

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

### PARASHAT BALAK

#### Bilam and Balak

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Parashat Balak is a parasha of dialogues. The most striking is that between Bilam and his ass, and the one which justifiably draws the most attention is the one between Bilam and God, both for what it says about God's relationship with Israel and for its insight into the enigmatic character of Bilam, who is characterized by the Sages as the "prophet of the gentiles." I would like to concentrate on a related but somewhat different dialogue, the one between Balak and Bilam, which continues throughout the parasha, and is the actual framework for most of what is related.

While the character of Bilam is problematic, even a cursory reading of the parasha presents him as a *tzaddik* compared to Balak. Balak constantly presses Bilam to curse Israel, and Bilam repeatedly replies that he will do only that which God instructs him. In the final result, Balak refuses to pay him, and Bilam accepts that result. While psychologically it is not hard to find clues to what Bilam would have really wished to do, were he not bound by the hand of God, it is still undoubtedly true that in the relationship between him and Balak, he is the hero and Balak the villain (at least up and till the incident of *Baal Peor*, where his name is not actually mentioned in the parasha).

The parasha opens with a description of Balak. "Balak son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Emori" (22,2). In this verse he is not described as king of Moav. Only two verses later, after describing the worried consultation of Moav and Midian about the danger of the Jews, does the Torah add "and Balak ben Tzippor was king of Moav **at that time**" (22,4). This leads many commentators to conclude that he was appointed king only **after** the people of Moav began to worry about the danger posed by the approaching Israelite nation. The Ramban claims that this was because, as part of their preparations for war, they needed a mighty warrior as king, and Balak filled the role. The only support the Ramban is able to find for his assumption that Balak was a military figure is in the verse in Shoftim which was in last week's haftara, where Yiftach asks the king of Ammon whether he sees himself as "better than Balak ben Tzippor," who did not wage war on Israel when they came from Egypt. The Ramban understands this question to mean – are you mightier than the famous hero Balak, who did not dare to wage war on us, that you now seek to fight with us. In our parasha there is, in fact, no hint that Balak is a warrior. If we remember that our only knowledge of the character called Balak before being informed that he was the king **at that time** is that he "saw all that Israel had done to the Emori," it is reasonable to conclude that he was chosen king for precisely **that** reason – that he was

perceptive. He was the one who raised the issue and warned the people of Moav of the approaching danger, and hence he was chosen to deal with the problem.

In other words – and this is my first point – Balak is introduced as a perceptive statesman and strategist, who had studied the Jewish advance on the land of Canaan, and specifically had been impressed by the surprising victory of the band of escaped slaves over the mighty kings of the Emori, Sichon and Og. This had resulted in a state of psychological panic in the people of Moav, and Balak had been specifically chosen as king in response, to offer a response and "save the day."

Now we begin the dialogue.

### **First act: 22,5-13**

Balak sends messengers to Bilam, asking him to curse the "people who have come from Egypt," for – he explains – "I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse shall be cursed." In other words, Balak ascribes power to Bilam – he has the power to bless and to curse. Hence, Bilam can be hired to change the destiny of Israel and Moav.

Bilam answers (after consulting with God, which may indicate something about Bilam's own desires and beliefs – but we are not concerned with his character now) that God has not permitted him to go with the messengers of Balak. Notice – he does not in any way indicate that if he did go he could not meet the demand. His answer implies that he does in fact have the power to overcome Israel; however, he is not permitted to go. Like all men, Bilam obeys the commands of his God. In this case, that means that he restrains the power that he possesses and does not use it against God's express command.

Does Bilam actually believe that he possesses this power? It is interesting to note that when Bilam repeats the message of the messengers of Moav to God at night, he cites their words nearly verbatim, with one very notable exception. He leaves out entirely the explanation of Balak that "I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse shall be cursed." Bilam does not dare repeat this to God, for of course it is absurd – the power to bless or curse is God's. The real reason that Bilam asks God what to do is because he can only curse the people if God agrees to curse them. In other words, it is not prohibited to go to Balak against God's command, it is pointless to go without God's support. But Bilam does not tell this to Balak (or rather, at this point, to the messengers of Balak). He does not wish to impugn his professional reputation, which is based on the occult powers he is believed to possess. In the morning, he merely tells them that he is not permitted to **travel** to Balak, implying nothing about his ability to curse or bless.

Technically, this is accurate, as what God had told him was "Do not go with them" (22,12). And so, Bilam tells them that "God has refused to permit me to go with you" (22,13). It is just that he has left out a little. God told Bilam, "Do not go with them, do not

curse the people." Bilam conveniently leaves out the second part. What is more, God has added a reason for the prohibition. "Do not go with them, do not curse the people, for **they are blessed.**" The last part directly contradicts the premise of Balak and the pretense of Bilam. Blessing and curse are not actually in the mouth of Bilam at all. It is not only prohibited, it is pointless, as they are blessed (by God) before Bilam begins to act. Of course Bilam does not cite this part of God's statement to the messengers of Balak.

### **Second act: 22,16-38**

Balak sends a second request to Bilam. This time, the message begins with the opening, "Thus speaks Balak ben Tzippor, do not refrain to come to me." This sentence includes both the formal emphasis on the status of the king, and a not very well hidden threat. The first time, Balak offered Bilam an assignment. This time he is given a direct royal order.

Since Bilam had claimed that his inability to give Balak what he had requested was rooted in a command, Balak responds with a contravening one. Against Bilam's explanation that "God has refused to permit me to go with you," Balak responds with, "do not refrain to come to me." Parallel to Bilam's attribution of the prohibition to "God," Balak carefully and explicitly attributes his command with the words "Thus speaks Balak ben Tzippor." Apparently, Balak is not overly impressed with the authority of God, or specifically of the god whom Bilam had called by the name we assume refers only to the God of Israel (HaShem - the tetragrammaton). He is perfectly willing to place his own royal authority against the (divine) authority behind which Bilam is hiding. To which he also adds that it is worth Bilam's while to obey him rather than God, as he will pay handsomely.

Bilam answers, "If Balak will give me enough silver and gold to fill his house, I still will not be able to transgress the word of HaShem my God" (22,18). Here we have direct confrontation. Balak has implicitly placed his authority above that of God; Bilam answers him directly that the authority of God binds him more, and takes over both the authority of the king and his money as well.

Before this answer is actually delivered to the king, we have the incident of Bilam's ass. Something about Bilam's message or understanding of his mission is not acceptable to God. Before Bilam sets out to the king, after receiving God's permission to do so, he is told by God, "**But**, that which I will speak to you, that is what you shall do" (22,20). When the angel frees him to continue, he says to him, "**However**, that which I shall speak to you, that is what you shall speak" (22,35). There is subtle change here, especially if measured against Bilam's understanding of his role. It is not just that Bilam may not transgress God's prohibitions on his **actions**. His speech, the locus of his presumed power, is not his speech at all. His very words are to be no more than the words that God gives him. If this will be carried out, it will be that Bilam has no words of his own at all, he is merely quoting God.

And so, when Bilam finally meets Balak, he answers him with one sentence, which in fact appears to go far beyond what he has said in the past.

Behold, I have come to you. Now, can I say anything? That which **God shall place in my mouth, it will I speak** (22,38).

Here we have the answer to Balak's original assumption, one which Bilam has tried to avoid contradicting. The question is not one of authority at all, though of course Balak's authority could not supervene that of God. Bilam is not only bound by God's command to restrain his power of cursing or blessing. In fact, he has no such power at all. The words, apparently so powerful, which come out of his mouth – they are only the words that God has placed there beforehand. The picture in our minds created by this use of language, of God placing a piece of paper in the mouth of Bilam, turns him into no more than an amplification device. The question is rhetorical. "Now, can I say anything?" Do I have the power of speech? I just release that which is implanted in me by God. If Balak will understand this answer, he will realize that the entire enterprise of hiring a wizard to curse is pointless and nonsensical. There is no such thing as the power to curse.

### **Third Act: The Blessings**

The rest of the drawn out conversation of Balak and Bilam repeats this conflict, as Balak remains unable to understand it.

Balak said to Bilam: What have **you** done to me; I hired you to curse my enemies, and you have blessed them.

He answered him and said: Behold, that which God places in my mouth, that is what I keep to speak. (23,11-12)

Balak's next move is to see whether Bilam has the power to change God's mind. He sends him back to try again, and enquires, "What has God said?" (23,16). When Bilam blesses once again, including the statement that God, unlike men, does not change his mind (23,19), Balak exclaims,

If you will not curse them, then you will not bless them.

Bilam answered and said to Balak, But I have already told you, **everything** that God will speak, I will do. (23,25-26)

Balak has given up on getting a curse from Bilam, but at least he thinks that if he can get Bilam to be silent, then there will be no blessing. Bilam answers him that neither Balak nor Bilam have the power to stay the blessing of God.

Balak improves a little on his previous suggestions. He does not suggest that Bilam can do anything to change the situation, but perhaps God will nonetheless change.

Balak said to Bilam: Let me take you to another place; perhaps it will please God and you can curse them for me there. (23,27)

When this does not work, Balak reverts to his original form, mocking Bilam. "And now, run away to your place; I said I would honor you greatly, but your god has prevented you from honor" (24,11). Bilam does not run away at all, and answers once again,

Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, saying,  
If Balak will give me silver and gold to fill his house, I shall not be able to transgress the word of God, **to do good or evil from my own heart**; that which God speaks, I shall speak. (24,12-13)

The dialogue ends with a conclusion of failure, dialogue without understanding.

Bilam rose and went and returned to his place, and also Balak went on his way.  
(24,25)

Nothing has changed.

Perhaps this is part of the answer to the important question why Parashat Balak exists at all. Why do we need to know of this incident, which happened around us and did not affect us? Perhaps the answer is to inculcate the difference between the understanding of Balak (who, after all, has his name as the name of the parasha), a belief in power and in magic, and that of the Torah, as expressed clearly by the one who stood on both sides of the question, of Bilam.

For there is no incantations in Yaacov, and no magic in Israel  
Now will be said to Yaacov and to Israel, what has God wrought!  
(23,23)