

Parashat Balak

The Israelites are now on the threshold of the Promised Land. Their tents are pitched on the hills of Moab looking over the Jordan and Jericho, to the hills of Judah. The actual invasion, however, is not described until the book of Joshua. The incredible story of Balaam comes at this point, to emphasise the irresistible advance of Israel along the path which Adonai had mapped out for her. Over the years I have puzzled over the apparent contradictions in the story. For instance, verses 22:20 and 22:22 are contradictory - in the first, God agrees that Balaam should go to Balak but in the second, expresses His anger at the going. This is perhaps due to the fact that different versions may have been woven into the same narrative? The Priestly tradition, as opposed to the JE tradition, represents Balaam in an unfavourable light. This could account for his evil reputation in the Brit Hadashah, as we have read in 2 Peter 2: verse 1 and 13-16, this morning.

Balak, king of Moab, alarmed at Israel's military successes, attempts to overcome them by sorcery. He sends for Balaam, a well known wizard from the East, to put a curse on Israel which, in ancient belief, was, like a blessing, both irrevocable and effective. Balaam, against his employer's wishes, insists on blessing Israel instead of cursing her. The moral is that even a heathen seer is impelled to proclaim that absolutely nothing can stop the people whom God has appointed to fulfil their destiny as masters of the Promised Land. This, the faithful believe, is true to this day. Balaam can do nothing but praise Israel. Why, even that amazing, intelligent, talking ass recognises the hand of Adonai in the matter!

Once again the motif is the inexplicable grace of God, who despite the failure and rebellion of His people - and their unworthiness has been writ large on every page of their journey from Sinai to Moab - has nevertheless laid His hand upon them for His own divine purpose of Creation to Completion. This divine plan, will not be thwarted by Israelite folly and disobedience; although the price of folly and disobedience must be paid, as has been made clear in the preceding chapters of Israelite wanderings. In a sense, the oracle of Balaam stands in the same line, and in part uses the same words, as the blessing given to Abraham and passed on by Isaac to Jacob. Recall Genesis 12:3, 'I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.' Put bluntly, the blessing and the promise are by the will of God the only reason why this stubborn, recalcitrant and altogether ungrateful people should not be left to meet the fate they deserve. Likewise, we moderns as individuals, are only saved by the grace of God's Son and His Sacrifice and Resurrection. All is part of that divine plan, Creation to Completion.

Balaam's fourth oracular blessing of Israel is of huge significance. Numbers 20:17 puts it thus, "I see him but not now; I behold him but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel...." Although the Star which Balaam's vision foretells doubtless refers to David, much thought sees behind David the person of the Messiah Himself. This thought treats the whole passage as a pointer to the ultimate victory of Yeshua and the Israel of God. Thus, we read in Revelation 22:16, "I, Yeshua, have sent My angel to give you this

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testimony.....I am the Root and the Offspring of David and the bright Morning Star.”

The narrative later suggests that Balak, having failed to block the Israelite progress by magic, resorted to a more insidious method. Following Balaam’s unsuccessful attempt to curse the Jewish nation, Moabite and Midianite women seduce many Jewish men. In the course of their seduction, they also entice the men to worship the *Baal Peor* deity. God commands Moses to execute the guilty people, and simultaneously a lethal plague erupts amongst the Jews. A Jewish leader, Zimri, brazenly and publicly displays the Midianite princess with whom he is consorting. Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, runs his spear through both. The plague is halted and God honours the man Phinehas who was so passionate for God’s Name that he acted in such a decisive fashion to defend that honour.

Next week’s portion details the ruthless massacre of the Midianites, on God’s instructions. A casual reading of the text misses the point here. A more thoughtful reading makes one ponder why such a ruthless massacre was deemed fitting for what appears to be a casual promiscuity between the men of Israel and the women of Moab and Midian. The Ras Shamra tablets, discovered in the 1930’s at Ugarit, Syria, give the clue. No greater contrast could be imagined than that between the austere and disciplined sex life of Israel’s desert days and the licentious atmosphere of the fertility cults of Canaan. The Moabite/Midianite pattern followed a similar pattern to that of Egypt and Babylonia. In Canaan, the chief god was El - a name used of God in Genesis, with the normal Torah word for God, Elohim, the plural form denoting “majesty”. El’s consort was Asherah - a word often found in the bible, generally translated as “grove.” When the Israelites finally entered Canaan, they found the peoples worshipping their gods in temples in the cities and on the “high places”; that is, artificial temple mounds, in the villages. Associated with the “high place” was a sacred tree or carved tree trunk representing the goddess Asherah and therefore called by her name. The son of El and Asherah was Baal, the storm god, often represented as a bull.

This religion was common in the Fertile Crescent and was highly sophisticated and accompanied by elaborate ritual, based on a mythological representation of the seasons. Thus, the dying vegetation in autumn was followed by its re-birth in spring, giving rise to the myth of the death and resurrection of the god. This god was Baal in Canaan and he owned the land and gave life-giving spring rains for the farmers. This meant each place had its own little Baal and its own little goddess and they were regarded as manifestations of the cosmic deities. Now, Baal’s sexual union with his sister and consort, Anath or Ashtart, was seen as the basis for the fertility of the soil. As a result, the ordinary worshipper believed that imitative worship by some magical process could assist the fertility of his land. Therefore, he engaged in the sex act in the temples of the cities and the “high places” of the villages, with male and female representatives of the god - the sacred prostitutes.

Sacred prostitution was thus part of normal Canaan worship. This was later to prove a great threat to Israel’s allegiance to Adonai. Here, in this portion, it seems that the Israelites first

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encountered this sensuous and demoralising menace to their faith - and that was before even setting a foot in the Promised Land. We can see why Moses's re-action was so violent with regard to the Midianites and Moabites. The menace would undoubtedly have turned the Israelite's thoughts to pleasures of the flesh rather than the arduous tasks that lay before them. It would also have robbed their faith in the One and Only God of one of its distinctive characteristics. A breakdown in the rigid sexual standard was but the first step to the Israelites' faith becoming indistinguishable in all respects from the polytheism that surrounded them. It is no wonder that Phinehas drove his spear through Zimri and his Midianite princess. Then it was that God stopped the plague but not before those who died from it numbered 24,000. The rot had been stopped..... for now.