Parasha Chukat-Balak

וַיִּסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעַרְבוֹת מוֹאָב מֵעֵבֶר לְיַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ:וַיַּרְא בָּלָק בֶּן-צִפּוֹר אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לָאֱמֹרִי:

So much of what we have just read in this chapter (and previous ones) about these elaborate rituals cannot help but seem to us moderns as mumbo-jumbo; sorcery, stuff we expect some deep-jungle tribes of the Brazilian rain forest might perform. And, that is because we have set aside ritual as unimportant and unneeded and unintelligent. We don't see its value anymore; in fact, we really don't like it and aren't at all comfortable talking about it. But contained within Biblical ritual is the visible picture of what is going on in an invisible realm. Believe me, long before the church was around, Rabbis struggled with the words to explain just WHY ritual was performed, and WHAT actually occurred during these sacred procedures, just as we do. Did the blood and body parts of sacrificed animals take on supernatural qualities? Did sacred procedures done in exactly the right way and order create magic-like effects upon the people of Israel? Does bathing in water and saying the right words at the right time react with our flesh and our souls so as to remove whatever it is that has contaminated us and offended God? So as important as this chapter of Numbers and its details is, so is the need for us to take another step in understanding the Biblical principles surrounding ritual impurity.

I'd like to begin by quoting a brief story from the Talmud about a famous Rabbi who was asked to explain the very issue I just framed. A heathen questioned Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, saying: "The things you Jews do appear to be a kind of sorcery. A cow is brought, it is burned, it is pounded into ash, and its ash is gathered up. Then, when one of you gets defiled by contact with a corpse, two or three drops of the ash mixed with water are sprinkled upon him, and he is told, 'You are cleansed'". Rabban Yochanan asked the heathen: "Has the spirit of madness ever possessed you?" He replied, "No." The Rabbi said: "Have you ever seen a man whom the spirit of madness possessed?" The Heathen replied, "Yes." The Rabbi said: "And what do you do for such a man?" The Heathen replied, "Roots are brought, the smoke of their burning is made to rise about him, and the water is sprinkled upon him until the spirit of madness flees." Rabban Yochanan then said: "Do not your ears hear what your mouth is saying? It is the same with a man who is defiled by contact with a corpse; he, too, is possessed by a spirit, the spirit of uncleanness, and Scripture says, 'I will make false prophets as well as the unclean spirit vanish from the land." Now, when the heathen left, Rabban Yochanan's disciples said: " Our master, you put off that heathen with a mere reed of an answer, but what answer will you give to us?" Rabban Yochanan answered: "By your lives, I swear… the corpse does NOT have the power by itself to defile, nor does the mixture of ash and water have the power by itself to cleanse. The truth is that the purifying power of the red cow is a decree from the Holy One.

The Holy One said: 'I have set it down as a statute, I have issued it a decree. You are not permitted to transgress My decree. This is the ritual law." In essence the Rabbi is saying: I'm not entirely sure how the whole thing works, but I know that the cow has no magical power in itself, and I know that a corpse can't inherently defile anybody. In the end, we do this Red Cow purification procedure because God said to do it, and if we do so He will count us as purified and it is not permitted to do otherwise. So, the good Rabbi is denying that any kind of sorcery is involved. He readily admits that it all sure looks like a mumbo-jumbo pagan exorcism… but it's not. And part of the reason it's not is that he says God has said that He has banished unclean spirits from the land of Israel, so it's impossible that the contaminated man could even have an unclean spirit in him.
That's a great lead but that's not where I am going…

So… speaking of sorcery… I want to talk about Baalam today… The story of Balaam and his donkey is one of the most unusual in the Bible. People have used donkeys for thousands of years, mostly for riding or hauling. For Balaam, this was a ride which I doubt he ever forgot! I read from Numbers 22:22-28, *But the anger of God burned because he was going. The angel of Adonai stood in the road to oppose him—he was riding on his donkey and two of his servants were with him— [23] when the donkey saw the angel of Adonai standing in the road with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off the road and went into the field. So Balaam beat the donkey to get her back onto the road. [24] Then the angel of Adonai stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. [25] When the donkey saw the angel of Adonai, she pressed against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against the wall. So Balaam continued beating her. [26] The angel again moved. He stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, right or left. [27] When the donkey saw the angel of Adonai, she lay down under Balaam. Balaam was very angry and beat the donkey with his staff. [28] Then Adonai opened the donkey's mouth and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"* We read that Balaam had first refused a request by Balak, king of Moav, to come and curse "a certain people (Israel)", but Balak's messengers never mentioned the name "Israel" to Balaam. Then, Balak sent more princes, all of whom were more honorable; to make a second, maybe even sweeter deal for Balaam. He, just like the first time, said, "Let me see what God says about this and I'll reply in the morning". So far, so good. God indicated to Balaam that it was okay to go with the men, but if, and only if, they contacted him first (Numbers 22 has the whole story). For whatever reason, Balaam got ready to go before anybody said anything and God was very displeased with this. Isn't that a classic definition of sin, to do what God expressly said not to do? So now, Balaam is on his way, heading to Moav along with the princes/messengers from the king. Now, I can't say for sure just what Balaam was thinking, or if he was thinking, as he was riding the donkey from Pethor, his hometown, to Moav.

I doubt, though, he was anyway near ready for what was about to happen! Remember that God was very angry that Balaam had ignored the command, and as a result rebelled against God. We don't know when or how far from Balaam's hometown these events happened, but we can rest assured they did. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and for some to say these incidents are myths, fables, or anything less than plain historical narrative are playing fast and loose with the sacred text. If God says it happened, it happened. All right. According to verse 22, Balaam was riding the donkey, and two servants (of his, implied) were along with him. I have to confess that I have no idea how fast a donkey can walk, but probably not very fast here, if two men can keep up while still walking. A lot of information, as in real-world or experiential knowledge, is far higher than my pay grade or knowledge! And it's while he's riding the donkey that we read about the first out of the ordinary experience. Again, based on my limited knowledge, donkeys tend to follow a straight-ahead path, only turning when the rider (somehow) indicates that it's time to go either left or right. People with experience riding horses say it's easy to make them turn, just pull the reins until the horse goes in the rider's chosen direction. Anyway, the donkey seems to be walking along the straight path until she saw something very much out of the ordinary. This donkey saw something Balaam didn't see—the Angel of Adonai! Not once, not twice, but three times. Balaam didn't see the Angel once, until later. So, what did the donkey see? The first time, she saw the Angel of the Adonai standing "in the way", which I take to mean the road, trail, or pathway this group was traveling. And not only did the donkey see the Angel Himself, but she noticed He had a sword drawn in His hand. I remember reading or hearing, somewhere, that if one's sword was kept in the sheath, this meant peace but if the sword was drawn, this was either a warning or an act of punishment. No matter what it was, the donkey knew that something bad was going to happen unless she made a move. May I digress for a planned rabbi trail? Those of us who have or used to have pets know that sometimes these animals can sense something before we humans ever notice anything. One such example that I'll never forget took place after retiring from my military career. Our house has a backyard fence and one evening, my service dog, Duke, did something I didn't expect. He was a very mellow, "laid back" and very trained dog, but not this time. He shot off my porch, and let out a low, almost menacing growl and by the time I could react, he had set out across the back yard to get to a deer he had seen! Still, the donkey didn't receive any credit for moving out of the Angel's way. The donkey left the path and went into the field, but Balaam didn't like it, and "smote: the donkey. We're not told what Balaam used here, but I'm willing to say he expressed his displeasure clearly!

As a side note, even knowing a bit of Hebrew, I have some trouble understanding all the verb conjugations. Now the Hebrew verb "smote" is *"nakah"* in the Hiphil stem, but here it says *v'yach, "and he struck" (as in repeatedly).*

At any rate, the donkey got the message, painfully clear, that Balaam wasn't happy with the direction she was taking him. Now here's the second time the donkey saw the Angel of Adonai. The donkey noticed the Angel in a path of the vineyards, per verse 24, with a "wall" on each side. The word "wall" has several different meanings and definitions and may refer to a wall of stone to make a border, the Hebrew word used is *qir (keer)* and was more than likely a vineyard wall. The Bible frequently mentions vineyard walls, often using them as metaphors for protection, care, and divine favor. This time, when the donkey saw the Angel, she "crushed" Balaam's foot against the wall. Taking this to be a wall of stone, I'm pretty sure Balaam was not pleased when this happened, whether it was a vine wall, I doubt there was any permanent damage. As we'll see, Balaam was able to walk up tall mountains, and the word lachatz can mean "crushed" or also translated "pressed". We could say the donkey tried to get away from the Angel, she pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, vine or stone. Balaam, just like before, "smote" the donkey again. But he got back on the donkey, and they rode, you guessed it, into experience number three. The donkey saw the Angel, but Balaam didn't, and this time, the donkey did something different. She promptly lay down. She could see the Angel standing in a narrow place (location not given) but there was no way to move either to the left or the right. The donkey might have guessed, if I go forward, the Angel may kill me, and I can't turn to either side, so I'm just going to lay down until something happens. This made Balaam furious! Twice the donkey had done something he didn't like, and he beat her with something. Now, she lays down ("fell down", verse 27) and Balaam took a *"makel",* a *"staff"* and beat her. Of note, the "staff" was likely a walking stick, perhaps something like the "rods" which men, especially shepherds, had used for many years. It's also the same word for the "staff" the Hebrew men held onto when they were preparing for the first Passover (Exodus 12:11). A staff, then, was a good-sized rod, as it had to hold up the weight of a grown man. Someone once described a "staff" like this as solid wood, like a tree limb, about 1 to 2 inches in diameter and about the same height as a grown man. I don't know much about physics, either, but it's a fair guess that a five-foot rod, with the full force of a grown man, would absolutely cause a lot of pain on any animal or human unlucky enough to feel it! Balaam had been furious with his donkey, but now he was about to receive a lesson from a pair of unforgettable teachers!

Let's read about this uncanny experience in Numbers 22:28-30, *"Then Adonai opened the donkey's mouth and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you've made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now!" The donkey said to Balaam, "Dude"..."Am I not your donkey which you have ridden as always to this day? Have I ever been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said."* Balaam had apparently just finished beating his donkey with his walking staff when he got the surprise of his life. His donkey spoke to him!

Likely, this was in Balaam's own language, whether Hebrew, Chaldean, or whatever; the important thing is that he and the donkey, as incredible as this sounds, had a mutual conversation. Something I like to do is guess what a person will sound like whenever he or she speaks. I've been surprised, believe me! During my military career, I worked with and knew a number of people who came from just about every state in the Union and even foreign countries — and there were variations in accents, brogues, and the like even between people from all over. For example, I knew some folks from New York City, but they sounded a lot different than those from, say, upstate New York where my wife is from. So. to me, I would have liked to hear what that donkey sounded like, did she have a smooth, pleasant, feminine voice (kind of like the recorded voice, "Please continue to hold; someone will be with you in just a moment" while you think you're waiting for something, anyone, to pick up!) No matter what the donkey did sound like, she was able to question Balaam, saying, "What did I do to deserve you hitting me these three times?" And Balaam's reply? "You made fun of me! If I had a sword in my hand (remember, he hasn't yet seen the Angel Who had a sword in His hand!), I would kill you!" Balaam was, I think, so furious, he was ready to kill his own donkey even though he may not have been anywhere near Moav, and he would have had to walk all the rest of the distance! The donkey could not only speak but think. She then asked Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, and haven't you ridden on me ever since the day you got me? Also, have I ever done anything like this to you before? Balaam, of course, would have to say, and did say, no. Well, at least he was truthful at that moment. Not much more to say here, except that I think Balaam and the donkey might well have stared at each other for a while. I mean, this was perhaps only the second time in all recorded history (except Genesis 3 for the first time; the serpent spoke to Eve) when an animal had the power of speech, and it was to rebuke a prophet! I'm still not sure what Balaam was thinking at this point, but he was about to have a face-to-face encounter with Someone he wasn't expecting. The Angel of Adonai had something to say. Let's read.

Numbers 22:31-35 tells us, "*The angel of Adonai said to him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Behold, I came as an adversary because your way before Me is a reckless one!* [33] *The donkey saw Me and turned away from Me these three times. If she had not turned away from Me, by now I would have killed you indeed, but let her live!"* [34] *Balaam said to the angel of Adonai, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now, if this is displeasing in your eyes, I will go back home."* [35] *The angel of Adonai said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's princes."* Once Balaam finished dealing with his donkey, and maybe wondering, "What's next?" he received another shock. His eyes were opened and now he saw The One Whom the donkey had seen— the very Angel of Adonai!

The Angel was standing in the way, and whether both feet were on the ground, or if He was hovering (I can't think of another or better word) above the ground, makes no difference. The Angel had His sword drawn, out in the open, just as the donkey had seen at the first. This also reminds me of the cherubim whom God placed at the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had sinned (Genesis 3). These cherubim had flaming swords and that proved God meant business about not allowing anyone, period, back in that garden. When someone's sword is drawn, that's a clear sign that he or she is serious about something. Balaam, to his credit, bowed down to the Angel, even to the point of falling "flat on his face". This was and is a universal sign of worship, and here Balaam was worshiping the Angel. Some, including me, believe He was Yeshua in a Christophany, a manifestation. Now we have the words of the Angel of Adonai. I personally think He spoke very directly, but maybe with a still, small voice, just like the voice Elijah heard at Mount Horeb. Sometimes, a quiet but direct word hurts worse than if you get yelled at. God of course has the right and privilege to use any tone He sees fit and, admittedly, there were and are times when we deserve a loud, solid blast to get our attention. But, I know personally, there are times when the Lord has spoken to me in a simple, clear, direct means and it hurts worse than just about anything else He could say or do. How does He get the message to you? Does He ever hurt your feelings too?

Well, He got the message to Balaam, and that's a fact. He first asked Balaam the same question as the donkey, "Why did you beat the donkey those three times?" He then added, "I came up to stand against you because your way is perverse (evil) before Me." Balaam, as we read, had nothing to say but the Angel was just getting started. He then said this to Balaam, "Your donkey saw Me (though you didn't) and turned away from Me three times. If she hadn't, I would have killed you (just as you threatened your donkey) and saved her alive!" I'm thinking Balaam had a moment of self-reflection before He said anything. He came to realize that he was wrong for going with the princes to Moav, and he was wrong for mistreating his donkey. Now he also realized, "I have sinned", and not just because he literally didn't see the Angel until the Angel opened his eyes (just like the two disciples in Emmaus saw Yeshua, Luke 24). Balaam offered to return home, another sign, I think, of genuine repentance, but the Angel had something else in mind. He apparently forgave Balaam, (only God can forgive sins, Yeshua? ...hmmm) but he also commanded him to go but only speak the words he received from the Lord. There's more about that in the next chapter or two, when Balaam arrived in Moav and met Balak. The story of Balaam and Balak serves as a profound reminder of God's overarching sovereignty and the unwavering fulfillment of His promises. Despite human attempts to thwart divine plans, God's will prevails, weaving blessings through unexpected channels. May we walk assured in this truth that every word God speaks over our lives contains power and purpose beyond our comprehension. Let us commit to faithfulness and trust, knowing that God's plans are both for our good and His glory.

So, what have we learned? First, remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it generally is. Balaam seems to have let the greed of promotion and great honor cloud his judgment. Then, when God puts a restriction on anything you or I might want to do, even if it's good, it's wrong unless He permits it. Remember, God told Balaam to go with the messengers ONLY if they contacted him first and there's no record that ever happened. Another thing is that when something goes wrong, it may be the Lord trying to get our attention. It's a shame when animals are more aware of God's presence than we are! Finally, when we realize we've sinned, remember that the Lord would much rather forgive than discipline us. I hope none of us ever have to face the judgment of God when, A, it would have been better not to sin in the first place; and, B, to get and make things right with God before it goes too far. I heard someone say that it's so important to get right with God, because it is so easy to get "wrong" with Him! I pray that Adonai opens our eyes to recognize His sovereign hand in all circumstances. That He guides our words and actions to reflect His truth. To secure our hearts in the understanding that His plans cannot be thwarted. Hence, I think that this teaching can be summarized in a sentence: "Don't be a Balaam!"

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")