**BALAK (2ND** part in triennial cycle)

*B’Midbar* (*Numbers*) 22:39 – 23:26

*Eitz Hayim* 899; Plaut 1176; Hertz 673

Parashat *Balak* is an interlude in Jewish Biblical History. The Israelites have fought their way south to north through much of Moab. They are now resting on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho, and making preparations for their move westward into Canaan, their real objective. In between is *Parashat Balak*, which describes an attempt at cursing the Israelites by Balaam, a quasi-prophet from Midian. Balaam is not himself angry at Israel; he is acting only in response to an offer of money from Moab’s King Balak. His curses are defeated by God while Israel does not even know that it is under threat.

*Eitz Hayim* has a slightly different view of *Parashat Balak* (894):

This *parashah* contains what may be the only comic page in the Torah. It tells how Balaam, reputedly the world’s most powerful wizard, cannot find his way out of his own neighborhood, and how his attempts to curse Israel are turned into blessings in his mouth. The overall message, however, is a serious one: God continues to watch over Israel and extend divine protection to them, despite their recalcitrant behavior and lack of appreciation.

Another view is found in *The Torah: A Women’s* Commentary by Eshkenazi and Weiss (937), which also notes that *Balak* is written “in a different scribal circle from what one finds before and after it in B’Midbar:

The story of Balaam is inserted at this juncture because its outcome will determine whether Israel will indeed inherit the Promised Land. Actually, it is a contest in the divine realm between the God of Israel and those supernatural elements available to Balak.

R. Plaut writes (chumash 1170) that, “The special quality of the this story encouraged the Talmudic opinion that it was a separate book of the Bible,” so that *B’Midbar* (*Numbers*) would be divided into three books. Perhaps, but I suggest that, rather than a Biblical book, *Parashat* *Balak* is more like a short story with three chapters--22, 23 and 24. Chapter 25 is added to this parashah but I cannot think why. It fits much better with *Pinchas,* the next *parashah.*

We are reading the middle third of *parashat* *Balak*, but today’s text is rather lost without some information on what has already happened. Balak, the wealthy King of Moab, is frightened after hearing how successful Israel has been as it defeated king after king fighting its way northward, and he turned to Balaam to reverse what he presumably saw as Israel’s luck by cursing Israel. Balaam is at first true to his mandate and tells Balak’s messenger that he can only relate what God tells him to say. Balak then ups the ante for Balaam with an offer of a rich reward. Balaam is sorely tempted and asks God for permission to go to Balak. In my view, God is thinking that it is time to pull Balaam down off his presumptuous pedestal so He says to Balaam, OK, you can go but remember “whatever I command you, that you shall do.” This resumé brings us to the end of the first third of *Parashat* *Balak—*except that I have skipped the whole story of the talking donkey, which could easily be a d’var in itself. The important point is that Balaam tries by one subterfuge or another to get the answer he wants from God, yet it never works.

The middle third of the *parashah* describes Balaam’s first two attempts to curse Israel. The author adds to the tension by describing how Balaam orders preparations for the cursing. They start with an initial set of evening sacrifices that were eaten by the king, his entourage, and Balaam, presumably with appropriate fluids to ensure they would sleep well before the big day. The big day starts with the construction of seven new altars with a bull and a ram sacrificed on each. (Bulls and rams were the biggest animals and therefore presumed to be the most influential for the gods.) Balak guides Balaam to a high point of land from which he can look down on the Israelite camp. (The Hertz chumash indicates (669) that heathen curses work only if you can see the target of the curse.) At last, it is Balaam’s turn at centre-stage. He tells Balak to leave him there alone. And Balaam shouts out his curses, but, as we have known all along, God intercedes and what comes out of his mouth are blessings.

“Oy vey,” shouts Balak, or something like that. You have done exactly the reverse of what I wanted. So he guides Balaam to another high point, but, thinking that the size of the Israelite camp had perhaps scared God, it was one where Balaam could only see some of the Israelites. They go through the same set of preparations—apparently Balak had no shortage of bulls or rams—but once again when Balaam tries to curse Israel what emerges are more blessings.

Balak cannot believe what has happened after he had made all the proper preparations. Balaam responds publically that he had always warned that he could only say what God allowed, but privately he must have been wondering how to influence God to let him curse Israel and get those riches that Balak had promised him. So when Balak suggests a third try, but neither to curse nor to bless—I have no idea what he really wanted—Balaam jumped at the chance. Not surprisingly that doesn’t work any better, but you will have to come to Shul next year to hear what happens in the third year of the triennial cycle of Parashat Balak.

So what eIse needs to be noted in this middle third of *Parashat Balak?* After all, Balaam is known as a wonder worker, a wizard, a visionary. He even appears in non-Biblical plaster wall inscriptions (Eshkenazi and Weiss, 937). We cannot ignore that Balaam did have some personal relationship with God, yet in later parashiot he appears to become an implacable enemy of Israel, perhaps as revenge. As the commentary in the Hertz chumash states (668), “Balaam’s personality is an old enigma, which has baffled the skill of commentators.” He goes on to say that “some Jewish opinions are decidedly and emphatically favourable” to Balaam.

This position took me by surprise. Balaam is a bad guy, indeed a very bad guy, but I finally found something attractive in the man, at least when he is speaking in his role of wizard or visionary. Balaam speaks not in prose but in poetry—twice in the middle third of *Parashat Balak*, and twice again in the third part. His language must have been special to gain the notoriety that he had, and poetry may have seemed to him to be a notably influential way of declaiming curses or blessings.

If you are surprised at my statement about Balaam speaking in poetry, it may be because of the chumash you are using. Bravo to *Eitz Hayim* and to the *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, which print Balaam’s words in poetic format in both English and Hebrew. Partial credit goes to the Hertz chumash, which prints only the English in poetic format. And shame on the Plaut chumash, which prints neither in poetic format. Balaam is truly a bad guy, but let’s give him whatever credit he deserves.

The poetry itself is typical of the Biblical format of couplets. That is, one sentence makes a statement, and the immediate following sentence repeats the idea or strengthens it. Particularly good examples are the following:

How can I damn whom God has not damned, / How doom when God has not damned?

There is a people that dwells apart, / Not reckoned among the nations,

And in the words that open every Jewish morning service:

How fair are your tents, O Israel / Your dwellings, O Israel

Then, perhaps because he is talking about himself, Balaam can also write quatrains:

Word of Balaam, son of Beor / Word of the man whose eye is true

Word of one who hears God’s speech / Who beholds visions from the Almighty,

Pity that Balaam did not take his own words to heart instead of trying to push God around. R. Plaut relates a Chasidic story that Balaam was blind in one eye (1187). How so? Each person has two eyes: with one eye he sees the greatness of God; with the other his own smallness. Balaam had an eye to see God’s greatness, but was blind to see his own smallness.

***SHABBAT SHALOM***