

Balak Destroyer Lessons From a Donkey

Torah: Numbers 22:2-25:9

Haftarah: Micah 5:6-6:8

Brit Chadashah: Romans 11:25-32

Reading: Mike Taber p. 161 and Ps. 79. Jewish Hero: Daniel. Carrier Laureen

This Torah portion occurs while Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, receiving the Ten Commandments again, so that the new generation might become the covenant people of the L-rd. Even though Israel had no designs on the land of the Moabites, when they saw what Israel did to Sihon and Og, they were afraid that not even their mountains and fortresses could prevent Israel from destroying them completely as well. They even figured that their gods could use a little help. They needed the services of a professional curse maker.

Their King Balak, sends for a famous prophet/enchanter (sorcerer) named Balaam. He initially refuses and the L-rd only allows him to go on condition that he only says what the L-rd tells him to. He takes off, but has not yet apparently committed to only saying what the L-rd tells him to. Three times his donkey saves his life and when he eventually sees the avenging angel, he bows down and finally agrees to only say what the L-rd tells him to say.

What happens next is that Balaam is brought to three Moabite holy places and Balak has seven altars built at each place and sacrifices a bull and a ram on each of the altars. We find out that before each oracle is pronounced from the L-rd, Balaam engages in acts of sorcery, which were apparently used as the lead up to a cursing session. After the second oracle of blessing is pronounced, Balak says that if Balaam is not going to curse, Israel, the least he could do, was not to bless them.

The sorcerer Balaam declares that no sorcery will work against Israel and proclaims Israel's status above the nations. It is said that three times is a charm, so Balak give Balaam one more chance to curse Israel and is greatly disappointed. Balaam's oracle promises Israel victory over all of her enemies and repeats the Abrahamic blessing that G-d will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel.

In frustration, Balak fires the useless sorcerer/prophet, who is apparently sent away without receiving his promised payment. Balaam says that even if Balak gave him a house full of gold and silver, he could not himself do anything against the order of the L-rd. As a parting gesture Balaam pronounces four short oracles which speak about the future glory of Israel and the imminent destruction of all of Israel's enemies.

There is a people mentioned in the last oracle who are called Eber, which is the same word from which the term Hebrew derives. This group of people shall be humbled along with the Assyrians and in this case it does not refer to Israel, who are also sons of Eber, but are a different branch of the family.

In order to finish the story, we have to go to Numbers chapter 31, verses eight and sixteen. Here it is recorded that after Balaam went home, he returned to Moab with instructions on how to defeat the children of Israel. When they walk with the L-rd, they are indestructible and no weapon forged against them shall prosper. But if you can get them to practice idolatry and immorality, they would lose the protection of the L-rd.

We are not told why the L-rd used a sorcerer prophet to pronounce blessings upon Israel, nor are we told why this same person helps the Moabites against the people he has just blessed. In an incident similar to what happened when the Children of Israel made the golden calf and worshiped it, Moabite priestesses came into the camp and invited the Jews to participate in a specialized form of worship through sexual activity. They were sent to convert the whole camp, but again the tribe of Levi stepped in and slaughtered all the priestesses and all of those who were practicing this form of idolatrous fornication.

A plague had already broken out among the people and unless something was done quickly, the entire nation might have been consumed. This is what Balaam said would happen and it was a close thing. People were already dying from the plague, as it made its way through the camp, following on the footsteps of those who practiced this criminal idolatry. It struck after the priestesses had moved on to make new converts. The people were caught off guard and were involved in receiving the Law and the statutes for a second time.

This was a spiritual attack and once the danger had passed, we learn that retribution upon the perpetrators was to follow. The ladies were warriors of another god and their attack on the camp was not military. They invoked the two besetting sins of Israel: idolatry and fornication and nearly succeeding in subverting the entire camp.

Balaam took up residence among the Moabites, perhaps feeling that he was safe because they were going to destroy Israel when they followed his advice.

I bet he did not ride to Moab on the same donkey he had used previously and he was not sent there either by invitation or by a mandate he had received from the L-rd. He went there as a free agent and as a declared enemy of Israel and, by association, of the L-rd. He sought the protection of the gods of Moab and was probably involved in all kinds of sorcery which, this time, he felt free to direct against the House of Jacob and, by association against their G-d.

He should have heeded the advice of his donkey and listened to the words of the Oracles which he himself had pronounced. The angel of the L-rd opposes all who come against Israel and the L-rd will indeed curse those who curse Israel. Germany and its allies paid a steep price for their attempted genocide of the Jewish people and they suffered massive loss of life and witnessed the almost total destruction of their homeland.

Israel had no designs on Moab and the Jews were not guilty of the horrendous crimes which the Nazis accused us of. When we are left alone to practice our faith in peace, we are a blessing to all nations and the eventual victory of the L-rd over the combined forces of the nations who will rise up against Israel, is as certain as the rising and setting of the sun.

We need to heed the advice of the donkey and not fall into the trap which snared Balaam. Those who work for the destruction of Israel, are actually working towards their own destruction, no matter how frequently and passionately they curse Israel. Those who curse us will experience the Australian phenomenon, as they see their curses boomerang back into their faces. Balaam figured he could outsmart G-d and sidetrack His wrath. He sowed destruction and reaped it, along with so many Moabites whom he had encouraged to move against Israel. People need to learn to bless Israel and never curse us, because it is for their own good. We need to keep our eyes on the long term big picture and bless the people of Israel. Our final victory is a prophetic done deal. I want to be on the winning side.

Sermon: Courage Under Fire: Perseverance From the Scriptures

Passage: “ *For all that was written beforehand, was written for our instruction, in order that by the patience (perseverance) and by the consolation which the Scriptures give, we might possess hope.* (Romans 15:4)

This is my last message in the series: courage under fire and I want to talk to you about our greatest offensive and defensive weapon, which is the Scriptures. First, I want to talk to you about how this greatest of treasure came into being. Then I want to make some suggestions as how we can best use this resource under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Winning a victory always means a fight and the L-rd wants to show us how to fight so that we win and are not defeated.

I am sure you have heard the term: “the canon of the Scriptures” and it refers to how both the Old Testament (Tanakh) and the New Testament were put together. It describes a process where certain writings are recognized as the Word of G-d, while others are not given this special status. The Old Testament mentions up to 400 books which no longer exist and can no longer be used to corroborate (support) the contents of the books we have in our possession. These lost books in no way compromise those which made it into the Canon.

When our people were taken captive to Babylon, they had lost everything, except a number of sacred writings which they had received over the years. As the people started to recover, they wanted to make sure that such a tragedy would never happen to them again. They realized that they had ignored the prophetic warning of the L-rd and that they have violated the Word which they had received from the L-rd. They wanted to gather this Word together.

A man called Simon the Righteous (Shimon ha Tzadek) undertook to collect and arrange all the portions of Scripture which the people still had in their possession. It is called the canon of Scripture, not because people could no longer receive prophet warnings from the L-rd, but because it is the ultimate means to measure and to evaluate any subsequent writings which claim divine authorship. Future books could neither add nor subtract from what was received.

Before the compilation of the Canon of the Tanakh, the people received numerous messages and writings which claimed divine authority and the established prophets and the Levites guided the people into receiving good words and into rejecting words that evidently did not come from the L-rd. Much was lost when our people were taken into captivity, but the Canon was established as a means of evaluating messages and writings which might surface after the Canon was established. It became the measuring tool to evaluate spiritual truth.

Since the establishment of the Canon, many other writings have surfaced which want to claim divine authority, and if they do not measure up to the Canon, they should be rejected. Many good books of teachings have also been compiled, but they do not have the status of being part of the Canon because they are recognized as merely the words of men and not as part of the Word of G-d. The books of the Apocrypha fall into this category.

When it comes to the Canon of the New Testament, a different procedure was followed. First of all we need to acknowledge that the New Testament accepts the Canon of the Tanakh and also wants to preserve the words of the Apostles who walked with the Messiah and the words of their disciples who also passed on the words of the Messiah.

There are many different Canons of the New Testament, but the one established at the council of Nicaea is generally accepted as the authentic and authoritative Canon when it comes to the words of the Messiah and of His apostles and their disciples. The council of Nicaea was actually convened by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, in 325 C. E. (A. D.) so he could have an official document to enforce his particular version of Christianity.

Just as the L-rd used a donkey to speak to Balaam, the L-rd used a donkey so that His church could have a Canon to determine which words could be considered the Word of G-d and which should be treated as merely the words of men. The council had two thousand Christian clergy from every corner of the empire, as well as one thousand laymen, also from every corner of the empire. They wanted to recognize the Words of the Messiah and the apostolic tradition which were based on those words.

They waded through thousands of documents, including over 200 documents claiming to be Gospels. They used three criteria in order for a document to be included in the Canon of the New Testament: (1) authorship, (2) content and (3) circulation.

It had to be written either by an apostle, or the disciple of an apostle – or at the very least by a disciple of an apostle's disciple. It could not be more than three generations removed from the time when the L-rd walked among us. Other writings and other commentaries could be used to help understand the words of the Messiah and His apostles, but only 27 documents were selected as the actual words which came directly from G-d.

Next they looked at the content and said that it could not contradict the oral traditions which the church had received from the apostles themselves. This included not contradicting the teachings of the Tanakh and the council went through an enormous number of documents and most of them were refused because they contradicted the apostolic tradition.

Lastly, the document had to have been circulating among all the churches and not just among a restricted number of churches in only one region of the empire. It was not an attempt to suppress any document, but only to prevent foreign influences from penetrating into the truth of the Gospel as it had been taught and received among the churches.

As with the Tanakh, it is still possible that subsequent documents would surface – especially those mentioned in the New Testament which did not survive to be included in the Canon which was identified at Nicaea. All the documents which were presented, were examined rigorously and their contents were debated to ensure that the authentic apostolic tradition which was received from the apostles, was not diluted or polluted by foreign elements.

The books were divided into two broad categories: homologoumena and antilegomena. Homologoumena refers to those books in the New Testament which everyone agreed upon as representing authentic apostolic tradition. Antilegomena refers to those books which not everyone agreed upon. The main works of the antilegomena which were included in the Canon at Nicaea are: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and the Revelation.

No one really remembered who had written the Book of Hebrews and only the Roman church claimed Paul as its author. He is not the author, but the Book gave such a good explanation of the nature of the Messiah and how He should be followed, that it was accepted, even though its authorship was still open to question. The author was likely a Levite.

James was considered a bit too Jewish, but its divine origin could not be questioned. 2 Peter was so different was 1 Peter that it took some discussion to agree that both books were written by the same hand. It was the same problem with 2 and 3 John, but they were eventually included in the final version of the Canon.

When it came to the Revelation, while it was eventually conceded that it was written by a man named John, who was the disciple of an apostle's disciple, none of the gentile scholars could effectively decipher exactly what it was talking about. However, it presented such an exalted vision of the resurrected Messiah and such a clear teaching about the judgment which is coming after the end of the age, that it was also eventually included.

Should any other works surface which claim apostolic authority, they would have to have the same or similar content as the other books of the New Testament. They could neither introduce foreign teachings not found in the New Testament, nor could they deny any of the teachings which are found in the New Testament. The Canon describes authentic content.

I might argue that the Didache falls into this category, but it was too Jewish to suit the tastes of the Gentiles who were doing the collecting and categorizing. It neither adds to nor subtracts from the other books of the New Testament and is a good commentary on the Tanakh. We need to use the Canon to discern authentic apostolic truth.

So how do we handle all the works and books which are missing from the Bible, but which are mentioned by it? Let me suggest three ways and I will close with this. First, we have to be so familiar with the contents on the Bible, Old and New Testaments, that we recognize biblical content when we see it. And we also recognize content which is not biblical when we encounter it. It must complement, and not contradict that which we have already received.

We know that the final, real Word of G-d is in Heaven and our best human copy will always not be perfect. It will always be authoritative and complete. Rabbinic scribes falsely claim that the Word of G-d in its fullness exists among us and is no longer in heaven – so that G-d Himself has to listen to what the rabbis teach. This is at best silliness and at worse blasphemy, but we know that all that which was lost will be restored when the kingdom comes and we enter into Eternity behind the ever living Word who is our Messiah.

Secondly, we have to realize that much of the content of the Bible is selective and certain details were not included into the Books of the Bible (John 20:30, 31 and 21:25). It is the spiritual diary and guide book of both the Jewish people and of Jewish and Gentile disciples of the Messiah. Some of that which is passed over can be reconstructed by a careful study of relevant passages, as long as detail which is added is not considered to be on the same level as that which was written.

There are also secret things which belong to G-d and which are none of our business and such things as the means which G-d used to create the universe are not given and a lot of truth is given through symbols and poetry. But nothing which is said in the Bible ever contradicts the cosmos which G-d also created. No necessary details were ever omitted from the text of the Scriptures and no unnecessary details are ever included in the text of the Scriptures. Everything that believers will ever need to walk with the Messiah is included in the Canon of both Testaments, so that we can have a victorious, successful pilgrimage through this darkening world, being a salty light and overcoming all and any obstacles which rise up against us to block our path. Nothing more and certainly nothing less.

Finally, our passage outlines four dividends which the Scriptures hold for all believers who take the time to study its pages and walk according to its teachings: instruction, patience (perseverance), consolation and hope.

The Bible is never dubious when it comes to things which matter and clearly teaches monotheism, monogamy and a high regard for the sanctity of human life. It clearly teaches that there is an eternal kingdom coming and all those who know the Messiah and walk with Him are already citizens of that final abode. The Bible is full of instructions of how to walk with the L-rd in the light and how to avoid stumbling back into darkness. How well do you know this wonderful guide book? How closely do you follow its teachings, both when it comes to faithful obedience and to sincere repentance?

Some problems take a lot of time and effort to resolve and some trials and temptations are very persistent in their attempts to block us, burden us or defeat us. Sometimes it takes a lot of patience and perseverance to keep walking through whatever valleys of death we have to pass through and the Scriptures teach us never to give up or give in. Other saints and pilgrims have also encountered similar trials and their experiences can teach us patience and perseverance. We may be the sheep of His pasture, but we are also spiritual warriors armed with the weapons of our warfare, as we confront and defeat the flesh, the world and the enemy. We will take the time to learn, to recover and to discern, so that we do not grow impatient and jump the gun, when He wants us to hold on and wait a little longer.

The Scriptures are also a source of consolation to bring us comfort when we suffer loss and healing when we are wounded by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. There are promises for us at every stage of our lives and in every situation we can possibly encounter in life, both when we are walking through great light or stumbling through great darkness. He remembers that we are but frail dust and holds our hand and lifts us up when we feel we are in over our heads. He will never let us be pushed beyond our ability to resist and will always clearly indicate the ways of escape when we feel cornered and overwhelmed.

Finally, the Scriptures speak so often of Heaven and the coming kingdom that we have hope, no matter how long it will take for the return of our beloved Messiah to happen. The Scriptures are full of examples of provision and protection, so that when we are hard pressed, we can have hope because others have faced worse and have been given provision by Divine providence- so there will always be honey in the rock for us. We serve the G-d who tabernacled among us and defeated our enemy and who, on the cross, won eternal salvation for all the nations and generations of mankind.

This is not vain hope and when innumerable enemies line up to devour and destroy us, we know that in our Messiah we are more than conquerors and we are but treading where others have trodden before us. The bumpy straight and narrow will always open up before our feet, so that even when we stumble off the trail, He is there to help us get back on track. He is there to help us get cleaned up, ready for the next trial that comes our way.

Courage under fire takes advantage of all the armour of G-d and relies on the provision and protection of G-d, both when things are going incredibly well and when they are going incredibly bad. Feast on the wonder of His Word and rest in the power of His amazing grace. Don't settle for anything less as you learn to be an overcomer and walk in His light every day and in every way. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.