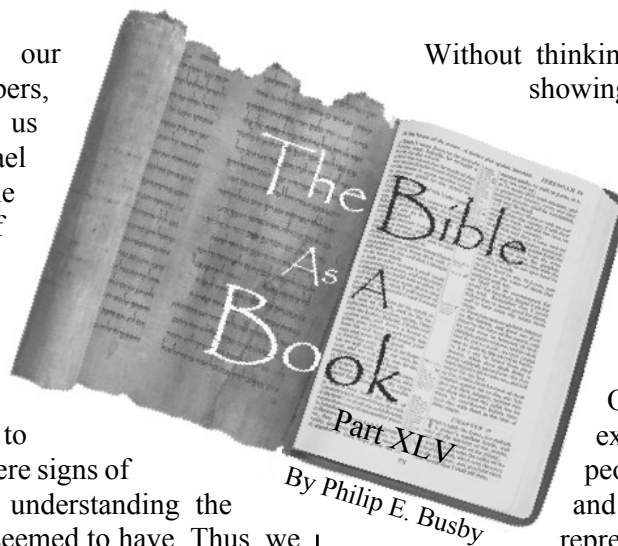


As we continue our overview of the book of Numbers, our last segment brought us through the transition of Israel being a group wandering in the wilderness for the sake of allowing a generation to pass, into a people on the move to the promised land. We talked about how this new generation showed doubt in God's ability to provide, but also how there were signs of hope they were gaining an understanding the generation before just never seemed to have. Thus, we see them not just taking a journey to where they would enter the promised land but the first battles Israel would have with the Canaanite inhabitants and the victories God gave them. This brought us to the end of Numbers chapter 21, and we are now ready for chapter 22.

The key to understanding chapter 22's story is that of remembering how Moses had requested the king of Edom allow Israel to pass through their land, and when the king said no, Israel took a path around them. Israel also went around Moab without even attempting to ask about entering their land, but when they got to a part of the land the Moabites had lost, mostly to Canaanites, Moses asks to pass through. When the Canaanites refuse, instead of going around them, Israel is told to destroy them, and they do. Israel would go on to destroy a couple more Canaanite groups living on the lands east of the Jordan, but never touched or even threatened Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, or the Midianites. This is because they were related people, descendants from Abraham and Lot. In another point that clearly shows how much this was about eliminating the Canaanites, Israel now possessed a great deal of the land on this eastern side of Jordan, but God would not break the camp of Israel from being centered around the tabernacle. At this point, Israel would set up their camp just across the Jordan from Jericho in part of the territory they had taken from the Canaanites. It was only called the plains of Moab because the Moabites had once held the area. All this indicated that the next move for Israel would be to cross the Jordan without attacking people such as Moab, which they could have done on the their way up from the south if they had intended to do so.

In spite of this, the Moabite king, named Balak, still believed Israel was a threat to the entire region.



Without thinking about how much God was showing Himself to be with Israel in giving them the victory over people the Moabites could not defeat, Balak chose to send for a prophet of God in the desire the prophet could curse Israel and halt their progress. The fact the king knew of a prophet of The One True God shows us an example of how there were still people outside the nation of Israel, and as such, not part of the representational laws but who served God, even in a ministry capacity.

While the Moabite king understood this prophet served God, he does not seem to see the conflict of having him curse the chosen nation of God. However, as the king sends for the prophet named Balaam, the king shows in his message he understands who Israel is. In spite of the fact Balak only refers to them as a people who came out of Egypt, he surely knew Israel was the nation that came from Jacob. One very interesting detail in Balak's message to Balaam is the king's observation that those whom the prophet blesses are blessed and those he curses are cursed. These are the same words God told Abraham would be true of his family in being servants of God. (Gen. 12:1-13)

The elders who go to take this message bring gifts along with them as if God can be bribed into doing what one wants, or it would do any good if one had success in bribing God's servants. When they deliver the king's message, Balaam gives them no immediate answer but tells them they will have to spend the night while he seeks God's will on the matter. When God speaks to Balaam, He asks the prophet to consider the people who had made the request, and ultimately informs Balaam he would not curse Israel because Israel was blessed. In the morning Balaam tells Balak's servants to go home because God will not allow him to go with them to do what they had requested. When they return to Balak with the news, the king simply tries to send men that were considered to be of even higher honor than those he had sent before. He would also add to the bribe that he would promote the prophet to a high position of power. Balaam assured them he could do nothing beyond what God wants him to do no matter what the king offered him, but he tells them to again spend the night so he could see what more God might have to say. That night God does speak to Balaam and

tells him only if the men continue to call for him to come could he go, but only if they understood Balaam would go solely for the purpose of doing what God told him to do.

One can only suppose it was due to the fact Balaam felt he had already made the point about God's will clear that he does not inform the men of these words. However, what is even worse is that he simply gets up in the morning and goes with them, giving them the impression God had given him the all clear to do what the king wanted. Because this is not what God had instructed him to do, God is angry with Balaam and sends an angel to block his path. It would not be Balaam who would see the angel but the donkey upon which he rode, and this causes the donkey to turn off the road so as to avoid the angel. Balaam, upset by this action, starts to strike what he sees as a rebellious animal, and they head down into a walled vineyard where they are then trapped because the angel had again put himself in front of them with his sword drawn and ready to strike. Due to this, the animal tries to turn abruptly and crushes Balaam's foot against the wall. Again, Balaam strikes the animal in anger, and, once again, the angel moves, this time blocking them in even further and leaving them no place to go. When the donkey sees this she simply halts and kneels down on the ground. This angers Balaam even further and he beats on the animal again with his staff.

It was at this point God allows the animal to show Balaam how much he was not following God's instructions in what he was doing, even to being more blind to the seriousness of the matter than an animal. To do this, God allows the donkey to speak. The words the donkey speaks points out that Balaam had stopped paying attention to and/or trusting in anyone or anything but himself. Balaam had ignored everyone from God all the way to the animal who had faithfully served him ever since Balaam had owned her. Amazingly enough, Balaam is not immediately struck by the fact he was now carrying on a conversation with an animal. However, he had little time to take that into account as God opened his eyes to see the angel the donkey had saved him from. In fear, Balaam falls on his face, and the angel begins to confirm to Balaam what the donkey had pointed out about his foolishness, and informs him that while Balaam wanted to kill the donkey, the angel would have killed him and spared her because he was not in tune with God as much as his own animal. Balaam confesses his sin of going with the

men and being too blind to the will of God to see the angel. With this, Balaam says he will turn back and not go with the king's men, but the angel tells him to go ahead and go. However, the crucial part of what Balaam had been in violation of was that he had to make clear the very thing he originally told the men about only speaking what God told him to when he got there!

When the king hears that Balaam had finally come, he goes out to him and quizzes the prophet about why he did not come immediately and if he doubted the king could promote him in power. It is always odd that people who need God's help, and even a servant of God to intervene for them in order to get it, believe they are still so great as to have something to offer such a one due to the position of "power" they believe they hold. In any case, Balaam informs the king of what he was suppose to reemphasize to the princes, which was that while it may be a fact he was there, all that meant was he was there to do the work of God and nothing more. The king ignores this and puts out the kind of feast one would for an honored guest; and in another irony, the next day Balak took Balaam out to the high places where the people worshiped the powers of the creation, in order to see Israel. In seeing Israel from this place, the king hoped Balaam would become convinced he needed to do something Balak obviously understood his false gods could not! Balaam, again, a man outside the nation to whom God had given the Law, shows he is a true prophet of God, and using God's number of completion for this creation asks for seven alters to be built upon which he would offer sacrifices to God. Balaam then tells the king to wait by the altars as he went to see if God would give him words to speak.

Balaam goes to a higher point and meets with God in the hope he had pleased God with his offerings, and God gives Balaam the words he is to speak. Balaam returns to the altars where the king and his princes were and makes it clear the king had asked him to come all this way to curse Israel, but Balaam had no power to curse those whom God had not cursed nor defy those whom God had not defied. Balaam goes on to make clear he had seen Israel so it was not that he lacked understanding of what a great people they were, and adds the fact Israel would only increase more with time and no one would be able to number Israel. They also would stand out from among all the other nations of the world as something very separate. He ends his words with the wish that his life could mean what

Israel's life was to mean and die in the righteous service of God as Israel would serve. Upon hearing this, the king shows how much he did not pay attention to what Balaam had said about only speaking what God gave him to say, or the king would not have been so astonished that Balaam had just blessed the people he wanted him to curse.

What is most odd though is that Balak was foolish enough to believe a change of venue might resolve the situation. Apparently, believing that somehow it might have frightened Balaam to see all of them, Balak wants to take him to the prominent mountain in Moab, named Pisgah, from which only part of Israel could be seen. Once on the top of this mountain, seven altars would again be built and the offerings offered on each of them. Having nowhere higher to go this time, Balaam simply tells the king he will go off a ways and see what The Lord wants him to do. God meets with Balaam, and he returns to speak God's words before the king and his princes. This time there would be an even harsher rebuke of the king about the fact God is not like man, in that He should just tell one what they want to hear or have his mind changed as if He had made a mistake on the plan He had set in motion. Balaam was only to bless Israel because that is what God had chosen to do, and for that reason God had brought them out of Egypt. He also points out one day there would be a king among Israel, which confirmed they were not going to be a loose knit group of wanderers. No amount of magic the king or others believed they could use against Israel was anything but foolishness as God was always going to be greater. Israel simply could not be stopped from doing what God had called them to do!

However, the king just could not get it out of his mind that Balaam must hold power to do something other than speak God's words about Israel. Balaam reminds Balak that he warned the king this was all he could do, but the king again insists on giving it yet another try. Thus, they go to another predominant mountain, and the cycle of seven altars with their sacrifices is accomplished again. What was different this time is that Balaam did not bother to go away and seek God because his eyes had been opened by God's words, and so he does just what the king wanted him to do, which was use his own words to speak of Israel. The problem for the king was that while he got what he wanted in Balaam speaking his own thoughts, Balaam's words were now perfectly in line with God's will!

Balaam looks out on Israel and begins to prophesy about not just what Israel would mean in the short term but what the nation would mean in the long term. He spoke of all the affects they would have on the various nations of the world and how they would prevail as God's chosen nation until the end of this earth. He even adds the words of how Israel would be the one upon whom curses and blessings would come according to whom they cursed and blessed. When the king heard all this he was enraged, and began to rant about how the prophet had denied himself great rewards by listening to God instead of doing what the king wanted. To this, Balaam reminds the king one more time that he had told his princes when they first came to him that he could only do God's will.

Balaam shows no fear of the king, and before he goes tells Balak what else he knows about what the future holds for Moab and the surrounding region because of Israel. Balaam tells Balak how it would not be the immediate future he should worry about being a danger to Moab, but further down the road Moab would be ruled over by Israel. Not only that, while Israel would go on into the future, the Moabites would eventually cease to exist as a people. Edom would suffer much of the same fate and its great stronghold would become the possession of others. Balaam goes on to look across the Canaanites and speak to how they were the prey of Israel in spite of the fact so many of them, unlike Balak, felt secure in their ability to face Israel. He concludes by speaking to the point there was really no hope that any of the people of the region could maintain long-term survival as a people, because many other people beside just those Moab normally dealt with would become involved in the region. Because Israel was in God's plan to be used as His chosen nation, they would go on to be involved in all these future events; but the people Balak thought were so important would not! With this, Balaam would go home and Balak would return to his seat of "power," having gotten a much different outcome than he had hoped for.

The events of this story are very appropriately followed by the next events we are told, which are that of Israel involving themselves with the Moabites and Midianites in the practice of their false religion. What is interesting about this is that in one instance the king of Moab along with the princes of Midian are desirous that a prophet of God curse Israel for them because they are afraid of them. In the next instance we see

those very same people being friendly with the Israelites and seducing them into taking part in their pagan practices. This is not to excuse Israel's own choice in involving themselves, and the story shows us God held them directly accountable for their actions. However, it is reasonable to assume that Moab and Midian decided to change tactics and go right along the lines the devil would use. It was as if to say, if God won't help us then we will destroy Israel from within by getting them to turn away from God, and long term it might have worked had not God and those zealous for Him acted to turn back this activity and punish those involved.

Basically, the Moabites' main religion involved worshipping a set of false gods which hold or represent the powers of nature as there is in almost all cultures. Almost without exception certain of these gods end up being held in higher regard than the others in any culture's particular set. While it is not clear just which specific god might have been worshiped in this incidence, one can speculate that it was a god mentioned later in the history which Moab held in high regard. (I Kin. 11:6-8) In any case, the verses here simply referred to it as Baal-peor, which basically is to say the god(s) of the mountain Peor. In Greek terms this might have been to say they were joined in the worship of the gods of Mount Olympus. This means it really did not matter which specific god there may or may not have been a high feast for at this time, it is only important that a false god or gods was being worshiped. Whether those Israelites that joined in on this did so in order to worship false gods or just for the revelry of the celebration is also not important. This was a personal affront to God, and it would seem it included some very lewd and promiscuous acts between males and females, as so often pagan festivals do.

For this, God told Moses those who were involved were to be put to death by hanging them facing the sun. In almost all cultures the sun was considered one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of their gods, and hanging these individuals with their faces toward the sun made an example of how much this kind of activity would not be tolerated among Israel. It also represented how much these would not live to see another sunrise. Moses instructs those who were appointed judges in Israel, for the sake of taking some of the burden off Moses, to go out and be sure the sentence was carried out for all those under their

jurisdiction. However, due to this same sin, a plague had also begun to move through Israel, and those who had not taken part in this sin had gathered themselves before the door of the tabernacle to weep and pray for God's forgiveness. In a blatant disregard for this, we are told one of the men of Israel who had joined in the pagan festivities actually brought a Midianite woman back to the camp of Israel. As bad as it was to go out of the camp and join others in the worship of false gods, bringing the activity into the camp of Israel was an even higher offense, as this entire incident brings to mind the time before the flood when those who served God began to take wives out from among those who did not serve God. (Gen. 6:1-3) Before the flood, such activity brought an end to the distinction between those who lived for God and those who rejected Him until the entire world came to such a corrupt state the end of all flesh came before God. In a more isolated way that is the threat this kind of activity brought directly into the nation of Israel.

Another fact we are told about this particular couple is that both the man and the woman represented leadership among their families. Thus, this was not just about a couple of foolish young people choosing to have a fling. The joining of this couple would represent a joining on a political level between Israel and Midian. This was exactly the kind of connections with the people of the land God had warned Israel not to make! For this blatant act, Phinehas, the son of the High Priest, rose up, got a spear, and went into the couple's tent. There he drove the spear through them both, killing them and making it clear that no such connections would be tolerated in Israel. What is important about the fact this was a man in the direct line of the High Priesthood who took this action is that in any normal circumstance the act of killing another human for any reason would be something God did not allow the priest to be involved in, if for no other reason than to ensure the priest could remain clean in order to carry out the ordinances of the tabernacle. Another reason is so the priests would not have blood on their hands in general. The idea of not believing the priesthood and service of the tabernacle was established through military might is exactly why, later on, God did not allow David to build the temple but left it for his son Solomon to do once Israel was in a time of peace.

However, in the case of Phinehas, we see a man who was overcome with the righteous zeal for the

purity of Israel and punishment of sin. Not only did this not bring any punishment from God upon him but a blessing instead. In the end of it all, 24,000 in Israel died due to the plague and those executed for their sin as God had commanded to be done, but Phinehas' actions are what God said He stopped the plague because of. Thus, God speaks to Moses specifically about how this action by Phinehas had made an atonement for Israel's sin in this matter, and due to that it would secure God's favor on his house, and his family line would go on to be perpetual priests. God also affirms to Moses that the Midianites did this as an intentional act to undermine Israel, which is what made Phinehas' actions so appropriate. For this, Moses was to specifically vex the Midianites. As was covered before, God was using Israel to destroy the Canaanite population while leaving those descended from Israel's same family line alone. While there is more than one group of people known as Midianites, this particular group, which was nomadic and living in the same general region with the Moabites, would appear to be one descendant from one of the sons of Abraham through Keturah. This is why God makes it clear to Moses he is to vex them. They would have been part of the groups Israel would have left intact and not bothered, but that would now change. Though one important note on this is that vexing is still not an order to utterly destroy them as God had/would command to be done to the Canaanite populations.

Next, we have the record of another census being taken in Israel much as was done early on after they left Egypt. However, this would be a census of a new generation in Israel, and it is confirmed to us this took place after the plague which had killed many thousands. Moses and Eleazar are told to count all those able to go to war who were twenty years old and older accounting for the numbers that belonged to each house. This would basically go down the lines of the tribes, but family groups inside each tribe are named. Among Reuben there were four major houses, and altogether they numbered 43,730. It is also pointed out that this tribe was diminished by the incident where Dathan and Abiram, along with Korah had come against Moses and Aaron. While Korah's family group, who was of Levi, survived; the houses of Reuben's tribe that were involved did not.

Next was Simeon, of whom there were five major houses, and in all they numbered 22,200. Gad consisted of seven major houses, and in all they

numbered 40,500. Two of Judah's sons died before Israel even ended up in Egypt, but the tribe went on to consist of three primary houses and two more notable ones that both grew out of one of the three, giving five major houses in all and a total number in Judah of 76,500. Issachar consisted of four major houses, and in all they numbered 64,300. Zebulun consisted of three major houses, and in all they numbered 60,500. Joseph became the two tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh consisted of one primary house, out of which came another notable house, and from that one came six more notable houses. For reasons which become apparent later on, it is also noted here that a part of one of the houses within these last six consisted only of daughters. However, in all, Manasseh consisted of eight major houses, and in all numbered 52,700. Ephraim consisted of three primary houses, and out of one of these came one more notable house making four major houses, and in all they number 32,500.

Benjamin consisted of five major houses, and out of one of them came two more notable houses making seven houses, and in all they numbered 45,600. Dan consisted of only one major house and numbered 64,400. Asher consisted of three major houses, and out of one of them came two more notable houses. Asher's daughter Sarah is also mentioned here, but this made for five major houses, and in all they numbered 53,400. Naphtali consisted of four major houses, and in all they numbered 45,400. This would cover all the tribes of Israel, leaving out the tribe of Levi. In all, these tribes numbered 601,730 of those able to go to war, twenty years old and older. It would be unto these groups the promised land would be divided. Bigger groups would get bigger plots of land and smaller groups would get smaller plots. However, no favor would be shown in giving bigger or smaller groups land that was more preferable than another. To keep down any arguing in this regard, a random drawing system would be used to choose which group's plot would be mapped out one after the other.

Let's stay in God's Word!

