own head even as **he** speaks **words of blessing!** **Those** who attempt to **curse the children of Abraham** will find **themselves cursed**. This is a reaffirmation of **the Abrahamic Covenant**, when **God** said: **I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.** Therefore, the promise to **Abraham (Genesis 12:3 and 22:18)**, to **Jacob (Genesis 27:29)** and to **the Israelites (Exodus 23:22)** was fulfilled by **Balaam**.⁵²⁹

The Moabites' failed attempt to curse the children of Abraham returned to **them** like a boomerang. **The descendants of Lot** were **cursed**, while **Isra'el, the descendants of Abraham**, were **blessed**. The score between **Abraham** and **Lot** was finally settled on the plains of **Mo'ab**. **Lot** went for the quick and easy reward; while **Avraham** held onto the promises. In the end, **Abraham** was vindicated. **God is the Promise Keeper**.⁵³⁰

Balak's angry response (24:10-11): Balak's anger burned against Balaam after his third blessing upon Isra'el. Then, Balak flew into a rage against Balaam. He angrily struck his hands together (see Job 27:23 and Lamentations 2:15) and shouted, "I called you to put a curse on my enemies. Instead, you have done nothing but bless them - three times already! At least Balak got that much right. Now get out of here! Go back home! I had planned to reward you very well, but now ADONAI has deprived you of payment." As far as the king was concerned, all his efforts had amounted to nothing.

Balaam's response (24:12-14): Balaam, although clearly disappointed, reminded the king, "Didn't I tell the messengers you sent me that even if the king would give me his palace full of silver and gold, I would be powerless to do anything against the will of ADONAI. I told you that I could only say what ADONAI has put in my mouth? Balak should have known that the whole thing would end in failure. Then, the defeated sorcerer declared: I am going back to my own people. But first let me warn you what the Israelites will do to your people in the future Messianic age (see [Dw - Balaam's Fourth Oracle: the far eschatological fulfillment](#)).

Dear Heavenly Father, Praise You for being so very Awesome with Almighty power! Your strength and wisdom are so great that there is no possibility of You ever making even the slightest mistake. You not only have total power but your omniscient wisdom guides You to know what will take place hundreds of years in the future, and you already have the plan on how to win the victory! Praise Your infinite wisdom! In the days of Dani'el, You foretold and described all the future world kingdoms, thousands of years before the kingdoms even began to exist (Daniel 2:31-45, 7:1-27).

What a comfort it is that you prepare in advance for the right people to be in exactly the right place to win the battle. When Haman plotted to destroy the Jews, you already had the perfect Jewish woman in place to be the queen whom You would use to move the king's heart to reverse Haman's demonic plan. Haman's plan backfired on him for instead of Jews being killed, it was evil Haman himself who was impaled on the Pole he had set up for Mordecai (Esther 7:10). Also, not only were the Jews not killed, but King Ahasuerus' new decree allowed the Jews to defend themselves and 75,000 of their enemies were killed (Esther 9:16). The Jews who at one time were the cursed people, then became the blessed people. Many Gentiles of the land were circumcised and became proselytes because the fear of the Jews had overcome them (Esther 8:17c). You so wisely put everything carefully in place for future victory! In Messiah Yeshua's holy Name and power of His resurrection. Amen