



The View From Above

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Balak, King of Moab, has been made uneasy by Israel's recent string of victories over enemy nations, and has begun to worry that he will be the next to fall before them. He decides to seek the advantage with a preemptive strike, hoping to weaken the Israelite forces before they have a chance to advance against him. His first plan of attack, however, is not military, but magical: he will hire Bilaam, a local prophet, to curse Israel, and thus doom them to defeat. Bilaam seems open to the task and, after several stops and starts—including an incident with a talking donkey—he heads out to perform the curse. But when he opens his mouth to unleash the curse, the spirit of God takes over and, instead of cursing Israel, he blesses them. For, as Bilaam declares:

במדבר כג:

מִה אֶקְבֵּל לֹא קִבֵּה אֶל וּמִה אֶזְעַם לֹא זְעַם ה'.

Numbers 23:8

How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I doom when the Eternal has not doomed?



The message of this tale seems relatively straightforward: God is on Israel's side. No one can curse them, for they have divine protection. Their triumph is assured. Who could defeat God's favored nation?

That would appear to be the end of the story. Yet there is a curious plot device that extends the narrative, taking us through two more, seemingly unnecessary repetitions of the same cycle. For Balak's reaction to the first failed curse, after an initial burst of anger, is to relocate Bilaam to a new mountaintop. Strangely, he seems to believe that a different view will change the nature of Bilaam's prophecy:

במדבר כג:יג-יד

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בָּלֵק לֵךְ נָא אִתִּי אֶל מְקוֹם אֲחֵר אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם אֶפְסֵי קִצְהוֹ תִּרְאֶה וְכָלְוּ לֹא תִרְאֶה וְקִבְּנוּ לִי מִשָּׁם. וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׂדֵה צִפִּים אֶל רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה.

Numbers 23:13-14

Balak said to him, "Come with me to another place from which you can see them—though you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them—and curse them for me from there." And with that, he took him to Tzofim field, on the summit of Pisgah.

Of course it does not work. Bilaam goes through his ceremonial preparations again, and again he summons his prophetic voice and lets out:

Numbers 23:19, 20

God is not a like a man, to be capricious,
Not some person who will change his mind...
Behold, it is a blessing I have taken hold of
And when [God] blesses, I cannot reverse it.

במדבר כג:יט, כ

לֹא אִישׁ אֵל וְיִכְזָב
וּבֶן אָדָם וַיִּתְּנָחֵם...
הִנֵּה בִּרְךְ לִקְחֹתִי
וּבִרְךְ וְלֹא אֲשִׁיבָנָה.



Why did Balak think it would be otherwise? How could a simple geographical repositioning have altered a divine message? Rashi attempts an answer. He tells us that Balak himself was a sorcerer, and foresaw that this was the place where Moshe would die (“the summit of Pisgah”). Indeed, the last chapter of the Torah, that records Moshe death, begins as follows:

דברים לד:א

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מֵעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב אֶל הַר נֶבֹו רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה.

Deuteronomy 34:1

Moshe went up from the steppes of Moab, to Mount Nevo, to the summit of Pisgah.

So Moshe did die on the summit of Pisgah. Balak somehow divined that, suggests Rashi, and therefore hoped it would be a site embedded with bad fortune for Israel.

Whatever Balak’s reasoning, the plan has failed. Surely now he will give up. Surely at this point he accepts the fact that God will not be swayed.

And yet, Balak tries again: another location change, to another mountaintop.

במדבר כג:כז-כח

וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלָק אֶל בִּלְעָם לֵכָה נָא אֶקְרָא אֶל מְקוֹם אֲחֵר אוֹלִי יִישַׁר בְּעֵינֵי הָאֱלֹקִים וְקִבְּלוּ לִי מַשָּׁם. וַיִּקַּח בָּלָק אֶת בִּלְעָם רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוֹר הַנִּשְׁקָף עַל פְּנֵי הַיַּשִּׁמּוֹן.

Numbers 23:27-28

Balak said to Bilaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you curse them for me there.” Balak took Bilaam to the summit of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland.

We can guess what happens next. The preparatory offerings are made, Bilaam looks out over the plain and sees Israel, and then delivers... another blessing. This one is so poetic it entered Jewish liturgy:

Numbers 24:5, 9

How goodly are your tents, Ya'akov,
Your dwelling places, Israel!...
Blessed are they who bless you,
And cursed are they who curse you!

במדבר כד:ה, ט

מֵה טֹבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב
מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל...
מְבֹרָכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ
וְאֶרְרֶיךָ אָרוּר.

Balak is predictably furious. He explodes at Bilaam, and sends him home without payment.

But what did he expect? The last relocation did not help; why would this mountain view have been any different? Again, Rashi jumps in to suggest that Balak was engaged in some kind of divination:

רש"י במדבר כג:כח

ראש הפעור - קוסם היה בלק וראה שהן עתידין ללקות על ידי פעור ולא היה יודע במה, אמר שמא הקללה תחול עליהם משם, וכן כל החוזים בכוכבים רואים ואינם יודעים מה רואים

Rashi to Numbers 23:28

"The summit of Peor"—Balak was a sorcerer, and saw that in the future they would be struck down because of Peor, though he did not know how. So he said to himself, "Maybe the curse will take hold from there." And so it is with all stargazers: they see things, but they do not know what they see.

Again, the name of the mountain alludes to a future calamity for Israel. This time, Rashi does not have to search all the way to the end of the Torah to find it, because the word “Peor” appears again just one chapter later, immediately after the story of Balak and Bilaam has come to a close. Their exchange has taken up the bulk of this week’s reading, but there is one last episode tacked on at the end of the *parashah*, which seems detached from the rest of the reading.

Chapter 25 begins startlingly with these scathing lines:

במדבר כה:א-ג

וַיָּשָׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשָׁטִיִּים וַיַּחֲלֵהָם לְזָנוֹת אֶל בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב. וַתִּקְרְאֵן לָעַם לְזַבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכֹל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן. וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעֹר וַיַּחֲרֹף ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

Numbers 25:1-3

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. Thus Israel attached itself to Ba'al Peor, and the Eternal was enraged with Israel.

There is Peor, and it is the name of a foreign god whom many of the Israelites will soon be worshipping, after being led astray by their sexual desires. They will commit these terrible outrages in full public display, and their brazenness will prompt violent retaliation by the community leadership and a divine plague that will leave 24,000 dead.

So, says Rashi, Balak senses this coming disaster, and is hoping to capitalize on the ominous forces lurking in the air. His powers of perception do not reveal exactly what Peor represents, but he knows that it is bad for Israel, and maybe that will be good for him. If God’s anger is soon to arrive in this place, surely he can call for a curse here, and receive it. In Rashi’s



imagination, this is the classic work of “stargazers,” fumbling about in the darkness of their hazy visions, hoping to harness forces of doom that they perceive, but do not fully understand.

There is, however, a less magical explanation for Balak’s choice of vista. With the scene of Peor-worship nestled in right at the end of our *parashah*, one cannot help but wonder if it describes events that took place not on some separate occasion, but concurrent with the story of Balak and Bilaam.¹ If that were so, then when Balak takes Bilaam up to the summit of Peor, what he wants Bilaam to see is this very display of orgiastic idolatry that we are soon to read about.

In this reading, Balak need not be some kind of evil sorcerer. He is merely a strategic thinker, seizing on the very real and visible breakdown of Israelite society, in order to channel God’s wrath toward his own ends.

Look at them! Look at how they lust and dance about! Look at how they have forsaken You, God! Look at how they taunt each other, these barbarians, and then lash out in violence! And You, God, are enraged. You are sick of these people and their wickedness. Surely You are tempted to wipe them all out.

So curse them now! Curse them, for You and for me! Bring them to their knees, and then I will do the rest. All I ask is that you make them vulnerable to attack, and I will finish the job. Here is

¹ This logic may remind us of the rabbinic principle of interpretation, “אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה” - there is no before or after in the Torah,” which suggests that the Torah need not be read in chronological order, and is often used to explain סמיכות הפרשיות, the juxtaposition of sections that happened at different times, and perhaps out of order. The suggestion here, however, is that the two juxtaposed sections happened at the same time.



the prophet, here are the offerings. He is opening his mouth. Just fill it with a curse. Just give him the words...

But God won't do it. Even now, in the face of the most outrageous treachery. Even as the people are explicitly rejecting God, and a prophet stands on the mountaintop gazing down at their disrespect, God refuses to curse the Children of Israel and deliver them over to their enemies.

That is not to say God will not punish them, nor that God forgives their crimes. This relationship is badly damaged and will need a lot of repair.² But even in this darkest hour, God has not forsaken these people and left them to die at the hands of King Balak.

The advantage of such a reading is that it incorporates the last scene of the *parashah* into the story of the whole. It also makes sense of the otherwise strange behavior of Balak and his repeated scramblings up the mountains. Each time, he has been seeking a fuller view of the people in their debauchery, as a way of focusing Bilaam's prophecy upon a curse.

If we look again carefully at the language used on each of those summits, we can see this strategy being pursued. On the first mountain, we read:

במדבר כב:מא

וַיִּקַּח בָּלָק אֶת בָּלָעַם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ בָמוֹת בְּעֵל וַיֵּרָא מִשָּׁם קֶצֶה הָעָם.

² See the beginning of next week's *parashah*, where that repair seems to begin when God gives Pinhas "בְּרִיתִי - שְׁלוֹמִי - My Covenant of Peace" (Numbers 25:12). Many are shocked to see Pinhas receive this honor after committing an act of violence. But I think the *pshat* is that it is God offering peace to the people through Pinhas. That is why it is called "**My** covenant." It is not a description of Pinhas' behavior, but God's pledge to be more peaceful to the people after seeing that the latest plague has led even the High Priest into violence. Indeed, this is the last plague God unleashes in the Torah.



Numbers 22:41

Balak took Bilaam up to Bamot Ba'al. From there he could see a portion of the people.

Just a portion. Not enough, it seems, to give the full impression of their sins. So he goes up again. This time, Balak says:

במדבר כג:יג

תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם אָפֶס קִצְהוּ תִרְאֶה וְכִלּוֹ לֹא תִרְאֶה.

Numbers 23:13

You will see a portion of them, but you will not see all of them.

Another portion, but still not **all** of them. Not good enough, it appears. So finally, Balak finds the right lookout spot, the summit of Peor, right next to where all the action is happening. The name of the summit is a clue that reveals Balak's intentions. He has not merely been seeking a wider view of the people to make the curse more effective. He wants Bilaam to see them as they attach themselves to Ba'al Peor. He and Bilaam look out and:

במדבר כד:ב

וַיֵּשָׂא בִלְעָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו.

Numbers 24:2

As Bilaam raised his eyes, he saw Israel camped by their tribes.

All their tribes. He sees it all now. He sees what we will see when we look down a chapter later. This is the view that Balak was seeking all along. This, if anything, will do the job.

And yet the prophet's eyes seems to be filled with a different vision:



*How goodly are your tents O Jacob,
Your dwelling places, O Israel!*

When Balak protests—*How could you say this!*³ *Why didn't you describe all the chaos we both witnessed from the mountain?!*—Bilaam simply throws up his hands and says:

במדבר כד:יב

לֹא אוּכַל לְעֵבֵר אֶת פִּי ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה מִלְּבִי אֲשֶׁר יְדִבֵּר ה' אִתּוֹ אֲדַבֵּר.

Numbers 24:12

I cannot, of my own accord, do anything, good or bad, contrary to the word of the Eternal.

Exactly what the Eternal says, I must say.

He saw it all, too, it seems. But what could he say? His tongue was tied.

Such a reading forces us also to reconsider the message of the *parashah*. For there is something distinctly less triumphalist about the story of Balak when it includes a view of this final chapter. Now it is no longer a bold testament to the invincibility of these chosen people who have God's protection. Instead, it is a story of a God who has decided not to allow these people to be wiped out by their attackers even when they have betrayed their covenant with God. It is a tale, then, not of God's faithfulness, but of God's mercy. The critical difference between faithfulness and mercy, of course, is that we do not deserve the latter.

³ There is something ironic, after all, about this classic description of how good the "tents" of Israel are. The Talmud (in Bava Batra 60a) understands this to be an allusion to their modesty: "He saw that the openings to their tents (פתחי אהליהם) were not facing one another, and said: these people are fit to have the Shekhinah dwell upon them." But these are the same people who will, just a chapter later, be whoring with the Moabite women; and one of them will even bring his lustful display to "פתח אהל מועד" - the opening of the Tent of Meeting."

