

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 14

Chapters 23 - 24

At the conclusion of chapter 22, Balak had taken Balaam to the top of a mountain that was used to worship Baal in order to show him the part of the camp of the Nation of Israel viewable from that location. We will detail the practice of the worship of Baal when we reach chapter 25.

Balak had brought Balaam to his city for the single purpose of cursing Israel. Prophets were known for proclaiming both blessings and curses on people and in some way or another, the blessing or the curse occurred. Balak is expecting Balaam to curse Israel so he can see his downfall. Balak was afraid of Israel because of what he had seen him do to the two Amorite kings and their nations. Balak will not be happy with Balaam's work.

Build Seven Altars

Num 23:1 Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here." **23:2** Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. **23:3** Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a bare hill. **23:4** Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar."

Balaam had learned his lesson well on the road to Balak. He was not going to make the same mistake again. He was going to listen to the LORD and follow His command exactly. He had Balak prepare seven altars, bulls and rams and they were offered as a burnt offering. We must wonder what kind of burnt offering it was. The Nation of Israel had specific instructions for burnt offerings that they had been following for their 40-year stay at Mount Sinai, but neither Balak nor Balaam were Israelites. They did not have the luxury of knowing the parameters and instructions for the preparation and procedures for the LORD's official burnt offering. Nevertheless, they would have known how Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau performed a burnt offering and they most likely followed that same procedure. In that case, the wood would have been placed on the altar and then the bound animal would have been placed on the wood and then killed. The fire would have been started and the animal would have been burned until it was completely gone. The burnt offering for the Israelites was different. In that case, the fire was constantly burning on the altar. The giver of the animal would place his hand on its head and symbolically pass his sin to the animal. The neck of the animal would be sliced and the priest would then prepare the animal for the rest of the ceremony. The animal was skinned and then the flesh was totally consumed in the fire. The hide was the only thing left and it belonged to the priest after the ceremony was completed. Not so with the burnt offerings before the exodus. In those cases, even the hide was burned in the fire.

As the offering was in progress, Balaam left Balak behind to seek a place alone where he could meet with the LORD. He knew that the LORD would tell him exactly what to say.

The Word of the LORD

Num 23:5 Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus." **23:6** So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab. **23:7** He took up his discourse and said, "From Aram Balak has brought me, Moab's king from the mountains of the East, 'Come curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!' **23:8** "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? **23:9** "As I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people *who* dwells apart, And will not be reckoned among the nations. **23:10** "Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, And let my end be like his!"

Here Balaam says that he was summoned from Aram. We made quite a commotion about where Balaam's home was located in lesson 12. In that lesson we countered the common argument that his home was on the Euphrates River about 300 miles to the north of Balak's home. In lesson 12 we learned about the discoveries in 1967 and 1989 that seem to prove that Balaam's home was at the intersection of the Jordan and Jabbok Rivers. We still hold that conclusion in this lesson. However, in verse 7, Balaam says that he was brought from "Aram." We know Aram as an early name for Syria during the days of the Divided Kingdom (Still to be established 520 years after this prophecy). That single point confuses the Bible student and would seem to justify that Balaam was in fact living near the Euphrates River. However, in the book of Genesis, Moses always used the name Padan-Aram for that area.¹⁴ Here Moses uses only the name "Aram" which indicates that it is a different place. It is the Hebrew *Padan* and it means the *place or country of Rachel's death*. We know that Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin died on the way from Bethel to Ramah, modern day Bethlehem. Exactly where she died on that trip we do not know. In either case, Tell Deir Alla was in the correct country. In Deuteronomy 23:4 Moses wrote, "because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you." The word for Mesopotamia is *Aram Naharayim* and it means *place or country of Rachel's death of the two rivers*. It does not mean Mesopotamia where the Euphrates River lies. Furthermore, after taking the Promised Land and in the days of Judges 3:7-8, the LORD was angry with the Israelites because they fell into Baal worship. The Scripture states the following:

Judges 3:7-8 ⁷ The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. ⁸ Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

¹⁴ Padan-Aram, the place Jacob ran too, met Laban, married Leah and Rachel and gave birth to 11 boys and 1 girl.

The Hebrew word for Mesopotamia is *Aram Naharayim* and it means *place or country of Rachel's death of two rivers*. The Hebrew for Cushan-rishathaim is *Kushan-rishathaim* and it means *king of Aram of two rivers*. We have assumed in the past that he was king of Aram or Syria as it will be known later but that is troublesome. First, this Judges passage presents the first rise of a judge in Israel named Othniel. He is from the tribe of Judah. Judah's land was west of the Dead Sea and just south of Benjamin's land that held the historic sites of Bethel and Ai. Judah's land held the historic sites of the great citadel of Jebusites located on Mount Zion and the village of Ramah, the place of Rachel's burial. Both of these areas were protected on the north by eight of their tribal brothers. This brings about the question, how did the king of Syria control the areas in southern Israel without controlling the tribes to the north. That does not make sense. Furthermore, during the times of the judges, their issues were always with the Moabites, Ammonites, and Canaanites which included the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The two previous verses in Judges 3 tell why the LORD was angry with the Israelites.

Judges 3:5-6 The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

The word "Canaanite" indicated the descendants of Canaan, the grandson of Noah. The following names indicated some of the various tribes of the Canaanite descendants. The trouble with the interpretation that Cushan-rishathaim was the king of Mesopotamia does not make sense. The Israelites had fallen into the control of the Canaanites, not the nation of Padan-Aram or Syria. Cushan-rishathaim had to be a Canaanite king of his people living in the region of the tribal area of Benjamin and Judah and that made perfectly good sense if they were dwelling in the areas of Ephraim and Manasseh directly north of Benjamin. The Jordan Rivers divides the areas of Manasseh and Gad. The Jabbok River intersects the Jordan near the Benjamin border. Therefore, Balaam was from a village near the intersection of the two rivers. East or west of the river intersection, we do not know.



The LORD filled Balaam's mouth with an answer for Balak. He was not going to curse what God had blessed. Balaam could not count the multitude of Israel and neither could Balak. This response did not make the Moabite king happy.

Complaint of Balak

Num 23:11 Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!" 23:12 He replied, "Must I not be careful to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?" 23:13 Then Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place from where you may see them, although you will

only see the extreme end of them and will not see all of them; and curse them for me from there."

From the mountain where the Moabites worshiped Baal, Balak took Balaam to a second place where he could see the extreme end of the camp of the Nation of Israel. His intent was to scare Balaam by showing him the extreme size of the camp as a whole.

Balak and Seven More Altars

Num 23:14 So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on *each* altar. **23:15** And he said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering while I myself meet *the LORD* over there."

Zophim was a field on one side of the mountain that led to Pisgah. Pisgah means *summit or top*. The Scripture refers to Mount Nebo where the LORD allowed Moses to see the Promised Land just a few days before the record of this passage. Balak had slipped Balaam extremely close to the nation and up to the same place where Moses once stood. Moses was most likely near the mountain but down in the camp below. Once again, seven altars were prepared with bulls and rams. Once again Balaam entreated the LORD for words.

The Word of the LORD

Num 23:16 Then the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak." **23:17** He came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the leaders of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?" **23:18** Then he took up his discourse and said, "Arise, O Balak, and hear; Give ear to me, O son of Zippor! **23:19** "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? **23:20** "Behold, I have received *a command* to bless; When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it. **23:21** "He has not observed misfortune in Jacob; Nor has He seen trouble in Israel; The LORD his God is with him, And the shout of a king is among them. **23:22** "God brings them out of Egypt, He is for them like the horns of the wild ox. **23:23** "For there is no omen against Jacob, Nor is there any divination against Israel; At the proper time it shall be said to Jacob And to Israel, what God has done! **23:24** "Behold, a people rises like a lioness, And as a lion it lifts itself; It will not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain."

As expected, the words of Balaam are a blessing for the Nation of Israel.

Balak's Complaint

Num 23:25 Then Balak said to Balaam, "Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!"

Balak was not happy with Balaam. Notice that Balak has changed his tune. He would rather that Balaam said nothing than to say something that blessed them. Remember, Balak was under the assumption that if a prophet blessed or cursed, that action would come to pass. Balak had now taken the stance that it was better not to ask Balaam to do either. The more Balaam blessed, the

more blessed Israel would be in Balak's mind. Balak had no understanding of just how blessed Israel was in the mind of the LORD.

Balaam's Reply

Num 23:26 But Balaam replied to Balak, "Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do'?"

We just have to stop here and put this in the vernacular of the our day. Today, Balaam would have said, "I told you so!"

Another Seven Altars

Num 23:27 Then Balak said to Balaam, "Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there." 23:28 So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor which overlooks the wasteland. 23:29 Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here." 23:30 Balak did just as Balaam had said, and offered up a bull and a ram on *each* altar.

Balak was not satisfied. He took Balaam to another place where Balaam could get another look at the size of the nation. Peor means *an opening in the mountain*. This means that Balak took Balaam from Mount Nebo to another location where they could look between two mountains and see the land. The NASB calls it the "wasteland" but it means the *wilderness*. The vast wilderness was covered with the tents of the Nation of Israel. Once more, Balaam had Balak build seven altars to offer seven bulls and rams. This time, Balaam did not entreat the LORD.

Balaam Blesses Israel

Num 24:1 When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek omens but he set his face toward the wilderness. 24:2 And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe; and the Spirit of God came upon him.

The sight of the Nation of Israel overtook Balaam. He did not entreat the LORD because the "Spirit of God came upon him." This is not the first time we have seen the Spirit of God come upon a man in the Scripture, but it has been rare, at least in the recording of its occurrence. Pharaoh had asked about Moses being filled with the Spirit of God in Genesis 41. The craftsmen who led in the building of the Tabernacle complex were filled with the Spirit of God in Exodus 31 and 35. Now, Balaam, a non-descendant of Jacob was filled with the Spirit of God. Bursting over, Balaam gave the following discourse.

The Oracle of Balaam

Num 24:3 He took up his discourse and said, "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened; 24:4 The oracle of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered, 24:5 How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! 24:6 "Like valleys that

stretch out, Like gardens beside the river, Like aloes planted by the LORD, Like cedars beside the waters. ^{24:7} "Water will flow from his buckets, And his seed *will be* by many waters, And his king shall be higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted. ^{24:8} "God brings him out of Egypt, He is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He will devour the nations *who are* his adversaries, And will crush their bones in pieces, And shatter *them* with his arrows. ^{24:9} "He couches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you."

The last line tells it all. "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you." And so the Nation of Israel still survives to this day and will until the coming of the LORD to set His kingdom in place. All other nations should choose carefully what they do with the LORD's Nation of Israel.

Balak's Anger

^{Num 24:10} Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these three times! ^{24:11} "Therefore, flee to your place now. I said I would honor you greatly, but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor."

Balak's fury raged at Balaam. He demanded that Balaam return home without honor, without his fee for services – unpaid!

Balaam's Reply of Original Answer

^{Num 24:12} Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying, ^{24:13} "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. What the LORD speaks, that I will speak"? ^{24:14} "And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, *and* I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come."

Balaam was not shaken by Balak's tough words. Balaam was not surprised that Balak would not pay him at all. Balaam was not going to go against the LORD in any way. Balak may have been through with speaking with Balaam, but Balaam was not through speaking with Balak.

Continuation of Balaam's Oracle

^{Num 24:15} He took up his discourse and said, "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, ^{24:16} The oracle of him who hears the words of God, And knows the knowledge of the Most High, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered. ^{24:17} "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth. ^{24:18} "Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly. ^{24:19} "One from Jacob shall have dominion, And will destroy the remnant from the city."

This part of Balaam's oracle is filled with prophecy! However, it starts with Balaam's describing himself as "the man whose eye is opened." It is sad that the English translators have made a mistake with this phrase. The word for "opened" is *shatam* which actually means *closed*. In Hebrew, Balaam described himself as *the man whose eye was closed* in speaking about his encounter with the LORD as he rode his donkey to visit Balak. Balaam then explained that in the state of having closed eyes, he heard God speaking to him, he fell to the ground, worshipped the LORD before his eyes were opened to see the Almighty standing there. This answers our question about whether Balaam saw the LORD with His sword drawn or not. He did not until his donkey had bowed to the ground beneath him.

Speaking about Moab, Balaam says, "**A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.**" This is a reference to a king of Israel taking complete control of Moab some time in the future. In 2 Samuel 8:3 King David smote Moab and put the people in total subjection to him. This prophecy has been fulfilled.

^{2 Samuel 8:3} Then David defeated Hadadezer, the son of Rehob king of Zobah, as he went to restore his rule at the River. ⁴ And David captured from him 1,700 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers; and David hamstringed the chariot horses, but reserved *enough* of them for 100 chariots. ⁵ And when the Arameans of Damascus came to help Hadadezer, king of Zobah, David killed 22,000 Arameans. ⁶ Then David put garrisons among the Arameans of Damascus, and the Arameans became servants to David, bringing tribute. And the LORD helped David wherever he went. ⁷ And David took the shields of gold which were carried by the servants of Hadadezer, and brought them to Jerusalem. ⁸ And from Bethah and from Berothai, cities of Hadadezer, King David took a very large amount of bronze. ⁹ Now when Toi king of Hamath heard that David had defeated all the army of Hadadezer, ¹⁰ Toi sent Joram his son to King David to greet him and bless him, because he had fought against Hadadezer and defeated him; for Hadadezer had been at war with Toi. And *Joram* brought with him articles of silver, of gold and of bronze. ¹¹ King David also dedicated these to the LORD, with the silver and gold that he had dedicated from all the nations which he had subdued: ¹² from Aram and Moab and the sons of Ammon and the Philistines and Amalek, and from the spoil of Hadadezer, son of Rehob, king of Zobah. ¹³ So David made a name *for himself* when he returned from killing 18,000 Arameans in the Valley of Salt. ¹⁴ And he put garrisons in Edom. In all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became servants to David. And the LORD helped David wherever he went.

In this passage, the "River" is the Jordan River. David defeated Hadadezer, the king of the Ammonites at that time, about 440 years after Balaam pronounced this prophecy. The Ammonites were the cousins of the Moabites. (Ammon and Moab were brothers born to Lot nine months after the destruction of Sodom and Gommorah and the formation of the Dead Sea. They took the land on the east side of the Jordan to make their tribal lands.) In verse 13 we see that David conquered Moab. Then in verse 14 he took control of Edom.

Balaam then speak to Edom. **"Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly. One from Jacob shall have dominion, and will destroy the remnant from the city."** In 2 Samuel 8:14 we find that King David took control of the land of Edom. This prophecy has been fulfilled.

But Balaam added to the prophecy of Edom by saying, "One from Jacob shall have dominion, And will destroy the remnant from the city." Notice the change in the person controlling Edom. For the first part of the prophecy he was the one to arise with a "scepter" from Israel. Here he is **"One from Jacob ... will destroy the remnant from the city."** This prophecy has not been fulfilled because it is still in the future. Edom will be destroyed by the LORD Almighty just before He arrives at Armageddon to destroy the three evil leaders and all their followers. See the entire book of Obadiah for a fuller development of this prophecy; however, here is a glimpse of the last words in that message to Edom.

Obadiah 1:20 And the exiles of this host of the sons of Israel, Who are *among* the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, And the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad Will possess the cities of the Negev. ²¹ The deliverers will ascend Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau, And the kingdom will be the LORD'S.

While we are here, let us address the word "Sepharad" used in this passage. It means *the region of Assyria*. The prophecy of Obadiah was given at the close of the Southern Kingdom. Exiles from the Northern Kingdom were already in Assyria. By the time of Obadiah's prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar had already taken control of Assyria and made it part of the Babylonian Empire. When Nebuchadnezzar took the Southern Kingdom and removed the exiles, they all went to the Babylonian Empire but some were left in the Assyrian area as the caravan made its way back to the city of Babylon. Daniel and his three Hebrew friends and others from Jerusalem would make it to the capital city but many would be left in Jewish friendly areas in the combined Babylonian/Assyrian nation. To be precise, some of the exiles were pushed by Nebuchadnezzar even further east into the lands of the Medes and the Persians, land also controlled by the Babylonian Empire. In the Obadiah 1:20 verse, the prophet speaks of the day when the exiles will have returned to Jerusalem and at some time after that, will control the Negev and participate in the destruction of Edom before the kingdom of the LORD is set up. We know that to be at the time of the Battle of Armageddon.

Oracle Turns to Amalek

Num 24:20 And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, "Amalek was the first of the nations, But his end *shall be* destruction."

Turning then to the Canaanite group called the Amalekites. The destruction of this group will begin with King Saul (1 Samuel 15:7-8), almost completed by King David (1 Samuel 27:8) and then finally completed in the days of Hezekiah by the sons of Simon (1 Chronicles 4:41-43). This prophecy has been fulfilled and the Amalekites are no more.

Oracle Turns to Kenite

Num 24:21 And he looked at the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said, "Your dwelling place is enduring, And your nest is set in the cliff. **24:22** "Nevertheless Kain will be consumed; How long will Asshur keep you captive?" **24:23** Then he took up his discourse and said, "Alas, who can live except God has ordained it? **24:24** "But ships *shall come* from the coast of Kittim, And they shall afflict Asshur and will afflict Eber; So they also *will come* to destruction."

Balaam turned to the Kenites, a tribe within the nation of the Midianites. Moses' father-in-law was a Kenite. Judges 1:16 mentions Jethro's descendants as being Kenites.

Judges 1:16 And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the city of palms with the sons of Judah, to the wilderness of Judah which is in the south of Arad; and they went and lived with the people.

We do not know which mountains the Kenites selected for refuge in the secure cliffs many years after this point in Balaam's life; nevertheless, when Nebuchadnezzar comes he will carry away the exiles of the Southern Kingdom, he will also carry the Kenites away. This is an assumption built on the fact that when Cyrus the Great allowed the return of the Israelites to the Promised Land, the Kenites were named in the listing of those who returned with them.

1 Chronicles 2:55 And the families of scribes who lived at Jabez *were* the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, *and* the Sucathites. Those are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.

"Kain" was the capital of the Kenites until they were carried away by Babylon. At the time of Balaam's prophecy, Assyria and Babylon were considered the land of Asshur, the second son of Shem, a grandson of Noah. At the division that occurred at the Tower of Babel, Asshur remained in the area where the tower was built, and the land assumed his name.

Balaam could not have known the extent of his prophecy. The mention of the "ships of Kittim" is a reference to the ships of the Roman Empire. Kittim was the great-grandson of Noah. When the Tower of Babel division occurred, Kittim's family moved to Europe (descendants of Japheth). It would take 750 years after Balaam's prophecy for Rome to be established and many years before it would be strong enough to have a formidable fighting force with a naval division. Rome would come into its own during the reign of Alexander the Great and be instrumental in the melding of the Greek and Roman Empires into one. But in this prophecy they will be ships from the coast of Kittim, not the actual Kittim ships. Greece was its own province established on the coast of Kittim. Alexander the Great would board his ships and sail to the edge of the Mediterranean Sea and defeat the cities of Tyre and Sidon. He would then defeat Egypt and make his way all the way through the land of Asshur (Assyria, Babylon, Mede and Persia) and stop when he reached the mountains on the edge of India. Alexander defeated the Persian Empire and made it part of his Greek Empire. "Eber" was the descendant of Shem who remained in the

land of Asshur after the Tower of Babel. His name is also translated *Heber* and he was considered the father of the *Hebrew* language formed at the tower episode. All of those who were still in Asshur when Alexander arrived were so absorbed into the Greek culture that the Old Hebrew language almost disappeared. Of course, all of that will occur about 1200 years after this prophecy was given by Balaam.

Little could Balaam have known the impact of this prophecy. We must also wonder how this information became known to Moses in order to be recorded in this book. Nevertheless, it was and nevertheless, all but one point in the prophecy has been fulfilled!

Balaam and Balak Return Home

Num 24:25 Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way.

And so the king and prophet departed from each other, each returning to his own home. The king unhappy, the prophet unpaid.