

SESSION EIGHTEEN

PREPARATION OF THE NEW GENERATION

Numbers 22:1—36:13

I. INTRODUCTION

The material in chapters 22—36 involves a period of less than six months and takes place in the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan from Canaan. The thirty-eight years in the wilderness has drawn to a close and the new generation has risen up to enter the land. However, even with them lies a wayward heart as the "sin of Peor" bears witness to (Num 25). In fact, Moses declares in the sermon of Deuteronomy, "*Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear*" (Deut 29:4). The new generation is little better than the previous one, and likewise will degenerate in time.

II. STRUCTURE FOR THE FINAL MAJOR SECTION OF NUMBERS (26:1—6:13)

- A. Final Preparations (26:1—27:23)
 - 1. Numbering of the New Generation (26:1-55)
 - 2. Provision for Zelophehad's Daughters (27:1-11)
 - 3. Appointment of Joshua (27:12-23)
- B. Cultic Matters (28:1—30:16)
 - 1. Regular Sacrifices (28:1-15)
 - 2. Sacrifices for Feast Days (28:16—29:40)
 - 3. Laws of Vows (30:1-16)
- C. Defeat of Midian and the Booty (31:1-54)
- D. Anticipation of the Conquest (32:1—36:13)
 - 1. Inheritance on the East Side of the Jordan (32:1-42)
 - 2. Record of the Journeys (33:1-49)
 - 3. Instruction for Possessing the Land (33:50—35:8)
 - 4. Provision of Cities of Refuge (35:9-34)
 - 5. Regulation for Inheritance by Marriage (36:1-13)

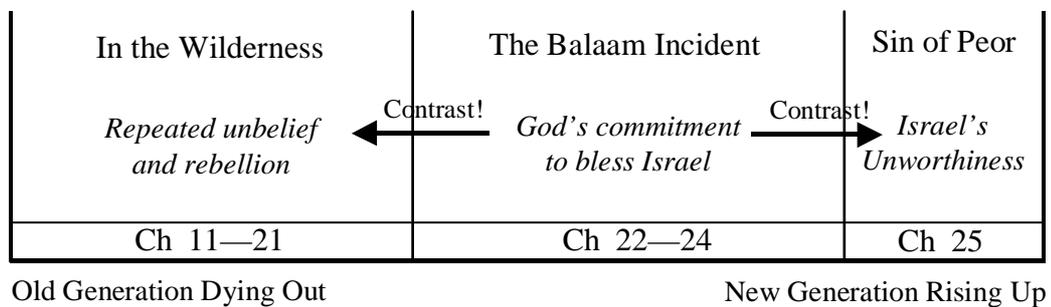
Although the final major section of the book commences with ch 26 and the numbering of the New Generation, the material in chapters 22:1—25:18 is an important backdrop for how we view this new generation. This concerns the Balaam Oracles, the primary subject of these notes.

III. THE BALAAM ORACLES¹

A. Introduction

These chapters come unexpectedly and as a surprise, for the preceding chapters from 10:11 onward center on Israel's intentional sin of unbelief and rebellion. Though we might expect *cursing* from God upon the nation, what we see is the theme of blessing on Israel. The setting for the event is in the plains of Moab. Aaron has already died and most of the older exodus generation have died off. The nation is ready to enter the land. These chapters bear out YHWH's faithfulness to the nation that still possesses a wayward heart. YHWH's steadfast love (*hesed*) for them certainly is not based on any merit in them.

THE BROAD PERSPECTIVE FOR THE BALAAM ORACLES



The bulk of the material is presented from a perspective within the camp of the Midianites rather than from within the camp of Israel. The reader is taken into the Midianite camp and allowed to see their fear and dread of the Israelites (22:3). They are aware what Israel did to the Amorites, and so the king (Balak) turns to a superstitious plot to do harm to Israel. He wants to employ a curse against them and so devises a scheme to summon a diviner named Balaam to curse Israel. The whole theological significance is seen in this. When Balak calls for Balaam, he declares, "*I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed*" (22:6). Obviously, he did not have the divine perspective on this, for God had promised the nation from the time of Abraham, "*I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you*" (Gen 12:3). So the events of Num 22—25 become a test case of the Abrahamic Covenant. God will discipline and punish His people, but He will not allow another to arbitrarily call a curse upon them (22:12).

¹ For an excellent study on the Balaam Oracles, see Ronald B. Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 79-119.

B. The Structure

BALAK'S FAILURE TO TURN YHWH AGAINST ISRAEL					BALAK'S SUCCESS IN TURNING ISRAEL AGAINST YHWH
Introduc.	1 st Oracle	2 nd Oracle	3 rd Oracle	4 th Oracle	
<i>Balaam summoned</i>	<i>Israel is unique Cannot be cursed</i>	<i>Certainty of God's Word to bless Israel, since YHWH dwells in their midst</i>	<i>Exaltation of Israel in triumph and mediating blessing</i>	<i>Ultimate blessing to come with Messiah</i>	
22:1-41	23:1-12	23:13-26	23:27— 24:13	24:14-25	25:1-18

C. The Person of Balaam

On a quick reading of these chapters, one may get the impression that Balaam was a faithful prophet who knew and loved YHWH. However, such a conclusion is far from the truth as other passages confirm:

Josh 13:22 - killed as a diviner by the sons of Israel

Josh 24:10 - YHWH was unwilling to listen to Balaam

2 Pet 2:15-16 - Balaam had gone astray, having loved the wages of unrighteousness

Jude 11 - speaks of the "error of Balaam"

cf. Num 31:8,16; Deut 23:5-6; Neh 13:2; Mic 6:5; Rev 2:14

Num 31:8,16 are enlightening verses. When God later had the Israelites kill the Midianites, Balaam was also killed because he was responsible for the sin of Peor (immorality). It was his counsel to the Midianites that they could make Israel stumble by enticing the Israelites to commit sexual sin with Midianite women, thereby incurring God's wrath.

Insights from archaeology could also be introduced, as Merrill has suggested:

Cuneiform texts from the important Amorite city-state of Mari document the existence of a complex guild of prophets who were expert in a variety of skills including divination. These documents date mainly from about 1700 B.C., but the types of prophets and prophetic techniques described are attested throughout the eastern Mediterranean world for hundreds of years on both sides of that date.²

Balaam did have some knowledge of YHWH (cf. Deut 2:25; Ex 23:27), although his heart was not truly with the LORD. Balaam had a conflict between knowledge and will. He knew YHWH did not want him to go (22:12), and yet when Balak's messengers made a second visit

²Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 89-90. Cf. Herbert B. Huffman, "Prophecy in the Mari Letters," *BA* 31 (1968):101-24; and A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 206-27.

he informed them that he would see "*what else the LORD will speak to me*" (22:19). There was no need for this, since YHWH had already made His will absolutely plain. This only reveals that Balaam did not really live to please YHWH, although he hypocritically spoke of YHWH as "the LORD my God" (22:18). Balaam was a pagan diviner, apparently having had some success with blessing and cursing people (22:6). For him, YHWH was not the only God but merely one among many gods that fit into his practice of divination. Nevertheless, Balaam knows about YHWH and seems to realize that YHWH is not one whom he can manipulate. Therefore, on the surface he cooperates with YHWH but is really pursuing his own interests. His attitude was more like "I cannot manipulate or control YHWH; therefore I will cooperate as far as I have to but seize any opportunity possible to further my own interests." Although he said he was not interested in Balak's money or honor, he really was (2 Pet 2:15-16). Balaam had a struggle with desire and conscience; covetousness ruled him (though the truth was clear to him). God's permission to let Balaam go was only a reflection of His permissive will, but obviously not what God wanted—"God was angry because he was going" (22:12; cf. 22:32). Balaam is used of God, to Balak's grief, because God had a particular purpose to accomplish and not because Balaam was a righteous man. The truth is that he was covetous and an ambitious hypocrite, pretending one thing and intending another. Thus, God used him in spite of who he was, in order that Balaam might perform His will for His glory.

But if God really did not want Balaam to go, why the apparent change of mind to permit him to do so? In permitting Balaam to go, YHWH demonstrated more forcefully His choice of Israel. At the same time, however, Balaam is seen to be a stubborn man. This seems to be the point of Balaam's donkey which is confronted by the LORD. The donkey, from earliest time, has been a symbol of stubbornness, and the use of the donkey in Num 22 is meant to form a contrast with Balaam: the blind seer (a stubborn fellow himself) sees less than the dumb animal. But this makes Balaam the perfect personality for these oracles. He is not an Israelite or even a faithful part of the covenant community (i.e., one who naturally favored Israel). He is a seer who can be used of God, and yet he would jump at any chance to curse Israel. If there were any inclination in YHWH to curse Israel, Balaam would be more than willing to reveal it and take Balak's gold.

D. The Oracles

Within each oracle, the original desire to curse ends with the desire to bless. Overall, as the oracles progress, the blessing becomes more and more specific and Balak becomes angrier with each one. Obviously, Balak's desire to have Israel cursed must be understood in light of the Abrahamic covenant. The blessing of God is based not on Israel's merit but on His faithfulness to what He had promised in the Abrahamic covenant. The only way to alter God's intent to bless Israel would be to have YHWH change His mind. But YHWH is unique and cannot be changed by any means of divination, as gods of the pagan world often were (23:22-23).

1. First Oracle (23:1-12)

Balaam cries out, "*How shall I curse, whom God has not cursed?*" (23:8). Any attempt to curse Israel is ineffective, for Israel has been made unique . . . she dwells apart (23:9). God does not deal with her as with other nations, and Balaam cannot deal with Israel as with other nations.

2. Second Oracle (23:13-26)

It is futile to seek a change of YHWH's mind, for He never backs out of a promise. He has promised to bless Israel, and He will make it good. YHWH dwells in the midst of Israel, and even omens and divination cannot alter that.

3. Third Oracle (23:27—24:13)

The focus is now on the blessing that Israel shall surely experience, both in exaltation and in triumph over her enemies. The proper way to relate to Israel is to bless her, not curse her, for that is the way to mediated blessing (24:9). Other nations should submit themselves to the divine plan revealed in Gen 12:1-3.

4. Fourth Oracle (24:14-25)

The final oracle envisions a "*star from Jacob*" and "*one from Jacob who is to have dominion.*" This is obviously a Messianic expectation. Every enemy of Israel will be brought low and the coming of Israel's Messiah will assure that!

The oracles close on the thought that YHWH is in absolute control of His universe, and His will cannot be thwarted. Balaam confesses, "*Alas, who can live except God has ordained it?*" YHWH cannot be turned against Israel.

This truth is what makes the incident in Num 25 so significant. When Israel committed the grievous sin at Peor, they were at their worst behavior. They played the harlot with the Midianite women, and they even ate and bowed down to the gods of the pagans (even Baal). If YHWH ever needed a reason to call off His plan for Israel, as reflected in the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, this incident certainly qualified as such an occasion. Vischer points out:

Assuredly Israel seems to have forsaken its blessing--yet nevertheless (and this is the miracle of God's faithfulness, which is incomparably more wonderful than the fact that Balaam's ass opens its mouth to speak), the Lord transforms the curse in the mouth of Balaam into a blessing. Despite all Israel's infidelity, the blessing of Abraham and blessing of Jacob remain.³

Properly seen, this marks a solid basis for premillennialism and the expectation of a future for Israel: if God does not reject them now, we need not think He will ever do so at any future point in biblical history!

IV. CONCLUSION

Finally, we could say that Numbers is a well-stated commitment of YHWH to the Abrahamic covenant, irregardless of the nation's obedience. The exodus generation rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea, and the new generation totally perverted the concept of covenant faithfulness at Peor. Yet the nation is not abandoned, and God's plan continues on. What does happen is not an abrogation of the covenant, but a forfeiture of blessing and experiencing of discipline by that generation. Disobedience does not go unchecked. But the covenant remains valid and ready for the generation that will submit to YHWH.

³Wilhelm Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*, trans. A. B. Crabtree (London: Lutterworth, 1950), 1:233.