

Numbers – Part 2

Who is Balaam?

One of the longest episodes in the book of Numbers comes in chapters 22-24 with the story of Balaam. Not much was known about this character until an ancient inscription was unearthed at Deir 'Alla in Jordan. Balaam was a *non-Israelite* prophetic figure who predicted various disasters. Although he presumably prophesied on behalf of other non-Israelite gods in his ancient context, Balaam speaks on behalf of Israel's God in the book of Numbers. This is somewhat unusual.

Balaam was first hired by King Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites, but that is not how the story unfolds. He instead receives enlightenment from a talking donkey who, apparently, can see things that Balaam cannot. It seems the Israelites adopted Balaam within this text, despite his outsider origins, in order to glorify YHWH.

There are lengthy poetic oracles from "Balaam son of Beor" found in Numbers that contain some clues as to what prophetic inspiration might have been like during this time. In the description of his last oracle, for example, it says that Balaam "sees visions of the almighty" and "falls down but with eyes uncovered" (Num 24:16). This description of ecstatic prophecy sounds similar to others found in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Saul). Some have also pointed out that it sounds almost like this could have been a seizure, but of course there is no way to know for sure.

Hostile Attitudes

Balaam's final oracle is particularly famous: "A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the foreheads of Moab and the heads of all the Shethites. Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. One out of Jacob shall rule and destroy the survivors of Ir" (Num 24:17-19). This oracle primarily foreshadows the reign of David. There are, however, some traditions that have interpreted additional meaning(s) within this text. As early as the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, the "star" and the "scepter" in Balaam's final prophecy were sometimes taken to predict *two* different messianic figures. This is a matter of interpretation. What is clear is that this oracle seems to affirm hostility toward Israel's neighbors.

The remainder of Numbers contains some more laws and stories, the allotting of land, and a battle against Midianites. There is a particularly colorful episode that takes place in chapter 25 after Balaam's story comes to a close. According to the text, the Israelite people began having relations with the women of Moab, which led them to "bow down" to other gods. The risk of serving gods other than YHWH was the major reason why Israelites are repeatedly told not to socialize with pagans in the Bible. Most social events in the ancient world took place within a cultic context. This idea is omnipresent throughout the Hebrew Bible: stay away from people who worship other gods so that you do not forget your loyalty to YHWH.

The text takes a violent turn, however, when the Lord tells Moses to take the chiefs and "impale them in the sun" (Num 25:4). This is a public, shameful, and painful death. Next, an Israelite man brings a Midianite woman into the communal tent "in the sight of Moses." This is somewhat odd given Moses's own marriage to the Midianite woman Zipporah in Exodus. Was Moses expected to object to having the Midianite woman join the Israelites? It is possible that the key "affront" in this story concerns the fact that this non-Israelite woman was brought into a sacred space. The tent symbolizes the temple, which makes it sacred in the context of the story.

Zealotry & Violence

After the Israelite man and Midianite woman enter the tent, Aaron's grandson Phinehas storms in after them and pierces both with a spear (25:7-8). Phinehas becomes the ultimate exemplar of religious zeal because of his "zero-tolerance attitude" toward those who break the law. There is an underlying sense in the text that one needs to have this kind of zero-tolerance attitude in order to be *truly* devoted to the Lord. Problematic though it is, this way of expressing religiosity was prized in the ancient world. Zealots were seen as protecting something important. It is a type of zeal particularly associated with the priesthood.

The fact that God then rewards Phinehas for his violent actions with a covenant of peace and "perpetual priesthood" is somewhat ironic (25:10-13). This text is among those that have inspired people throughout history who are not only fanatically devoted to their religious ideals, but also prepared to kill for the sake of those ideals.