

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

The Curse of a Blessing (Numbers 22-36): Last week we saw how that Israel encamped at the border of the Promised Land and was instructed to send twelve spies to spy out the land and bring back a report. The apparent motive for their search seems to be to aid in planning for battle (Numbers 13:18-20). When the spies returned, they discouraged the hearts of the people and brought back a report that was indicative of the lack of faith among God’s people in the character and promises of God. As a result, they were sentenced to wander the wilderness for forty more years until the generation who witnessed deliverance from Egypt were dead. The children of those who were delivered from Egyptian bondage would be the ones to inherit the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Why, one might ask, were the people of Israel sentenced to forty more years of wandering in the wilderness? The Psalmist answers this question centuries later. In Psalms 95:10 we read, *“For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways’”*. Israel’s forced continuance in the wilderness for a period of forty years was a consequence of their sins, but also a demonstration of God’s grace. It was clear that the people of God did not have faith in His word. This lack of faith can be attributed to a knowledge deficit of the “ways” of God. The remaining time in the wilderness, God exacted judgment against all who sinned, but also showed his people His ways. Such a judgment was simultaneously a demonstration of God’s grace because it teaches that it is more important for God’s people to know his ways than for them to inherit his promises.

This week we will turn our attention to at least three main features that occupy the remainder of the book of Numbers: 1) Balak’s attempt at cursing God’s people; 2) Boundaries of the Land of Promise; 3) Cities of Refuge. These three major themes will be explored in detail below.

Part One: Balaam’s Attempted Curse – There is a pericope that occurs in the beginning of our text for this week that can be both riveting as well as perplexing. The story of Balak and Balaam is very interesting because Balak succeeds to curse God’s people, but not in the way that he initially chooses nor in the manner obvious to most people. To understand the story we must first identify the key players. Balak, son of Zippor was the king of the Moabites. If you recall from your assigned readings in Genesis, the Moabites were descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. Lot is identified as a righteous soul by the Apostle Peter (2 Peter 2:7-8), and accompanied Abraham in leaving Ur of the Chaldees. God did not establish his covenant with Lot, and there is no reason to believe that Lot would have instructed his children and grandchildren to follow the Lord or at least no indication that the Moabites did so nationally. When Balak heard all that Israel did to the Amorites (they utterly destroyed them and possessed their cities), he hired Balaam the son of Peor to come curse the people for him. Balaam is a

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character well defined in our text that apparently worshipped a host of polytheistic gods, but was familiar as well with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was a renowned diviner with the reputation for accuracy among those whom he blessed or cursed. An archaeological discovery made in Transjordan in 1967 revealed a fragment of writing that talks about Balaam being a divine seer to whom the gods appear in the night and warn him that a great misfortune is going to occur in the land. This evidence is the first extra-biblical account discovered that mentions the prophet. It is apparent by the text that he had a reputation, something that appears to be supported by the archaeological writing mentioned above.

Balaam's Reluctance: Balak sends to Balaam who lives by the river in the land of his people and requests his presence at a specific location from which he will be able to see the thousands of Israel and curse them for him. At first, Balaam tells the messengers of the king that he is unable to come because he cannot curse whom God has blessed. When Balak sends messengers a second time that are more honorable than the first, he tells them the same thing. His devotion seems admirable enough. He states, *"Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more"* (22:18). However he invited them to stay the night, and God gave him a dream instructing him to go with the men, *"...but only do what I tell you"*. Balaam accompanies the men in the morning to travel back to Balak. As he journeys on the road, an angel from God appears to him with the intent of killing him. The donkey on which he is riding sees the angel and swerves out of the way, thus saving his master's life. Balaam does not see the angel at first. When the donkey sees the angel the second time he sits down and refuses to go further. Balaam begins beating the donkey. It is only then that God opens his eyes and enables him to see the angel standing in the way with his sword drawn. He repents for accompanying the men, knowing that it is displeasing to God. God saves his life and instructs him to continue his journey, but to share only the message that God gives him.

Balaam's Obedience: When he arrives in the city of Moab, King Balak meets him and brings him to the first of three locations known as Kiriath-huzoth. This location can be rendered in English as, "city outside". Here they offered oxen and sheep, possibly rituals to prepare for divination, and then called for Balaam to accompany him the following day. The following day they go to a place known as *Bamoth-Baal* or "heights of Baal". Bearing in mind that it became common practice for Israel after taking possession of the land to worship at "high places" when their worship of God was syncretized with the customs of the surrounding nations or when they were involved with the worship of Baal, it is quite certain that this location was a site of idolatrous sacrifice. From here Balaam could see a portion of the people of Israel in their camps. Instead of cursing Israel, he blessed them saying, *"How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?"* (23:8)

Balak was naturally disappointed with Balaam and brought him to the field of Zophim, at the top of Pisgah. From there Balaam once more required the obligatory sacrifices to be offered, and instead of cursing Israel, Balaam blessed them. His blessing included the following statement: *"Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The Lord their God is with them..."* (23:20-21) Balak was disappointed and said, *"Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all"* (23:25). He then, sought to bring him to the third location, the top of Peor. It is from this site that Balaam provides his third and fourth oratory, both times blessing and not cursing Israel. His fourth and final curse is significant because it references the coming of Messiah, *"...a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..."* (24:17). This could well be the messianic promise that was preserved by the Persians and informed the magi to look for the

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star heralding Christ's birth, indeed there is no other location in the scriptures that would offer a promise indicative of such a celestial appearance.

Balaam's Character: What are we to make of Balaam? Was he a prophet of God or an idolatrous diviner? Is this the end of the story? First, let's consider the first two questions, then we will offer an explanation for the answers to each by way of answering the third question – the rest of the story. Although Balaam was familiar with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he was not a prophet of God. He was not part of the covenant community. I suggest this to be the reason that God instructed him to accompany the men who came soliciting his services, but then sent an angel to threaten him with death along the way. It is quite likely that had he refused to accompany them, they would have consulted with another diviner. Although Balaam was quite reputable, it is highly unlikely that he was the only soothsayer among the Canaanite kingdoms. Since Balaam was not protected by the terms of the covenant (as were the people of Israel), it should not be surprising that a visitation by God (even in a dream by night) would have resulted in the just death of the prophet.

So, who exactly was Balaam, and is this the end of the story? According to the Biblical text as well as the archaeological findings discovered in the last century, Balaam was a worshipper of Baal who was no friend of Israel. He may have been familiar with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through stories or accounts passed down from generations beginning with the patriarch of Moab (Lot) or he may have been a Midianite who was a descendant of one of Abraham's other sons born of his concubine after Sarah's death. We should not be too distracted by the fact that he was familiar with the God of Abraham since many of the Semitic tribes were familiar with him (albeit they were not in a relationship with him). As for the remainder of the story, we know that even though he was unsuccessful at cursing Israel at the request of Balak, there was another way that he succeeded. What could not be accomplished through divination, was accomplished through deceit.

Balaam's Success: In Numbers chapter twenty-five we discover the rest of the story. The text reads, *"When Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and they ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal at Peor"* (25:1-3a). Why would God's people who had witnessed the mighty deeds He performed on their behalf forsake his commands and yoke themselves with a false god? The answer is given later in chapter 31 when Israel takes vengeance on the Midianites. After a victorious battle, they made the mistake of leaving all the women alive. To this Moses replied, *"Have you let all the women live? Behold these, on Balaam's advice caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord"* (31:15-16). The curse of Balaam was ultimately effective not through divination, but through deceit. He and his people died for their attempt to destroy the people of God, but many of the people of God were led astray and died as well. This event remained so much a part of the consciousness of the people of God that it is referenced later in Revelation 2:14 during Christ's rebuke to the church at Pergamum. He stated, *"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality."*

From these events we can conclude that the endeavors of the enemy to curse what God has blessed are subtle and may appear harmless at first glance. However, the Lord's sheep know his voice and a stranger they will not follow (John 10:4-5).

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Part Two: The Boundaries of the Land of Promise – The thirty-fourth chapter of Numbers discusses the boundaries of the Promised Land. The southern boundary is identified as spanning from the brook of Egypt through the wilderness of Zin and up the ascent of Akrabbim and up to the Dead Sea. The Western boundary would be the Great Sea (Mediterranean) up to the area adjacent to Mt. Hor. The Northern Border was from the Great Sea to Mt. Hor, and from Mt. Hor to Zedad, then on to Hazer-enan. The Eastern border entailed Hazer-enan to Shepham, then on to the Sea of Chennereth (Sea of Galilee) to Jordan and culminating in the Dead Sea. Please reference the attached map.

It is important to point out that at no time in Israel's history did they ever take full possession of the land. Some use this as justification that there will be a future expansion of the boundaries of Israel to include the full extent of the boundaries mentioned here in Numbers 34. However, there is another explanation. God's original intention for Israel as revealed to Abraham and later through the prophets was never limited to the geographical boundaries mentioned here. His plan was to give Israel the entire earth. Genesis 22:17b-18 states, *"I will surely bless you, and I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..."* The Psalmist David later prophetically said, *"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession"* (Psalms 2:8). Does this mean that the *land* motif consistently presented throughout the Pentateuch should not be understood as teaching that possession of the physical land of Israel by Abraham's descendants is part of the Abrahamic covenant? No, I do not believe this to be true. Anyone would have a hard time proving this from passages such as Genesis 17:8. However, this does mean that God did not give a geographic plot of land to Israel as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. His intent has always been all nations, *as far as the curse is found*. Furthermore, possession of the land has always been conditional from the administration of the Mosaic covenant forward: conditioned on Israel's obedience to God.

Part Three: The Cities of Refuge – The book of Numbers concludes with instruction regarding the designation of cities of refuge. What exactly were cities of refuge, and why were they important? When we looked at the Decalogue provided in Exodus chapter twenty we saw that the sixth commandment teaches against murder, the taking of another human life whether intentionally or through carelessness. However, any shedding of blood (even when done under the auspices of a just war or accidental slaying) is a consequent of the fall of man, and must be remedied. The punishment for one committing murder is death, capital punishment. If someone took another life accidentally, then the avenger of blood (a family member closely related to the deceased who might want to avenge their death) would be free of guilt if the perpetrator was found outside a city of refuge. A city of refuge was a place where one guilty of involuntary manslaughter or an accidental slaying could flee for safety. Cities of refuge were important because they preserved the taking of another potentially innocent life. Was it possible that the death was purported to be accidental when in all reality it was intentional? Of course. However, if the witness of the perpetrator and the witness of all present attested to the innocence of the slayer, then he would be considered legally not guilty of murder and would be encouraged to seek asylum in a city of refuge. Ultimately, such cities were important because, *"You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel"* (Numbers 35:33-34).