

Reformation Fellowship Notes • May 5, 2019
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Handout #12
Numbers 22 & 23

I. Introduction

- A. I didn't finish chapter 21 last week.
 - 1. I don't have much to say about it.
 - 2. There is a significant break in the text at the end of chapter 21.
 - 3. I will quickly finish chapter 21 and then introduce the next section.

II. Numbers 21:10-20

- A. Israelites make their way to the Arnon river.
 - 1. On the border of Moab
 - a) Mention of the Book of the Wars of the Lord
- B. These victories were memorialized in song.

III. Numbers 21:21-35

- A. Israel sent messengers to the King of the Amorites.
 - 1. They asked permission to pass through his territory.
 - a) Same thing they said to Edom
 - 2. Sihon refused.
 - a) He brought his army against Israel.
- B. Israel defeated the Amorites.
 - 1. Took control of their territory
 - a) Including Heshbon
 - b) Some of this area Sihon had taken from the Moabites.
 - 2. A poem celebrating this victory
- C. Israelites settled in this area.
- D. The Israelites took the area around Jazer.
- E. Israelite encountered Og, king of Bashan, and his army.
 - 1. God told Moses to fight him.
 - 2. God will be with them.
- F. The Israelites defeated him, killed his whole army.
 - 1. Israelites took possession of the land.

- G. At this point, Israel controls the whole Trans-Jordan region north of the Dead Sea.

IV. Introduction to Balaam's Ass story

- A. We have just seen a long stretch of passages dominated by scenes of rebellion by Israelites.
 - 1. No apparent progress; they don't learn their lesson.
 - 2. However, in the last scene, after judgment, they were the most contrite.
- B. For the next three chapters, we see another aspect of the relationship between God and the Israelites.
 - 1. We see the Israelites through the eyes of non-Israelites:
 - 2. Some farcical behavior/comic relief;
 - 3. A more hopeful side of the relationship between God and Israel.

V. Numbers 22:1-6

- A. Israelites have defeated the Amorites (Sihon) and the Bashonites (Og).
 - 1. Sihon had previously defeated the Moabites.
 - a) He must have been the dominant king in the area.
- B. Israelites are camped on the plains of Moab.
 - 1. Just opposite Jericho
- C. Balak, king of Moab, was very worried.
 - 1. Israelites had defeated Sihon.
 - 2. Israelites were numerous.
 - a) That was a sign of divine blessing.
 - 3. The Israelites will eat up all the pasture land like a big ox.
 - a) That area was predominantly pasture land.
- D. Moabites appear to have been allied with Midianites.
 - 1. I assume this is a different branch of the Midianites from the branch of Jethro.
 - 2. Balak meets with the Midianite elders.
- E. Balak proposes that they get a world renown seer to curse the Israelites.
 - 1. Military might from an alliance will not be enough.
 - 2. They need divine help against the Israelites.
 - a) They will pool their resources to get that help.
 - b) They send for Balaam, son of Beor.
 - (1) World renown seer
 - (a) Text about him found at Deir Alla
 - (i) In Aramaic
 - (ii) Dates to 8th century

- c) Lived in Mesopotamia
 - (1) A trip of several weeks
- 3. Message they will take to Balaam
 - a) They came out of Egypt.
 - (1) They have some knowledge of the Exodus.
 - (a) A significant achievement (attention grabbing)
 - (b) Could be indicative of divine help
 - (i) Thus the reason for the need of a seer
 - b) There are a lot of them.
 - (1) Too many for us to drive out
 - c) We need Balaam to curse them.
 - (1) “For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

VI. Numbers 22:7-14

- A. They sent a delegation to Balaam.
 - 1. With the divination in hand
 - a) Money? Down payment?
 - b) Some kind of divining device?
 - 2. They deliver the message from Balak.
 - a) Balaam asks them to spend the night.
 - b) He will bring back word from the Lord (YHWH).
 - (1) Technique
 - (2) Why does he use the name Yahweh?
 - (a) Does he claim to have a special connection with Yahweh?
 - (b) Did he learn about Yahweh from the visitors?
 - (3) In the passage, various names for God are used.
- B. God interacts with Balaam.
 - 1. Who are these visitors?
 - a) Conversation starter
 - 2. They have come talking about a people who came out of Egypt.
 - a) A big deal
 - (1) Is this a known event?
 - (2) Is it just a big deal that someone came out of Egypt?
 - b) Ancient peoples were identified by the land they inhabited.
 - (1) Israelites are known by the land they left.
 - c) There are a lot of them.
 - 3. If they are cursed by their god, maybe the Moabites can defeat them.
 - a) The Moabites don't want a curse from any old god; they want the Israelites to be cursed by their very own god.
 - (1) The one that brought them out of Egypt
 - 4. God tells Balaam to send the visitors back without him; no curse.

- a) If God is resolved to bless a people, a curse is not possible.
- C. Balaam tells the visitors he can't go with them.
 - 1. He cannot curse the Israelites.
- D. The delegation leaves and reports to Balak.

VII. Numbers 22:13-21

- A. Balak sends another delegation.
 - 1. More impressive
 - 2. Will reward handsomely
 - 3. Balak thinks everyone has his price, even God.
- B. Balaam refuses again.
 - 1. He can't act contrary to the command of God.
- C. Balaam has them stay the night so that he can consult with YHWH again.
 - 1. God says to go with them.
 - 2. But say only what I say to say.
- D. Balaam went with them.
 - 1. He might be thinking God is one whose mind can be changed.

VIII. Numbers 22:22-30

- A. God became angry with Balaam.
 - 1. Why?
 - 2. "Because he was going" or "when he was going"?
 - 3. Hypothesis—Balaam was thinking that once he got there, he would be able to somehow finagle a curse.
 - a) This attitude angered God.
 - b) So God sent an angel to teach Balaam a lesson.
- B. An angel of the Lord stands in front of him.
 - 1. In opposition to him (blocking his way)
 - 2. With sword drawn
 - 3. Donkey leaves the road and tries to go around the angel.
 - 4. Balaam struck the donkey to get her back on the path.
 - a) Balaam can't see the angel.
- C. The angel of the Lord blocks their way again.
 - 1. This time on a walled path between vineyards
 - 2. Donkey tries to squeeze by on one side.

- a) Smashes Balaam's foot against a wall
- 3. Balaam strikes the donkey again.
- D. The angel of the Lord blocks the way on a narrow path.
 - 1. Donkey just lies down.
 - 2. Balaam strikes the donkey.
 - 3. If Balaam had had a sword, he would have killed her for her defiance.
- E. The donkey speaks to Balaam.
 - 1. No surprise that donkey could speak.
 - 2. What did I ever do to you?
 - 3. Have I ever disobeyed you before?
 - a) Can't you discern that something extraordinary is happening?

IX. Numbers 22:31-35

- A. God opens Balaam's eyes.
 - 1. Balaam sees the angel.
 - 2. Balaam bows down to the ground.
- B. Angel speaks to Balaam.
 - 1. Why did you strike the donkey?
 - 2. I came to stop you.
 - a) Your way is contrary to my wishes.
 - 3. The donkey saved your life.
 - a) I would have killed you.
 - b) I would have let the donkey live.
 - 4. Scene is not one of a defiant donkey.
 - a) The donkey is heroic.
 - b) But it is an oblivious master.
- C. Balaam's response
 - 1. I have sinned.
 - 2. I didn't know you were standing there.
 - 3. I will go back if you want.
- D. Angel tells him to go with men.
 - 1. But say only what he is told to say.

X. Numbers 22:36-40

- A. Balak went out to meet Balaam.
 - 1. Eager for him to come

2. Why did you not come right away?
 - a) Did you not think you would get enough reward?
 - b) Balak thinks it was just a money issue.
 - c) Balak has a simplistic view of the world.
- B. Balaam responds.
 1. I am here.
 2. I can say only what God puts in my mouth.
- C. Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep for the visitors.
- D. The next day Balak took Balaam to a viewpoint where he could see some of the Israelites.

XI. Numbers 22:41-23:12

- A. Preparations for the “curse”
 1. Balaam ordered 7 altars to be built.
 2. Bull and ram offered on each altar.
 3. Balak and Balaam both did the sacrificing.
 4. Balaam went by himself to a bare hill.
 - a) Perhaps YHWH will come to meet me.
 - b) I will report whatever he says.
 - c) Balaam gave these nice sacrifices to God.
 - d) Now God can do something nice for Balaam.
 - e) Balaam returned with a word from God.
- B. Balaam gives the first oracle.
 1. Balak summoned me from far in the east.
 2. He wanted me to come and curse Israel.
 3. How can I curse them if YHWH has not cursed them?
 4. They are a unique people among nations.
 5. They are blessed, as can be seen by their number.
 6. Balaam would like to share the fate of blessed Israel.
- C. Balak responds.
 1. What did you do to me?
 - a) You were supposed to curse them.
 - b) You blessed them.
- D. Balaam defends himself.
 1. I have to say what YHWH tells me.

XII. Numbers 23:13-17

- A. Balak wants Balaam to give it a second try.
- B. Preparations for second curse
 - 1. Go to a new place.
 - a) A smaller portion is visible from there.
 - 2. Takes him to the top of Pisgah
 - 3. Build seven altars
 - 4. Offer bull and ram on each altar
 - 5. Balaam goes off by himself to connect with YHWH.
 - 6. God sends him back with his word to speak.
 - 7. Balak eagerly asks what YHWH said.

XIII. Numbers 23:18-26

- A. Second oracle
 - 1. An appeal to Balak to listen
 - 2. God is not like man; he does not go back on his commitments; he is not fickle.
 - 3. He does what he says he will do.
 - 4. God has told Balaam to bless Israel; Balaam can't change that.
 - 5. Israel has no physical or moral failings that would legitimize a curse.
 - a) This is interesting in light of what we have seen in Numbers.
 - 6. God is with them; he is there in the capacity of king.
 - 7. God's presence can be seen in how he used his power to bring them out of Egypt.
 - 8. There is no divine sign that is negative with respect to Israel.
 - 9. Because Israel is an act of God.
 - 10. It is a people fierce like a lion that does not rest until it has gotten its prey.
- B. Balak's response
 - 1. Don't curse them nor bless them.
 - a) Whenever you do, they get blessed.
- C. Balaam defends himself.
 - 1. I told you, I have to say what God tells me to say.

XIV. Numbers 23:27-30

- A. Balak decided to try a third time.
 - 1. We will take it up here next week.

XV. Conclusion

- A. Just as Balaam was to donkey, Balak is to Balaam.
- B. The blessedness of Israel is a reality.
 - 1. The circumstances of Israel's emergence are extraordinary.
 - 2. The signs of God's blessing are manifest.
 - 3. Anyone with an ounce of discernment could see this.
- C. This has nothing to do with Israel's worthiness.
 - 1. Exodus and Numbers dispel any notion of worthiness.
- D. This has all to do with God's resolve and determination to bless Israel.
 - 1. What Balak said about Balaam can only be said about God:
"He whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."