

# On the Road to Moab

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After hearing reports of the conquest of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, by the migrating Israelites, Balak, king of Moab, resolves on a non-military option. He seeks out Balaam, who is evidently a renowned magician, and employs him to lay a curse on the Israelites.

The reader might now expect a replay of the duel between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians -- with victory going to the one whose power comes from God -- or possibly an outstretched arm casting Balaam to the depths of the sea (as with Pharaoh's army) or of the earth (as with Korah).

What happens, however, is quite different, for Balaam turns out to be a rather ambiguous character. On the one hand, he is a prophet for hire, a professional who demands and gets a fortune for his services. On the other hand, he is a prophet of truth, whose words echo reality. And the simple truth, the truth that he knows in his heart, is that the Israelites are already blessed by God.

Nevertheless, hoping for riches and glory, Balaam accepts the contract and sets out for Moab. He earnestly wants to curse the people, but senses that they are under God's protection. He tries again and again to find a gap in that protection, a window of vulnerability, but is unable to do so. And so each of his curses becomes a blessing.

Traditional commentators have been hard on Balaam. He is seen as the embodiment of evil, as a man who persists in defying God, who ignores God's displeasure by traveling to Moab, who seeks to prevent the unfolding of God's blessing to the Israelites. Each of his attempts to curse Israel is foiled only when God overpowers him and converts his curse into a blessing. The words of Balaam that we recite daily, "How goodly are they tents, O Jacob, thy tabernacles, O Israel," can be included in the prayerbook precisely because they are not Balaam's words, but the words of God.

While this is consistent with the text, it is not an interpretation which can teach us very much. An evil sorcerer, who loses his freedom of choice and becomes simply a funnel for the words of God, is no closer to us than a Pharaoh. Such a Balaam we have

little in common with. But Balaam as a character in conflict is someone with whom we can identify.

There are two realities in which he lives, each of which pulls him in different directions. One reality is that of the "real world" in which we strive for power, for status, for wealth, for survival. All of us seek to learn, or like Balaam have already mastered, techniques for manipulating the world around us for our own ends. But there is another reality, a world which we can see when we step back >from our everyday lives and let go of our bags of tricks; there is a voice which we can hear, a voice calling us to live in accordance with God's will.

Though the voice is strong, the real world is compelling, and, like Balaam, we all set out on expeditions which contradict the truths that we know in our hearts. Imagine Balaam chuckling to himself about how he had rejected Balak's first emissaries and thereby extracted from him a delegation of higher-ranking officials with a more substantial offer. "I'm in the big-time now," he says to himself. "No more penny-ante domestic curses. But I must play my cards right, I must stage this curse properly for maximum effect. Yes, seven altars with seven young bulls and seven rams -- that's the right combination." The voice that he had heard the night before -- the voice which reminded him that Israel is blessed -- had been forgotten.

Though forgotten, the voice cannot be suppressed. The truth it speaks will be heard. We feel a malaise. We sense that though our lives have been going according to our plans, something is amiss. And so, like Balaam on his journey to Moab, we wander off the path, we find ourselves in tight places. Finally, there comes a point where we are stuck, when the only alternative is to listen to the voice, to see the angel of the Lord. And Balaam then understands that all of his machinations are for naught, that he must speak the truth, the words that God wants him to say.

Why then does he go on? For the same reason that we go on. We are not allowed to escape from the real world, but must live in it. The angel tells Balaam to continue on the road to Moab, to go on with his life, but to remember the truth, and to speak that truth. And so he does. He tells Balak again and again that his mission is impossible, but Balak keeps trying for a curse. Yet each time Balak sets the stage, Balaam expresses a blessing, for he is now a man who "hears the words of God."

After a while the vision fades, the voice is still -- "and Balaam returned to his place." The challenge is then to keep that vision before our eyes, to keep the voice in our hearts, when we walk in the many paths that constitute our lives. Did Balaam meet that challenge? Pointing to incidents reported subsequently, our commentators concluded that he did not. Will we meet that challenge? That is not up to the commentators.

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