

Drash on Parashat Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9)

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Parashat Balak is found about two thirds of the way through the fourth Book of the Torah, Bemidbar (Numbers in English). The Jewish name of the book means *In The Desert [of]* and the English name arose from the census the Book begins with. It ends with the next generation, most born in the desert, ready to cross the Jordan River.

The name of this parashat is derived from the second Hebrew word which is the name of the reigning King of Moab. To provide the customary summation of the entire parashat, I quote Wikipedia:

In the parashah, Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, tries to hire Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam's donkey speaks to Balaam, and Balaam blesses Israel instead.

Alas, there's more that Wikipedia's summary still completely overlooks:

Then many Israelites followed foreign women into their idolatry. fomenting Divine retribution stemmed only by zealous action on the part of Aaron's grandson, Phinehas.

Discerning what The LORD wanted brought out for this drash came gradually and in two sections, neither of which can be discussed in great detail.

Yah-a-mod, Karen bat George.

Karen will bless us with the Hebrew and English of Numbers chapter 22 verses 20 through 22a (TLV):

²⁰ God came to Balaam by night and said to him, "Since the men came to you to summon you, arise and go with them. However, only the word I tell you are you to do!"

²¹ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the Moabite princes. ²² But the anger of God burned because he was going.

The first section of this drash focuses on the translation of the Hebrew word מָן (eem), spelled aleph-mem, to which Strong's Hebrew dictionary assigns number 518. The TLV translated this word as *since vis-à-vis if* as most older translations do. The Gesenius Hebrew Lexicon which first appeared about 200 years ago also authoritatively translated מָן (eem) as *if*. However, about 100 years later and 100 years ago, the newer Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew lexicon (BDB for short), which is based upon the Gesenius lexicon, expanded the entry by adding nuanced usages including *still*, labeled with the suffix [1e] appended.

Basically, both translations indicate the word introduces a conditional statement in the form *if x then y*. However, the nuanced distinction is this: *if* is used when the status of the x component is *not* known at the time of the statement, but *since* is used when it *is* known at that time.

The Septuagint translation of the Torah into Greek dated to the mid-3rd century BCE translated $\alpha\epsilon\mu$ (eem) as $\epsilon\iota$ (ay), spelled epsilon-iota, to which Strong's Greek dictionary assigns number 1487. More recently than the BDB lexicon, the Lust-Eynikel-Hauspie Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, revised 2003, notes on page 398 that $\epsilon\iota$ (ay) is used:

to express a condition thought of as real or to denote assumptions relating to what has already happened

and unfortunately does not cite this verse as anything special.

So the TLV translators decided the use of $\alpha\epsilon\mu$ (eem) in Numbers 22:20 should be understood to mean, "Since the men have already come to you to summon you, arise and go with them..." as opposed to "If after I finish speaking to you the men come to you to summon you, arise and go with them...". Thus, this subtle distinction profoundly changes the statement. If God meant *since*, it is clearly a command to arise and go. However, if God meant *if*, it is clearly a command to wait to see if they come later (which does seem quite certain). If they do, then you are commanded to arise and go with them, but if they do not come, you are commanded to not arise and go.

Of course, the next verse implies Balaam did not wait for them to come to him. Either he understood the meaning to be *since* and was doing what God had commanded him to do, or for some reason he jumped the gun in the morning, perhaps due to greed and/or unmindfulness of the attached condition. Either way, we are told God was quite angry that Balaam went with them.

However, the *since* translation causes casual readers to wonder why God got so angry when it appears Balaam submissively did exactly what God told him to do. There are many commentaries that take one position or the other, and none I have encountered thus far is conclusive. As the pandemic has blocked my public library access and my wallet has prevented purchasing hardcopy resources or online access thereto, I cannot at this time report why the TLV chose *since* over *if*. Perhaps Roeh Ralph will comment upon this or today's *Talking Torah* will undertake further research into the matter.

Now, for the second section, I believe The LORD wants us to look at the way He interacted with a few other non-Jewish people alongside how He interacted with Balaam.

Starting then with Balaam, a gentile contemporary of Moses, note The LORD, maker of Heaven and Earth, talked to Balaam in sentences, and Balaam actually dialoged with the Angel of The LORD. God tolerated the use of sorcery by Balaam in his line of work. He caused Balaam to prophesy through the unction of the Ruach HaKodesh. Yet, according to Moses' words in chapter 31, Balaam counseled his client Balak how to bring the wrath of God upon the Jewish people despite the blessings. The same chapter reveals Balaam perished in the God-commanded judicial action by Israel upon the Midianites. Outcome for Balaam: negative.

Next consider God's servant Job. It seems Job lived in the time of the patriarchs, although he may have been a close descendant of Abraham but not of Jacob. The story implies Job obeyed God's commandments despite having no interaction with Him until a voice spoke to him out of the whirlwind and proceeded to humble him simply by teaching him who God is and who Job is not. Job became a better man thereby. Then his previous state of blessing was restored to him twice over. He continued to live for 140 more years, saw his children and their children for four generations, and died, old and full of days. Outcome for Job: positive.

Second Kings chapter five records God, in the time of Elisha, gave great military success to Syria through Naaman, the commander of the army, though Naaman apparently had no knowledge of that support and certainly no interaction with God. Through a strategically-placed young daughter of Israel, Naaman learned a prophet there could heal him of his leprosy. Initially unwilling to humble himself to submit to Elisha's regimen that he deemed to be demeaning, he was persuaded by his servants to just give it a try. He then experienced a spiritual transformation when he was physically healed. Even though God apparently never directly spoke to him, he immediately redefined his worldview and began to live by it, even obtaining dispensation via Elisha to appear to worship his king's deity only in the line of duty to his king. Outcome for Naaman: positive.

Lastly, consider the story of Simon the Sorcerer (aka Simon Magus) in Acts chapter eight. Was he Jewish? Well, he was apparently indigenous to Samaria where the story occurred, and Yeshua, who was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, ministered in Samaria, so the possibility he was Jewish cannot be ruled out. But his god-like practice of dark arts was incongruent with such identification. The story provides no hint of interaction with God. Philip's outreach in Samaria caused many to believe and undergo mikvah, and verse 13 says:

Even Simon himself believed; and after being immersed, he continued with Philip. And when he saw signs and great miracles happening, he was continually amazed.

The success of the outreach caused Peter and John to come from Jerusalem and they began to impart the Ruach HaKodesh into the new believers. The text does not mention if Simon received this, but it seems unlikely, as his response to this process was to offer to pay Peter for the power to perform such ministry himself. That did not work out as he had hoped. Peter sharply rebuked him and commanded him to repent of his wickedness and pray to God that, if possible, he might be pardoned for the intent of his heart. Instead of complying, verse 24 tells us:

Simon replied, "Pray for me, so that none of what you have said may come upon me."

No further reference to Simon exists in the Scriptures. His Wikipedia article mentions historical documentation regarding differing ideas of what became of his life, but none claim he repented and became a disciple—quite the contrary in most of them. Outcome for Simon the Sorcerer: negative.

So what can we surmise from these accounts? Dialoging with God and/or performing signs and wonders do not guarantee a positive outcome. Similarly, non-interaction with God and even unawareness of Him do not ensure a negative outcome. Likewise, actions contrary to what the Scriptures tell us are godly do not ensure a negative outcome. God in His wisdom deals with every one as a unique individual to draw us to Himself and hopefully begin a good work in us. But our responses are crucial and though some may be forgivable, it is foolish to ever count on leniency. Let us learn wisdom from these and other biographies to do what is necessary to assure positive outcomes for ourselves and hopefully others. But note that our primary motivation for assuring such outcomes ought not be to benefit ourselves. Rather, we should desire to bless and please our Creator with our loving obedience above all other desires we have.

The next parashat is *Pinchas* which spans Numbers chapter 25 verse 10 through chapter 29 verse 40.