

## Grandiosities of Nothingness

A lesson on Parashah Balak; B'midbar 22:2-25:9

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In this week's parashah, we see a bit of God's sense of humor. We see a talking donkey. The Democratic Party has been around awhile hasn't it? For me though, that's not even the funny part. What about Bil'am? He answers the donkey's questions and proceeds to threaten the donkey as if he talks to talking donkeys all the time. Of course I really don't know what prophets from Mesopotamia did to pass the time, so you never know, perhaps he was some sort of donkey whisperer or something. All I know is if it were me, I'd be freaking out if animals started talking to me. I've heard it said that if you talk to inanimate objects or animals, that's o.k., as long as they don't talk back.

So who is this prophet Doolittle and what is his relationship with God? There are a few facts we can glean directly from Scripture. The rest is subject to tradition and speculation. In Scripture, we see that Bil'am is the son of P'or, who was possibly a king of Edom. Bil'am is well known for his power of words. He can either bless people or curse people, apparently at God's directing. Despite his apparent relationship with God, however he is greedy and easily swayed by the promise of prosperity in the world. He eventually is killed by the sword of Isra'el when they defeat the Moabites, despite his reluctant blessings of Isra'el. All this shows a perplexing dichotomy in this man named Bil'am.

Looking at other sources, we see that the name Bil'am comes from two sources. One is Ba'al, who was the god of Babylon, and am, which means nation or people. So, Bil'am's name can be said to mean "god of the people", or "god of the nation" He was also prophet from Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was in fact the location between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where Babylon was located and ironically enough, where modern day Iraq is. Mesopotamia was a highly influential nation, not too much unlike Egypt. Sumeria was part of Mesopotamia and here is where cuniform writing was developed, which formed the basis of writing today. The wheel is also thought to come from this area. Mesopotamia was a polytheistic nation, with a pantheon of gods and goddesses similar to those of later Greece and Rome. Out of the midst of this most pagan of societies comes this supposed prophet named Bil'am who communicates with God.

There are a few ideas to keep in mind. First, God's covenants are with Avraham, Moshe, and the people of Isra'el. God's Torah was given to Isra'el. God's domain was in the tabernacle, along with the priesthood, the sacrificial system, the means of atonement, and the intimate relationship with God, which was possible through these. A gentile, regardless of his knowledge and fear of God, and his sincerity of devotion to God, could not erect an altar and make sacrifices of his own to come closer to God. Offerings were made in this parashah, and not at the tabernacle, but they served a different purpose than those for atonement at the tabernacle. Notice too, God did not require these sacrifices, neither did he chastise for them being made. It seems to me that these offerings were made as a result of the normal religious practices of Mesopotamia, and being gentiles, God allowed this, but was not swayed by it. A relationship with God was very possible for the goyim, but only through Isra'el. This is no different today. We now come to God through faith in Yeshua, who Himself said that He was the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through Him. He was the Messiah of Isra'el. He was a Jewish man in the line of David. Bil'am seems to know

something of God, but not His people Isra'el. In fact, He is willing to curse Isra'el if it benefits himself financially. I see no way this prophet from Mesopotamia can be a redeemed man. Calling Bil'am a prophet is a shaky concept as well. He is not a prophet in the sense of Yeshu'yahu, or Yirme'yahu. These people were sincere men of God who were mouthpieces of HaShem. Bil'am seems to have had a gift, possibly given to him by God, and used at times for use by God, but the words are normally Bil'am's, not God's. In this particular case, God tells Bil'am what to say to Balak and Isra'el, but I don't think this is the norm.

Also, something I know from Christian missionaries to people of polytheistic religions such as Hinduism. They often have a unique challenge to missionaries. It is often not difficult to get a Hindu to accept Yeshua. It's getting them to get rid of all their other gods, which is difficult. Yeshua becomes just one more god to add to the mantle, sometimes literally. So, the fact that Bil'am had dealings with HaShem, doesn't mean he dealt only with HaShem.

Finally, Bil'am may have at least known of some sort of moral code handed down from Noach, but he has no evidence of actually following it, let alone the laws of Torah. Without this foundation to keep him on the straight and narrow, especially in the midst of a pagan culture, any loyalty to God he may have had at some point in his life, would constantly be challenged. We see what happens with the people of Isra'el, who have Torah, and are alone in the wilderness. How much loyalty and holiness could we expect from a man amongst paganism without Torah?

What we see here with Bil'am is not a man of God. He is a man who has limited knowledge of God, and a superficial relationship with God at best. I see a man who has one foot in the world and one foot perhaps at the gate to the Kingdom of God. Balak sends elders to Bil'am to try to get him to curse Isra'el. Bil'am asks the men to spend the night in order to find out what God would tell him to do. Think about this for a minute. This would be like a terrorist asking President Bush for permission to poison the American people. What response did he think he was going to get from God? "Oh sure, go ahead and curse my people, who I brought out of slavery in Egypt." The only reason I see that Bil'am would even question God about this is if in his heart he really wanted to accept the offer, knowing the benefits to himself, but didn't at the same time want to go against God. He wanted to find a way to have both. God gave him no way out. He said flat out, "No!"

However, Balak being a man who doesn't give up easy, along with HaSatan, sends out the big guns. These weren't just some old guys with a check book. These were the Moabite versions of Donald Trump, Bill Gates, Bono, Simon Cowell, and perhaps Jessica Alba, because well, Bil'am was a guy after all. These were highly influential, wealthy, people who could give Bil'am anything he wanted, just for cursing some people he didn't seem to like anyway. Now he really wants to find a way to accept Balak's offer without offending God, so he asks again. Remember what I taught about last time about being consumed by the world and how there comes a point where God may give you up to your lusts? That's what happens here. God knows where Bil'am's heart is, and it is more in the world than with Him. This time he does not say no. He does not entirely say yes either. He tells Bil'am that if he has to go, then go, but say only what He gives him to say. Those of you who are parents, have you ever had one of your kids take a maybe as a yes? Here Bil'am took God's "if you have to go, then go" as a "yes". So first thing in the morning a much-relieved Bil'am packs his things, gets on his trusty steed, Eddie the Talking Donkey, and proceeds to prove which one of them is the real "fool" in the story. He was a man who had an opportunity to do great things for God. He could have

joined Isra'el and had benefits much more valuable and meaningful than the vanity Balak was offering him. He fell into temptation through false doctrine and a lack of Torah knowledge and obedience.

“But among the people there were also false prophets, just as there will be false teachers among you. Under false pretenses they will introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, and thus bring on themselves swift destruction. Many will follow their debaucheries; and because of them, the true Way will be maligned.

In their greed they will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their punishment, decreed long ago, is not idle; their destruction is not asleep! For God did not spare the angels who sinned; on the contrary, he put them in gloomy dungeons lower than Sh'ol to be held for judgment. And he did not spare the ancient world; on the contrary, he preserved Noach, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, and brought the Flood upon a world of ungodly people. And he condemned the cities of S'dom and 'Amora, reducing them to ashes and ruin, as a warning to those in the future who would live ungodly lives; but he rescued Lot, a righteous man who was distressed by the debauchery of those unprincipled people; 8 for the wicked deeds which that righteous man saw and heard, as he lived among them, tormented his righteous heart day after day. So the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and how to hold the wicked until the Day of Judgment while continuing to punish them, especially those who follow their old natures in lust for filth and who despise authority.

Presumptuous and self-willed, these false teachers do not tremble at insulting angelic beings; whereas angels, though stronger and more powerful, do not bring before the Lord an insulting charge against them. But these people, acting without thinking, like animals without reason, born to be captured and destroyed, insult things about which they have no knowledge. When they are destroyed, their destruction will be total - they will be paid back harm as wages for the harm they are doing. Their idea of pleasure is carousing in broad daylight; they are spots and defects reveling in their deceptions as they share meals with you - for they have eyes always on the lookout for a woman who will commit adultery, eyes that never stop sinning; and they have a heart that has exercised itself in greed; so that they seduce unstable people. What a cursed brood! These people have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Bil'am Ben-B'or, who loved the wages of doing harm but was rebuked for his sin - a dumb beast of burden spoke out with a human voice and restrained the prophet's insanity! Waterless springs they are, mists driven by a gust of wind; for them has been reserved the blackest darkness. Mouthing grandiosities of nothingness, they play on the desires of the old nature, in order to seduce with debaucheries people who have just begun to escape from those whose way of life is wrong.

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for a person is slave to whatever has defeated him. Indeed, if they have once escaped the pollutions of the world through knowing our Lord and Deliverer, Yeshua the Messiah, and then have again become entangled and defeated by them, their latter condition has become worse than their former. It would have been better for them not to have known the Way of righteousness than, fully knowing, to turn from the holy command delivered to them. What has happened to them accords with the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit." Yes, "The pig washed itself, only to wallow in the mud!" (2Kefa/Peter 2)  
(After all, a clean pig is still a pig.)

There are a lot of people who profess to know and love God. However, even in the Brit Hadashah God tells us that if we love Him we will obey His commands. Can a prophet be a true prophet of God if He disregards Torah and God's people, Isra'el? No. Why is it that so many Believers today do everything they can to continue in the world's ways and yet serve God at the same time? If we act like the world, talk like the world, dress like the world, walk like the world, and look like the world in every way except that we call ourselves Believers and go to church once in awhile, we look like Bil'am. He is a very difficult person to figure out, because who knows where he stands? Maybe today he stands with God, but tomorrow when the worldly benefits outweigh the spiritual challenges where will he be then? Torah is God's way of letting Him know, you know, and everyone else know, whether they know God or not exactly where you stand, not only today, but tomorrow and every day after that. "I want to know something for sure. Right now I don't. Blame it on pride. When I first entered high school I relished what I was taught: that I was the ultimate authority in my life, the final arbiter of all truth, the only decider of my values, and that no prior traditions, notions about God, or value systems had any authority over my will, my spirit, my behavior. "Maximum autonomy," they called it. Such ideas can be very inviting.

But there was a catch to all this freedom: I had to accept the idea that I was an accident, a mere product of time plus chance, and not only myself, but also everything that exists. Once I bought that idea, it was impossible to believe that anything really mattered, for whatever I could do, or create, or change, or enhance, would be no less an accident than I was. So where was the value of anything? Of what value was my own life?

So all that "maximum autonomy" wasn't the great liberation and joy I thought it would be. I felt like a kid in an infinitely huge yard – I started to wish there was a fence somewhere. At least then I would know where I was. I could run up against it and tell myself, "I'm in the yard," and feel right about it. Or I could climb over the fence, and tell myself, "Oh-oh, I'm outside the yard," and feel wrong about it. Whether right or wrong, and with infinite freedom to run and play, I know I would still stay near the fence. At least then I would know where I was. I would know something for sure." (Piercing the Darkness, by Frank E. Peretti, p.194) It is the fence of Torah which tells us where we are, and the rest of the world as well. It is also Torah which enables us to discern between teachers of truth and those whose words, whether blessings or cursings, are little more than grandiosities of nothingness.

"He gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers. Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah, until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection. We will then no longer be infants tossed about by the waves and blown along by every wind of teaching, at the mercy of people clever in devising ways to deceive. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in every respect grow up into him who is the head, the Messiah." (Eph.4:11-15)