

Balak: “Is there anything to be learned from Bilaam?”

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This sidrah describes how the wicked king of Moab, Balak, hired a magician called Bilaam to curse Israel and destroy her. Our sages believe, however, that Bilaam was far more than a mere magician or caster of evil spells. They credit him with having been a distinguished prophet and a guide and counsellor to the heathen nations. They even seem to have gone overboard with their praise of his powers, claiming that in the same way that Moses was the chief of all the prophets of Israel, so Bilaam was the most distinguished counsellor and guide to the other nations, and that his prophecies even equalled those of Moses.¹ So, how do we explain this astonishing assessment?

Some attempt to justify it on the basis that everything God created was symmetrical, and that every positive quality has its corresponding negative, such as light and darkness, good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, wisdom and folly. Thus, there were idolatrous prophets as well as divinely inspired prophets, with Bilaam constituting the evil counterpart to Moses.²

I suggest that the explanation may be found in four remarkable statements that Bilaam makes, when, under pressure from God, he spells out to King Balak or to his delegation why he cannot fulfil his mission to curse Israel (See Numbers 22:18, 38; 23:26; 24:13). On the very first occasion he tells the king: “If King Balak were to give me his palace full of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of the Lord, my God,” a statement repeated almost verbatim (with a twice-mentioned reference to God) in his final rejection of the king’s request that he curse Israel.

It is also astonishing that that passionate idolator has a revelation that the God of Israel is not only the supreme God, but also “my God,” whose instruction cannot be countermanded. Indeed, if we look at the above verses, we find that, on each occasion, Bilaam refers to Israel’s God as either *Hashem* or *Elokim*, or, in the first instance, *Hashem Elokai*, “The Lord my God.” In other words, he fully accepts upon himself the sovereignty of Israel’s God, to the extent that he feels totally bound by whatever He desires of him. This would go some way to explaining why the Talmudic sages elevated Bilaam to a status of a prophet, albeit to the other nations.

On the other hand, that total submission to God and recognition of His supremacy also explains why Bilaam ultimately deserved to lose his life in Israel’s battle against the Midianites. With such recognition it was the greatest gesture of lese majeste to tell the second delegation, that came offering him “anything that you might demand” (22:17), that they should remain with him overnight so that he might discern “if God had anything more to tell him” (v.19). It should have been abundantly clear to him that the mind of the supreme God would never be changed purely to accommodate Bilaam’s passion for wealth and royal honour. And then shortly after, at Bamot Baal, Bilaam agreed to participate with King Balak in acts of sacrificial worship to the gods (22:39 – 23:30), when his reaction should have been a firm refusal of the king. His punishment in that battle was assassination by the sword (see Nu. 31:8).

Ironically, there is also a profound and unexpected message for us all contained in his prophecies, and especially in the first: “If Balak were to offer me his entire household of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of the Lord, my God, to do anything great or small” (Nu. 22:18).

As we go through life, and especially in our modern age wherein values are largely devalued, temptations or inducements are frequently directed at us to persuade us to depart from the ethical, moral or religious standards that we have been brought up to observe, and that we know in our hearts are right. Only love and fear of God can keep us on the right track.

If ever we find ourselves in such a situation we might reflect on how even the non-believing magician, Bilaam, was vouchsafed a flash of spiritual insight, to realise – and to teach us in the Torah – that God’s word must be obeyed if we want peace of mind, joy, and blessing in life. And perhaps it was in recognition of that one teaching that our sages invested him with the accolade of being ‘a Moses to the heathen nations.’ His end, however, was to perish for his idolatry.

Finally, to make sense of the sages’ statement that Bilaam’s prophecies equalled those of Moses. This is truly mystifying. Perhaps we may understand it exclusively in the sense of its poetic language that must rank as among the most vivid and majestic of the Torah, suffused with prophetic vision and a unique power of expression. This is not surprising, of course, given that he was a mere mouthpiece for God. His expressions of desire to have God’s permission to acceded to Balak’s wish were, however, his own.

Shabbat shalom,

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NOTES

1. Mid. *Bemid. Rabb.* 14:20.

2. 2. See entries, *sub* www. The symmetrical aspects of Creation.