

NUMBERS

Lesson 26 - Chapters 21, 22, 23, and 24

We spent all last week on a very small, but difficult, section of the Bible: the bronze serpent on the pole. I'm not going to review it with you today, as it is quite complex. If you missed it, or want to go over it again, I recommend obtaining the CD or reviewing it on our Torah Class website.

This week is going to be quite different; we're going to do more reading in one large block than we've ever done. That is because the story we're going to explore is important, has many theological implications, and covers 3 full chapters. I don't like breaking up a story because we can lose continuity.

The entire serpent and pole story covers only 6 verses in Numbers chapter 21, and it essentially interrupts the travelogue of Israel as they leave Mount Hor, to march by way of the Sea of Suf back to the south in order that they avoid conflict with the inhabitants of Edom. As a reminder, this was some terribly difficult, dry, tortuous territory they were traversing, and the weary Hebrews grumbled about this decision, which is what led to the divine plague of snakebites, and then their cure (the serpent on the pole).

Verse 10 picks back up their progress...that is now gaining momentum.....toward their destination. You know, after a 40-year journey it must have been easy for those refugees to forget that the original goal was Canaan. They had been judged many times by Yehoveh, and countless thousands were killed as a result. They had been attacked by of nations; some who feared their approach, others simply for the sake of plunder. Their staple diet all this time was Manna, and they were tiring of that. Simply obtaining water was an act of faith, and a chore. Day to day living, surviving, was first and foremost in their minds. All the challenges of life, and bumps in the road of family disagreements and fractures in relationships were also part of their lives: marriage, divorce, death, illness, injury, and disputes with neighbors. There is an old saying that Floridians are particularly familiar with that expresses the Israelites' mindset well: "When you're up to your rear-end in alligators, it's easy to forget that the original idea was to drain the swamp."

By now, there had been an almost complete turnover of the Hebrews' population led by Moses. The make-up of Israel in no way resembled that horde of city dwellers that fled Pharaoh almost 40 years earlier. Most of those over the age of 20 when they left Egypt were dead and buried in the desert sand; actually their death was a pre-condition the Lord had set for entering the Promised Land, due to the Israelites' refusal to go forth and take the land (a result of the 12 spies incident). The majority population of Israel was now made-up of those who had NEVER

lived in Egypt, and never even lived in a town or a village because they were born out in the wilderness, in a tent, during this arduous journey. The majority of Israel only knew the lifestyle of the Bedouin who lived as nomads. Keep this in mind as we move forward in the story of the conquest of the Land of Canaan.

Let's re-read Numbers 21: 10 to the end of the chapter.

READ NUMBERS 21:10 to end

We'll move through this pretty rapidly so as not to get bogged down.

Basically, the story picks up as the Israelites enter the area that is often called the Trans-Jordan. It was really only known by that name during the 20th century. The territory is more known as the modern day Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

We'll get somewhat of a recount of this in Deuteronomy, which offers some additional details. But the idea is that they tried quite hard to avoid conflicts with peoples that had some distant connection with Abraham; people like the Moabites and the Ammonites who were originally descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot. So, we find Israel staying to the outer edges of the territory of Moab in hopes of not stirring up a problem; however, that was really unavoidable. There were too many Israelites to simply ignore their presence: and to the residents of the established territories and city-states of the Middle East these 3 million Hebrews were little different than a horde of locusts descending upon them.

Verse 13 finds Israel now quite far north and well to the west of the Dead Sea. The Arnon is a river that flows into the Dead Sea from the east. And, the Arnon represents the southern boundary of Moab. Understand that just like in our day geographic anomalies like rivers and mountain ranges tended to be the points of demarcation of where one nation stopped and another nation began. But also understand that some territories tended to be more politically stable and others in constant flux. The Land of Canaan was somewhat stable; the rulers of the area of Moab were constantly changing, and therefore so were boundaries.

This tended to make some areas easier to conquer than others; areas that were more stable tended to have large, walled cities. Areas that were constantly changing hands tended to consist of primarily unprotected villages because it took years and sizeable resources to build a strategically defensible city wall.

Therefore we find Israel willingly going to battle against the king of the Amorites, a fellow named Sihon, and summarily dispatching them. The Israelites didn't intend on battling the Amorites, they preferred to simply pass through their territory in order to cross the Jordan and enter Canaan. So as with the earlier story of the Israelites' encounter with Edom, Moses sends an emissary to Sihon asking for permission to pass, with a promise not to make war, nor to disturb the Amorites field crops or take water from their wells. By the way: the agreement "not to take water from their wells" is not to be taken the way you might think. The key word is "take". There was no way Israel could avoid using the water from the wells owned by the Amorites. It's just that Moses was promising not to "steal" the water, not to take it by force or

deception; rather Israel would openly tap the wells and justly compensate the king for whatever water they used. This is just the way of the various desert cultures of that era.

But like with Edom, the king of the Amorites says 'no'. Israel doesn't hesitate: they're not about to try to find another way into the land at this point. They're starting to feel their oats and they know how close they are to their final destination, Canaan, so they have plenty of incentive to place their lives on the line and do battle. The result was that Israel essentially conquered the heart of the Trans-Jordan region. It was wonderful land that was fertile and ascetically pleasing to look at. Israel killed many Amorites, took their towns and villages, and moved in. Heshbon was King Sihon's capital and Israel took that as well.

It's important here to understand a couple of things that will matter quite a bit when studying later books of the Old Testament such as the book of Judges. First is that the Amorites were NOT indigenous to the Trans-Jordan. Their homeland was Mesopotamia and they came down from there and took over the area where Moses and Israel were journeying through. Second is that they essentially conquered Moab; more specifically they established a king/vassal relationship with Moab such that Moab bowed down to Sichon of the Amorites. Thus Moab belonged to the Amorites and no longer was an independent, sovereign nation. We also find that while the nation of Ammon lay to the north and east of Moab, it too was affected by the presence of the Amorites. Some number of the Ammonite population had created villages outside of Ammon-proper in an area near to the Jordan River. The Amorites conquered that area and to a lesser degree subjugated Ammon proper. Thus when Moses and Israel defeated the King Sichon of the Amorites, standard protocol of the day meant that whatever and whoever King Sichon controlled now was transferred to Israel. Bottom line: even though Israel won Moab's territory, it was seen as being won from the Amorites who governed over Moab, which is not the same thing as Israel conquering Moab.

A good analogy would be that if some foreign power attacked and conquered the USA, the people of the US territory of Puerto Rico would also come under the control of the conqueror, even though realistically the conqueror never attacked and conquered Puerto Rico itself.

Now I think I can say with certainty that up to this point there had been no real thought by Israel of occupying land to the east of the Jordan River. This land was NOT Canaan. It had never been Canaan, and what God had promised to Abraham was Canaan. Since, up to now the land promised to the Hebrews had only been identified as Canaan (meaning to the Israelites the land on the west side, the west bank, of the Jordan River) this seemed like an unexpected bonus. But because Sichon of the Amorites forced the issue and attacked Israel, Israel suddenly found itself as holders of much territory on the east side of the Jordan.

Later in Numbers we'll read of the historical dividing up of territory, tribe by tribe, with Moses overseeing the tribal territorial allotments. And, we'll find that two Israelite tribes, and about half of another, are given territory right where we find the Israelites here in Numbers 21. Notice that verse 25 explains not that Israel simply took all these towns of the Trans-Jordan, but that they SETTLED in them; they made it home.

And can you blame them? It must have looked awfully good to those Hebrews who were

children or teens when Israel fled Egypt. It is no wonder that about a quarter of these road-weary Israelites decided NOT to continue on to the Promised Land but to remain in the land on the east side of the Jordan. Land that Israel had conquered with relative ease from the Amorites because the enemy's numbers were relatively small, and their villages un-walled.

Next Israel moved on a little further toward a place called Bashan. And of course Bashan hoped to avoid what happened to his neighbors. Apparently before deciding whether or not to take on Bashan, Moses consulted with Yehoveh and God told Moses to go ahead and conquer them; that in fact the Lord had already decided the outcome.

The territory of Bashan extended all the way north to Mt. Hermon, east to about the King's Highway, west to hills on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and south to a line a little below the Jabok River (the Jabok was that place where around 5 centuries earlier Jacob reconciled with his twin brother Esau).

So before the Israelites even entered Canaan (their destination) they acquired a large area of land and settled in it. And that area was primarily what is now the modern Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, located on the east side of the Jordan River. So I would say that the current regime controlling Jordan is quite wise to try and make peace with Israel; for the Israelites occupied it long before the Ishmaelite Arabs ever did and the Bible says that the Lord sees that land as belonging to Israel. When we look at later bible passages we find that what was promised to Abraham as a promised land actually expands in Ezekiel to include the Trans-Jordan.

One can stand at the crossroads near Jericho, coming down from Jerusalem (where the road to Qumran and Masada intersects), and look across the northern end of the Dead Sea and actually see the land on the east side of the Jordan that Israel conquered, and is also generally the area where Israel would eventually cross over into Canaan.

Let's move on now to Numbers chapter 22 and the famous Biblical story of Balaam and Balak. The story of Balaam and Balak is quite long. It covers 3 full chapters. And in order that we get the best overall picture of what occurred, we need to read it in the way it was originally written, not broken up into pieces.

Therefore, we're going to read Numbers chapters 22, 23, and 24 consecutively.

READ NUMBERS 22,23, AND 24 in full

Well y now I think we can all see that the assignment of the title "Numbers" for this book was a poor one; because accounting records and censuses are the least of this book. And I ask you to understand that all the titles we Christians use for the various books of the Bible are contrived by men in one way or another. Not that there is anything wrong with that. They are not false, nor were they intended to deceive, nor likely ever intended to be more than just a simple way to identify a particular group of Scriptures. But we must not be so naive nor so ignorant as to not know at this point in our Christian walk that there is nothing sacred nor God-ordained about Bible book names, chapter divisions or verse numbers. They were added well into the future from when the Scriptures were written for no other reason than to be a tool to

help us study and communicate. The Hebrews tended to use the first few words of a new book as its title; the Greeks tended to use a word that they felt expressed the overall purpose of the book, or as with the New Testament, who it was addressed to or to whom the authorship was ascribed.

Now this story of Balaam and Balak has much more theological depth to it than is on the surface. The gentile Christian world mainly remembers this episode because of the talking donkey, with the message that if God can't get a man to do his bidding or speak His Word, He can even use an animal. And truth be known, that is probably the least of what is being taught to us here.

A reasonable first question to ask about this story is: is this an actual event, or is it a Hebrew fable? I know that question probably instantly bothers some of you that I would even dare to broach such a possibility. So let me answer it in a way that I hope will relieve you.

Jesus often taught by means of a literary device scholars call Parable. Were the Parables of Jesus true stories of actual happenings? Were there really 10 virgins dressed in white carrying their oil lamps at night? How about the wheat and the tares? A Parable is a truth, told using an illustration, a word picture. Yeshua didn't invent the use of Parable; a Parable was a standard literary device of that age and invented centuries earlier. The Bible makes liberal use of metaphors and they are often meant to shock. The illustrations did not have to be an actual event, although something similar might have occurred so that the people who were listening got the picture because they could identify with it. Often enough the Parables were so vague that even Yeshua's closest disciples thought them to be riddles. So if you find it challenging at times to understand Jesus' parables and need a teacher to explain them, don't despair; the very men who Yeshua mentored found them perplexing.

Now just because a Parable is a story designed to embody a Godly principle, but was not always the recounting of an actual event, doesn't make it a lie or a fantasy. We'll find poetic license in the Bible, lots of it. We'll find exaggerations (hyperbole) to make a point (the Apostle Paul was a real champion of exaggeration). We'll find the recording of men making false statements (King David for instance) about what happened (in order that we see they are lying), we'll see men do terrible things, we'll see men say something totally incorrect about the Lord. This is all part of how the Bible communicates absolute truth and light to us.

Taking the Bible literally does not mean that we are to take exaggeration as if it weren't; nor metaphor as if it were a direct analogy; nor are we to take a poem as though it were unemotional history, nor history as though each event had deep spiritual meaning.

Very probably the story of Balak and Balaam is an embellished story based on something that actually happened; a historical event that had been expanded and fable-ized. There may have actually been a seer named Balaam, and a king named Balak. Balak might actually have been terribly concerned about this giant Israelite tsunami that was coming his way and sought divine help to counter it. The main giveaway that it is almost certainly at least part fable is the talking donkey; and secondarily is that the entire story simply appears as a detour in the historical recounting of Israel's approach to the Promised Land. Thirdly we see that this entire story was

an insertion into the book of Numbers from a slightly later date, and that it was probably added in pieces.

That said, just like the Parables of Christ, what is being taught throughout this story is divine truth and some of it is prophetic. Really there is probably more theological meat condensed in this telling than any other single place in the Scriptures. What we have in this story of Balaam and Balak is a Bible within the Bible, or a Torah within the Torah. For that reason we're going to examine it pretty closely.

This theological legend begins with one King Balak, king of Moab, which was a vassal nation ruled by the Amorites. Balak was worried about all these Israelites who were on his border. It is interesting that we're told that Balak was the son of a fellow named Tzippor because it harkens back to Moses' wife's name, Tzippora. Yes, it is actually the same name. Tzippor is the masculine, Tzippora the feminine, and it means bird.

Now how is it that Balak's father and Moses' wife would have the same name, especially since that name is found in ONLY one particular culture: Midian? That question is pretty well answered for us in verse 7 because it says that the elders of Moab got together with the elders of Midian to see what they should do with this Hebrew problem. In other words there was a regional alliance being described between Moab and Midian. And as happens right up to our day in tribal as well as royal societies, intermarriage and the adopting of certain elements of a hoped for ally's culture and customs (particularly as concerns adopting names) is the usual route to cement this kind of alliance. As we saw some time ago Tzippora (Moses' wife) was a Midianite; Tzippora was actually a rather common Bedouin name. So what we can readily see is that Balak's father had adopted a Midianite name, Tzippor, to show favor to his ally, Midian.

The Israelite army had mowed right through the Amorites so the people of Moab knew they probably couldn't stop them with mere force of arms, though undoubtedly they would try. The solution? Magic to enhance their chances of victory. So they sought to hire what must have been a very well known and highly regarded Magician named Balaam.

Key to understanding our story is that Balaam lived up in Mesopotamia; he was a gentile. He was a seer, a diviner, and a sorcerer.

Balaam lived near the Euphrates River, only about 12 miles from Carchemish. This is an area that is alternately known as Aram. Yet in a land full of pagan gods and a fully developed Mystery religion system, for some reason this Balaam seemed to know (perhaps even adopted) the God of Israel. How or why is not explained. But, let's also remember that Abraham (who also began as a gentile) was from Mesopotamia and rather easily accepted this god Yehoveh; and we get no explanation as to why Abraham had no qualms about it.

Now it is interesting that Balaam's character is alternately painted as evil and then righteous. In some ways there is a kind of neutrality or even-handedness regarding his sentiment towards his own culture and the people of Israel. Yet the very fact that he is called a prophet and a diviner and that his sorcery was found so impressive and useful for Balak and his government, attests to the pagan beliefs and rituals that Balaam must have practiced, and the heathen gods

that he also included in his worship. For our purposes we might as well picture him as running round with a pointy black hat and a magic wand. However our story puts what Balaam did in quite a positive light. At the least we see that he certainly knows and respects Yehoveh, and is determined (to some degree) to obey Him.

But as we'll see in later chapters (and in other books), another side of Balaam was revealed. In fact in Numbers 31 Balaam was killed by the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 21 we even find the idea that Balaam fully intended to curse the Israelites for the rather large sum of money Balak and his coalition were offering him and only God's intervention stopped it. It wasn't that Balaam was "doing the right thing" by blessing instead of cursing, Israel; it's that he feared for his life if he went against Yehoveh.

With all the Biblical evidence in hand, we could say with some confidence that Balaam was probably just a hired gun, utterly ambivalent to right and wrong. Whatever he did he did so to his own benefit even if that benefit was only self-preservation.

So what we have in Balaam is a gentile who definitely (at least in our story) received inspiration from the Lord of Israel. This is such a strange thing: here we have God redeeming and then guiding His now well-established nation of Hebrews, but then Yehoveh turns around and communicates with a gentile prophet who is NOT part of His set-apart people. Yet, there is also no reason to assume that the Lord found special favor with Balaam; and there is no reason to consider Balaam holy, or righteous before neither Yehoveh, nor that his allegiance was to the God of Israel. And let me repeat: keep in mind all throughout our investigation, that Balaam was a gentile who was hearing directly from God. So we have a lot to untangle.

Now let me take that one step further and we'll close for today. We don't have to take this incident with Balaam as a Biblical anomaly; that is, this story involving a pagan prophet (what we might commonly term a false prophet) being inspired by God and for that reason accurately telling the future in a particular case is not unique. So hear me: the Bible confirms that a false prophet can be used of God, and even be allowed to make an accurate prediction in order for Yehoveh to achieve His own purposes.

So while correctly foretelling the future or speaking an inspired message from God or demonstrating some other seemingly legitimate spiritual gift CAN indicate a genuine interaction with the Lord, it does NOT necessarily indicate a right relationship with Yehoveh, nor does the Bible use inspiration as a surefire indicator of the holiness of that person. Deuteronomy 13 tells us that false prophets can at times accurately see the future. We find examples of this throughout the Bible: even though King Saul continued to accurately prophesy he was condemned by the Lord as a bad king that would lose his throne. Caiaphas prophesied about the death of Christ in John 11. Jewish sorcerers cast out demons using Yeshua's name, but they didn't trust in Him as Messiah OR God. The Corinthians (perhaps the greatest examples of church behavior gone wild) were said to have had many real and validated spiritual experiences, but they came up pretty short on holiness, love, and any sound doctrine to speak of.

This sort of phenomenon was common enough in Christ's time that in Matthew 7 Yeshua

warned that in the end times driving out demons, and ecstatic spiritual acts and the performing of miracles WOULD happen, and it would be real; but these acts were not necessarily to be taken as signs proving that the persons who did these things were guaranteed a place in Heaven. Rather it was only those "who did the will of my Father....."

So in both the Old and New Testaments we have demonstrations and warnings that God's inspiration of a man to achieve a purpose is not a certain sign of that man's status with Yehoveh. This in itself is good reason to always be a healthy skeptic: not of God, but of persons who purport to speak for God.

We'll continue with the fascinating theological story of Balaam and Balak next week.