
NUMBERS 23:1 Balaam said to Balak, "Build here seven altars for me, and prepare here seven bulls and seven rams for me."

Being arrived at the high places of Baal, (Num 22:41), Balaam orders Balak to build seven altars, and prepare oxen and rams for sacrifice, Num 23:1, Num 23:2. Balaam inquires of the Lord, receives an answer, with which he returns to Balak, Num 23:3-10. Balak, finding that this was a prediction of the prosperity of the Israelites, is greatly troubled, Num 23:11. Balaam excuses himself, Num 23:12. He brings him to another place, where he might see only a part of Israel, and repeats his sacrifices, Num 23:13, Num 23:14. Balaam again consults the Lord, Num 23:15-17. Returns with his answer, and again predicts the glory of Israel, Num 23:18-24. Balak is angry, Num 23:25; and Balaam again excuses himself. Balak proposes another trial, takes him to another place, and repeats the same sacrifices, Num 23:26-30.

Verse 1

Build me here seven altars, etc. - The oxen and the rams were such as the Mosaic law had ordered to be offered to God in sacrifice; the building of seven altars was not commanded. Some think that these seven altars were built to the seven planets: this is most gratuitously said; of it there is no proof whatever; it is mere trifling, even with conjecture. As seven was a number of perfection, Balaam chose it on this occasion, because he intended to offer a grand sacrifice, and to offer a bullock and a ram upon each of the altars; the whole to be made a burnt-offering at the same time. And as he intended to offer seven bullocks and seven rams at the same time, it could not be conveniently done on one altar, therefore he ordered seven to be built. We need go no farther to find out his reasons.

NUMBERS 23:2 Balak did as Balaam had spoken; and Balak and Balaam offered on every altar a bull and a ram.

NUMBERS 23:3 Balaam said to Balak, "Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me. Whatever he shows me I will tell you." He went to a bare height.

Verse 3

Stand by thy burnt-offering - We have already seen that blessing and cursing in this way were considered as religious rites, and therefore must be always preceded by sacrifice. See this exemplified in the case of Isaac, before he blessed Jacob and Esau, Genesis 27 (note), and the notes there. The venison that was brought to Isaac, of which he did eat, was properly the preparatory sacrifice.

NUMBERS 23:4 God met Balaam, and he said to him, "I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on every altar."

NUMBERS 23:5 The LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak."

NUMBERS 23:6 He returned to him, and behold, he was standing by his burnt offering, he, and all the princes of Moab.

NUMBERS 23:7 He took up his parable, and said, "From Aram has Balak brought me, the king of Moab from the mountains of the East. Come, curse Jacob for me. Come, defy Israel.

Verse 7

And he took up his parable - מְשָׁלוּ meshalo, see on Num 21:27 (note). All these oracular speeches of Balaam are in hemistich metre in the original. They are highly dignified, and may be considered as immediate poetic productions of the Spirit of God; for it is expressly said, Num 23:5, that God put the word in Balaam's mouth, and that the Spirit of God came upon him, Num 24:2.

NUMBERS 23:8 How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I defy whom the LORD has not defied?

Verse 8

How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? - It was granted on all hands that no incantations nor imprecations could avail, unless God concurred and ratified them. From God's communication to Balaam he saw that God was determined to bless and defend Israel, and therefore all endeavors to injure them must be in vain.

NUMBERS 23:9 For from the top of the rocks I see him. From the hills I see him. Behold, it is a people that dwells alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

Verse 9

From the top of the rocks I see him - That is, from the high places of Baal where he went, Num 22:41, that he might the more advantageously see the whole camp of Israel.

The people shall dwell alone - They shall ever be preserved as a distinct nation. This prophecy has been literally fulfilled through a period of 3300 years to the present day. This is truly astonishing.

NUMBERS 23:10 Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous! Let my last end be like his!"

Verse 10

Let me die the death of the righteous - Probably Balaam had some presentiment that he should be taken off by a premature death, and therefore he lodges this petition against it. The death of the righteous in those times implied being gathered to one's fathers in a good old age, having seen his children, and children's children; and to this, probably, the latter part of this petition applies: And let

my last end be like his, (וְתֵהִי אַחֲרֵיָי כִּמְהוּ) uthehi acharithi chamohu, And let my Posterity be like his). It has been generally supposed that Balaam is here praying for a happy death, such as true Christians die who die in the Lord; and in this way his words are generally applied; but I am satisfied this is not their meaning. The prayer, however, understood in the common way, is a good one, and may be offered to God profitably. A righteous man is one who is saved from his sins, who is justified and sanctified through the blood of the covenant, and who lives, not only an innocent, but also a holy and useful life. He who would die well should live well; for a bad death must be the issue of a bad life.

NUMBERS 23:11 Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them altogether."

NUMBERS 23:12 He answered and said, "Must I not take heed to speak that which the LORD puts in my mouth?"

NUMBERS 23:13 Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place, where you may see them. You shall see just part of them, and shall not see them all. Curse them from there for me."

Verse 13

Thou shalt see but the utmost part of them - Balak thought that the sight of such an immense camp had intimidated Balaam, and this he might gather from what he said in the tenth verse: Who can count the dust of Jacob, etc.; he thought therefore that he might get Balaam to curse them in detached parties, till the whole camp should be devoted to destruction by successive execrations.

NUMBERS 23:14 He took him into the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered up a bull and a ram on every altar.

NUMBERS 23:15 He said to Balak, "Stand here by your burnt offering, while I meet over there."

NUMBERS 23:16 The LORD met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and say this."

NUMBERS 23:17 He came to him, and behold, he was standing by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"

Verse 17

What hath the Lord spoken? - Balak himself now understood that Balaam was wholly under the influence of Jehovah, and would say nothing but what God commanded him; but not knowing Jehovah as Balaam did, he hoped that he might be induced to change his mind, and curse a people whom he had hitherto determined to bless.

NUMBERS 23:18 He took up his parable, and said, "Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, you son of Zippor.

NUMBERS 23:19 God is not a man, that he should lie, nor the son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not make it good?

Verse 19

God is not a man, that he should lie - This seems to be spoken to correct the foregoing supposition of Balak that God could change his mind. Even the heathen would not allow that their supreme god could be caught in a falsity. Hence Aeschylus, in Prometh. vinct. 1068: - Ψευδηγορειν γαρ ουκ επισταται στομα Το Διον, αλλα παν επος τελει. "The mouth of Jove knows not to frame a lie;

But every word finds full accomplishment."

NUMBERS 23:20 Behold, I have received a command to bless. He has blessed, and I can't reverse it.

NUMBERS 23:21 He has not seen iniquity in Jacob. Neither has he seen perverseness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him. The shout of a king is among them.

Verse 21

He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel - This is a difficult passage; for if we take the words as spoken of the people Israel, as their iniquity and their perverseness were almost unparalleled, such words cannot be spoken of them with strict truth. If we consider them as spoken of the patriarch Jacob and Israel, or of Jacob after he became Israel, they are most strictly true, as after that time a more unblemished and noble character (Abraham excepted) is not to be found in the page of history, whether sacred or profane; and for his sake, and for the sake of his father Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham, God is ever represented as favoring, blessing, and sparing a rebellious and undeserving people; see the note on Gen 49:33. In this way, I think, this difficult text may be safely understood.

There is another way in which the words may be interpreted, which will give a good sense. און aven not only signifies iniquity, but most frequently trouble, labor, distress, and affliction; and these indeed are its ideal meanings, and iniquity is only an accommodated or metaphorical one, because of the pain, distress, etc., produced by sin. עמל amal, translated here perverseness, occurs often in Scripture, but is never translated perverseness except in this place. It signifies simply labor, especially that which is of an afflictive or oppressive kind. The words may therefore be considered as implying that God will not suffer the people either to be exterminated by the sword, or to be brought under a yoke of slavery. Either of these methods of interpretation gives a good sense, but our common version gives none.

Dr. Kennicott contends for the reading of the Samaritan, which, instead of לא הביט lo hibbit, he hath not seen, has לא אבט lo abbit, I do not see, I do not discover any thing among them on which I could ground my curse. But the sense above given is to be preferred.

NUMBERS 23:22 God brings them out of Egypt. He has as it were the strength of the wild ox.

Verse 22

The strength of a unicorn - רֵאִים reem and רֵאִים reim. It is generally allowed that there is no such beast in nature as the unicorn; i. e., a creature of the horse kind, with one long rich curled horn in the forehead. The creature painted from fancy is represented as one of the supporters of the royal arms of Great Britain. It is difficult to say what kind of beast is intended by the original word. The Septuagint translate the word μονοκερωσ, the unicorn, or one-horned animal; the Vulgate, sometimes, unicornus; and in the text rhinocerotis, by which the rhinoceros, a creature which has its name from the horn on its nose, is supposed to be meant. That no single-horned animal can be intended by the reem of Moses, is sufficiently evident from this, that Moses, speaking of Joseph, says, "he has the Horns of A unicorn," or reem, where the horns are spoken of in the plural, the animal in the singular. The creature referred to is either the rhinoceros, some varieties of which have two horns on the nose, or the wild bull, urus, or buffalo; though some think the beast intended is a species of goat; but the rhinoceros seems the most likely. There is literally a monoceros, or unicorn, with one large curled ivory horn growing horizontally out of his snout; but this is not a land animal, it is the modiodan or nurwal, a marine animal of the whale kind, a horn of which is now before me, measuring seven feet four inches; but I believe the rhinoceros is that intended by the sacred writers.

NUMBERS 23:23 Surely there is no enchantment with Jacob; Neither is there any divination with Israel. Now it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'What has God done!'

Verse 23

There is no enchantment, etc. - Because God has determined to save them, therefore no enchantment can prevail against them.

According to this time, etc. - I think this clause should be read thus: "As at this time it shall be told to Jacob and to Israel what God worketh;" i. e., this people shall always have prophetic information of what God is about to work. And indeed, they are the only people under heaven who ever had this privilege. When God himself designed to punish them because of their sins, he always forewarned them by the prophets; and also took care to apprise them of all the plots of their enemies against them.

NUMBERS 23:24 Behold, the people rises up as a lioness. As a lion he lifts himself up. He shall not lie down until he eats of the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain."

Verse 24

Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion - לַבִּיא labi, the great, mighty, or old lion, the king of the forest, who is feared and respected by all the other beasts of the field; so shall Israel be the subduer and possessor of the whole land of Canaan. And as a young lion, אַרִי ari from אָרָה arah, to tear off, the predatory lion, or the lion in the act of seizing and tearing his prey; - the nations against whom the Israelites are now going shall be no more able to defend themselves against their attacks, than the feeblest beasts of the forest are against the attacks of the strong lion.

NUMBERS 23:25 Balak said to Balaam, "Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all."

NUMBERS 23:26 But Balaam answered Balak, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'All that the LORD speaks, that I must do?'"

NUMBERS 23:27 Balak said to Balaam, "Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there."

NUMBERS 23:28 Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, that looks down on the desert.

Verse 28

Unto the top of Peor - Probably the place where the famous Baal-peor had his chief temple. He appears to have been the Priapus of the Moabites, and to have been worshipped with the same obscene and abominable rites.

NUMBERS 23:29 Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here."

NUMBERS 23:30 Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered up a bull and a ram on every altar.
