

# PARASHAT BALAK

*Numbers 22:2–25:9*

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*Parashat Balak* takes its title from Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab. Afraid that the Israelites will attack his nation, Balak sends messengers to invite Bala'am ben Beor, a well-known pagan prophet, to come and curse the people of Israel. At first, God forbids Bala'am to grant Balak's request. Then the seer is sent but told that he must say only what God commands. On the way, Bala'am's donkey sees an angel standing before her and refuses to go forward. Bala'am beats her. After the donkey protests that she is being mistreated, Bala'am himself sees the angel. Fearful, he asks if he should return home, but the angel tells him to continue, warning once again that he is to say only what God commands. On three occasions King Balak asks Bala'am to curse the Israelites, but each time the seer blesses them. Furious, Balak tells Bala'am to return home. In parting, the seer predicts that Israel will soon "smash the brow of Moab." Later, when the Israelites camp in Shittim, they have sexual relations with Moabite women and offer sacrifices to the Moabites' god. As a result they are punished with a plague. When Pinchas, son of Eleazar the priest, witnesses an Israelite entering a tent with a Moabite woman, he takes a spear and kills both of them. His action ends the plague after 24,000 Israelites have died.

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## OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

**F**earing that the Israelites will attack his country, Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sends messengers to Bala'am son of Beor in Pethor, a town located on the Euphrates River

in ancient Mesopotamia. Bala'am is known as a pagan prophet with special powers to bless and curse. Balak promises to pay him richly for cursing the people of Israel. When Balak's messengers tell Bala'am what their king wants, Bala'am asks them to stay the night while he considers the offer.

During the night, God tells Bala'am, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed." The next morning, Bala'am tells the messengers that he cannot accept Balak's offer. When these messengers report Bala'am's response, Balak sends other messengers who, as Balak instructs them, promise Bala'am anything he wishes. Bala'am listens to the offer and declares: "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything . . . against the command of God."

Later that night, God tells Bala'am to go with the messengers but to say only what God commands.

· 2 ·

Bala'am sets out for Moab on his donkey. Along the way, an angel holding a sword appears in

front of the donkey, blocking her way. The donkey swerves off the road. In anger, Bala'am beats her. Again the angel appears before the donkey. The donkey presses against a fence, hurting Bala'am's foot. Bala'am beats her with a stick. When the angel appears for a third time, the donkey sits down, refusing to move. Bala'am beats her again.

Finally, the donkey speaks, complaining to Bala'am, "Why are you beating me? Am I not the donkey you have been riding for many years? Have I behaved this way before?"

At that moment, the angel, with the sword drawn, appears to Bala'am and reveals that, had the donkey not turned aside, he would have killed Bala'am. Fearing the angel, Bala'am tells him, "I will turn back if that is what you wish." The angel answers, "Go with Balak's servants, but say only what I tell you."



• 3 •

When Bala'am arrives, Balak asks why he refused to come the first time he was invited. Bala'am answers, "I can say only the word that God puts into my mouth."

Bala'am orders Balak to build several altars and prepare sacrifices for them. Standing next to the sacrifices, Bala'am praises the Israelites, declaring, "How can I damn whom God has not damned? . . . May my fate be like theirs."

Hearing this praise, Balak cries, "What have you done to me?" He then takes Bala'am to Pisgah, a high place where he builds seven altars. But, again, instead of cursing the Israelites, Bala'am blesses them, predicting, "No harm is in sight for Jacob, . . . *Adonai* their God is with them."

Furious, Balak takes Bala'am to the peak of Peor. On seeing the Israelites camping below, the pagan prophet declares: "How fair [beauti-

### THEMES

*Parashat Balak* contains two important themes:

1. God's mysterious and wonderful presence in history.
2. Encountering the unknown future.

### PEREK ALEF: *Bala'am and His Strange Book*

The Talmud justifiably calls this Torah portion the "Book of Bala'am." Bala'am, identified as the son of Beor from Pethor, a town along the Euphrates River in what is now Syria, is the main character of the drama. The Torah, however, provides no background information about him. We are told only where he comes from and that Balak, the king of Moab, says of him: "He whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse falls under the curse." (*Baba Batra* 15a)

This "Book of Bala'am" raises several important questions: Who is Bala'am? What are his powers? Is he an enemy or a friend of the Jewish people? Does God really speak to him and appear to his donkey? How significant are these events in which Moses is not even mentioned and in which the main characters are non-Jews?

The first interpretations of Bala'am's powers

ful] are your tents, O Jacob,/Your dwellings, Israel!/. . . Blessed are they who bless you,/Cursed are those who curse you!"

Exasperated with Bala'am, Balak once again seeks to bribe him into cursing the Israelites. Bala'am responds, claiming he can say only what God has commanded. He then speaks a final blessing, promising that the Israelites will triumph over all their enemies, including the people of Moab.

• 4 •

While camping at Shittim, the Israelites have sexual relations with the women of Moab and begin worshiping their idols. God punishes them with a plague. As an Israelite is taking a Moabite woman into his tent, Pinchas, son of Eleazar the priest, attacks them with a spear and kills them. The plague ends after 24,000 Israelites are dead.

and intentions are found in the Hebrew Bible. In Numbers 31:8 we find that, after their victory over the Midianites, the Israelites, without explanation, "put Bala'am son of Beor to the sword."

A reason for the punishment may be found in Deuteronomy 23:4–6, where we are informed that "no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of *Adonai*; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation . . . because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Bala'am son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.—But *Adonai* your God refused to heed Bala'am; instead, *Adonai* your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for *Adonai* your God loves you.—" This view of Bala'am as a Moabite, a hired diviner who intends to curse and harm Israel but whose scheming is reversed by God, is repeated in Joshua 13:22, 24:9–10; Micah 6:5; and Nehemiah 13:2.

Early rabbinic interpreters also share this neg-

ative view of Bala'am. In discussing him, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yochanan agree that the blessings he speaks about Israel are not his but those that God puts into his mouth. Eliezer argues that an "angel" places them there; Yochanan disagrees. They are extracted, he says, with a "hook." Bala'am speaks the blessings against his will. Even God must force them out of his mouth. (*Sanhedrin* 105b)

Rabbi Abba ben Kahana agrees with Yochanan, declaring that Bala'am was one of three people pronounced "despicable" by God. The others are Cain, who murders his brother Abel, and Hezekiah, whose self-centered boasting leads to Israel's destruction by Babylonia. Rabbi Abba ben Kahana says that Bala'am is the "vilest of sinners" because he intends to curse and injure the people of Israel. Other rabbinic interpreters label him a "money changer" because he sells his advice, including curses and blessings, to leaders of nations.

Some rabbinic interpreters speculate that Bala'am is directed by Satan and that he hates the Israelites more than Balak because they never seek his advice. He also doubts God's promise to protect them. Summing up the early rabbinic view of Bala'am, one commentator says, "He possesses three qualities: an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a greedy soul." (*Numbers Rabbah* 20:6-11)



Peli

***Bala'am perverts his gifts***

*Claiming that Bala'am is responsible for helping to lure the Israelites into whoring with the Moabites, modern interpreter Pinchas Peli comments: "God grants human beings various degrees of talent in different areas of creativity; it is they themselves who are responsible, however, for putting this latent gift to the right use. Many waste their gifts; others pervert their use. Bala'am was among the latter. . . . After uttering some of the most lofty songs in praise*

*of Israel, Bala'am proceeds to offer their enemies some of the most sinister pieces of advice on how to go about destroying Israel and its 'goodly tents'; behind their backs, he plots their annihilation through the lure of fertility goddesses."*  
(Jerusalem Post, July 19, 1986, p. 22)



Ibn Ezra

Following early rabbinic tradition, ibn Ezra claims that Bala'am is a deceptive schemer, a dangerous man. He substantiates his accusation by pointing out that Bala'am never tells Balak's messengers that God will not permit him to curse the Israelites. He allows them to believe that he is willing to damn the king's enemies. Moreover, Bala'am orders Balak to build altars and make sacrifices without telling Balak that God will permit him only to bless the Israelites. Bala'am withholds information and distorts the truth. He seeks to take advantage of the king's fears for his own financial gain.



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides agrees with ibn Ezra's observation but sees in it something much more sinister than "financial gain." He claims that "it was God's original desire that Bala'am go with the messengers and bless the Israelites . . . for God wanted Israel blessed by a prophet of the nations." In failing to make clear his intentions to the messengers, Bala'am creates the false impression "that God has given permission to curse the people. . . ." Consequently, "when they see that God does not curse the Israelites," they may assume "that God has had a change of mind and is fickle. . . ." For Nachmanides, Bala'am is a dangerous person because he not only fails to tell Balak's messengers that he can only bless Israel, but he has no scruples in misleading others

about God's true intentions. (Commentary on Numbers 22:20)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a very different view from that of Nachmanides. For Hirsch, Bala'am's faith in God evolves, as does his willingness to do God's will. When Bala'am first agrees to go with Balak's messengers, "his mind is still obscured by the obsession that he would be able to achieve the purpose desired by Balak and himself." That purpose is to curse Israel. However, after he sees that "God cannot be influenced by means of sorcery," his intentions shift.

Realizing that he cannot damn the people, Bala'am "becomes a vehicle for the will of God." With experience, his faith in God becomes more profound. He becomes more open to hearing and doing God's will. At that point, Hirsch concludes, "It is not a question of God putting a word into his mouth against his will, *in spite of himself*, as heretofore, but of the spirit of unconstrained prophecy informing his utterances." (Commentary on Numbers 22:22, 24:1-2)



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz shares Hirsch's view that Bala'am may have begun with sinister intentions toward Israel, but he evolves into a person whose faith in God increases with experience and proximity. She points out that Bala'am ascends from a "common sorcerer to a prophet 'who hears the words of God.'" First, explains Leibowitz, Bala'am asks Balak to build altars and offer sacrifices. His purpose is to invoke "divine aid through magical means, striving to accommodate the divine will to his interests rather than to achieve closer communion" with God. Finally, after two experiences of blessing Israel "against his will," Bala'am "leaves

all his schemes and wholeheartedly gives himself up to the divine prophetic urge."

***Bala'am was a convert***

*Modern biblical scholar and archeologist W.F. Albright concludes that "Bala'am was really a North-Syrian diviner from the Euphrates Valley, that he became a convert to Yahwism [Israel's faith], and that he later abandoned Israel and joined the Midianites in fighting against the Yahwists." (W. Gunther Plaut, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 1184-1185)*

Unlike some earlier commentators, Leibowitz boldly claims that Bala'am is a "prophet," not a diviner, sorcerer, or magician for hire. Like Hirsch, she applauds Bala'am's spiritual growth and evolution from a man who sees less than his donkey to a person who achieves "pure prophecy." To those who question whether "prophecy" is a power given to non-Jews as well as Jews, Leibowitz quotes modern Israeli scholar Ephraim E. Urbach. He concludes that in Jewish tradition "prophecy is not the exclusive gift of Israel. . . . On the contrary, prophecy . . . was given at the outset to all human creatures." (*Studies in Bemidbar*, pp. 282-327)

Philosopher Martin Buber takes issue with Nehama Leibowitz. Bala'am, he argues, never reaches "pure prophecy." A prophet, explains Buber, never foretells "a fixed, unchangeable future." Prophets do not predict what will happen tomorrow. Instead, "they announce a present that requires human choice and decision." It is a present "in which the future is being prepared" but whose outcome depends upon the work and decisions of human beings.

Bala'am, Buber explains, is not "commissioned," not "sent" by God. He fails to make decisions on his own. Rather, "God makes use of him." Bala'am may have the potential to be a prophet and take initiative, but he never fulfills that potential. He remains detached and aloof from others. He never engages others. Instead, he announces God's words, exercising no will of his own. He speaks about tomorrow but does not participate in making the choices and deci-

sions that will shape the future. Consequently, he remains a common magician. (*Moses*, pp. 170–171)

Modern biblical and literary critic Robert Alter extends Buber's view of Bala'am. Pointing out that the "Book of Bala'am" contains "high comedy," Alter observes that Bala'am, a seer who cannot see, is cast ironically into a story about seeing! For comic relief the author treats us to the sideshow of a donkey with better vision than that of her owner. Bala'am, the most renowned of all magicians, is exposed as a pagan professional. He claims he has the power to manipulate God but ends up being controlled and maneuvered by God.

This entire story, Alter argues, is meant to demonstrate the flaws of paganism. "Paganism, with its notion that divine powers can be manipulated by a caste of professionals through a set of carefully prescribed procedures, is trapped in the reflexes of a mechanistic worldview while, from the biblical perspective, reality is in fact controlled by the will of an omnipotent God beyond all human manipulation." For the pagan, knowledge of the world and how to dominate it are consigned to expert magicians or seers like Bala'am. That explains why Balak is willing to pay him such a high price to curse Israel. By contrast, the Torah puts forth the view that no human being can truly comprehend, and certainly not manipulate, God's will. God's will is beyond understanding, too awesome to be grasped. (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, New York, 1981, pp. 104–107)

The "Book of Bala'am" is more than an example of the Torah's art. It reveals early Jewish views about sorcery and magic and contains a critique on professional prophets who made their living either cursing or blessing the enemies or allies of their rulers. In this ancient story about a seer who cannot see and whose donkey understands more of God's will than he does, pagan notions about manipulating God are ridiculed and condemned. The tale seems to make the point that human history and Israel's history are in the power of an unfathomable God. No person can fully understand God's intentions. Often what is perceived as a curse turns into a blessing,

and what seems to be a benefit sours into a disappointment.

### PEREK BET: *Decoding Bala'am's Poetry and Blessings*

The "Book of Bala'am" contains not only a moving narrative about a pagan prophet summoned to curse the people of Israel but also some very beautiful poetry. Balak, the king of Moab, fears that the Israelites will "lick clean" his land and fortunes. Bala'am, he hopes, will predict their destruction. Yet each time Bala'am prepares to curse Israel, his words become blessings. His pronouncements rise with poetic rhythm and power to praise the very people Balak wants him to curse.

Modern biblical commentators differ on the time Bala'am's poetry was composed. Some believe that the poetic sections reflect a time different from that of the Torah narrative. They speculate that these "poetic descriptions date from the time of Saul and of David" and echo national aspirations meant to demonstrate Israel's superiority over surrounding pagan peoples.

Other interpreters disagree, arguing that the narrative and poetry of the story of Bala'am "form an organic unity." Still others point out that the narrative portion and the poetic portions may have been independent of each other at one point but were later fused "by a single editorial hand," thus producing "a new artistic creation." (See Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1962, pp. 13–14; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, Schocken Books, New York, 1972, pp. 84–91; and Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, pp. 467–468.)

This disagreement on the time and authorship of Bala'am's poetry may never be settled. Unfortunately, there are no existing documents that can move the discussion beyond speculation. That, however, does not remove the challenge of interpreting the meaning of Bala'am's poetry about the people of Israel. Each of the three poems contains puzzling and enchanting expressions.

In the first, Bala'am says of the Israelites:

As I see them from the mountain tops,  
Gaze on them from the heights,  
There is a people that dwells apart,  
Not reckoned among the nations.

(Numbers 23:9)

What does this verse mean?



Rashi

Rashi, working with the literal translation of the original Hebrew, suggests that Bala'am is predicting a secure future for the people of Israel. He means to say: "I look at your origins [mountain tops] and see that you are strongly rooted in your ancestors [heights]. You are distinguished [dwell apart] by your Torah traditions, and because of them you will not suffer the fate [be reckoned] of extinction but will survive and prosper."



Hertz

Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz agrees with Rashi, interpreting the phrase "a people that dwells apart" to mean that "Israel has always been a people isolated and distinguished from other peoples by its religious and moral laws and by the fact that it has been chosen as the instrument of a divine purpose." His understanding of the meaning of "not reckoned among the nations," however, differs from that of Rashi. Hertz quotes the work of Marcus Jastro, a modern student of Hebrew and other ancient Middle East languages, who notes that *yitchashav*, or "reckon," may be better translated as "conspire." Thus the verse means that "Israel is a people that dwells alone; *it does not conspire against the nations.*" (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, Soncino Press, London, p. 674)

Hertz's interpretation may reflect the mood of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England rather than the accurate intention of the

Torah text. He seems to be saying that, while Jewish tradition differs from other religious expressions, it is not hostile toward other peoples or cultures. Worried about anti-Semites, who claim that Jews believe themselves to be "superior" to other religious and cultural groups, Hertz seizes the words of Bala'am to prove that such claims are false.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch also seems uncomfortable with Bala'am's statement, ". . . I see them from the mountain tops . . . a people that dwells apart." Hirsch maintains this statement means that Bala'am has a "panoramic view" of the Jewish people "in a future time." That view, says Hirsch, means Israel "will live in an insulated land without much intercourse with other nations." It will sustain "its 'internal' national mission as a national social body and will not seek its greatness as a nation among nations." In other words, the people of Israel does not seek "control of the world," as anti-Semites claim. Rather, Jews seek only a peaceful, cooperative coexistence with other peoples and nations. (Commentary on Numbers 23:9)

Each of the above interpretations finds the Torah's description of Israel as "a people that dwells apart, Not reckoned among the nations" perplexing and disturbing. It raises fundamental questions about the definition and nature of Jewish existence. Are Jews a nation like other nations, or are they a religious group without national aspirations? Within Bala'am's poetic praise, Jewish commentators locate some of their painful ambivalence and their serious concerns about the harmful misunderstandings of Jews and their tradition promulgated by anti-Semites.

These views, however, seem imposed upon the poetic words of Bala'am. The question remains: Can we uncover what Bala'am, or the author of these poems ascribed to him originally, had in mind?

Perhaps in the simplest terms they mean that the people of Israel "dwells apart" in a sacred covenant relationship with God, and, because of that covenant, it is judged differently by itself and by others. When Bala'am looks upon the people, he sees in their traditions and values a uniqueness worthy of blessing.

Bala'am's second poem of blessing includes the following verses:

No harm is in sight for Jacob,  
No woe in view for Israel.  
*Adonai* their God is with them . . .

Lo, a people that rises like a lion,  
Leaps up like the king of beasts,  
Rests not till it has feasted on prey  
And drunk the blood of the slain.

(Numbers 23:21, 24)

Nachmanides offers a different reading of the Torah text. He believes: "No harm is in sight for Jacob,/No woe in view for Israel" is not an accurate translation of the original Hebrew. He insists that the Hebrew word *aven*, translated above as "harm," means "wrongdoing," and the Hebrew word *amal*, translated as "woe," denotes "deception." Thus, argues Nachmanides, the phrase should read "No wrongdoing [among the people of] Jacob,/No deception [among the people of] Israel."

Nachmanides perceives that Bala'am is not predicting the future but making a judgment about the character of the Israelites. Because they do not engage in falsehood, cheating, or deliberate harm to others, God is with them. Therefore, they merit protection from their enemies and, like the lion, the "king of beasts," will be victorious over all who attack them. (Commentary on Numbers 23:21,24)

Early rabbinic tradition provides a different interpretation of the phrase "a people that rises like a lion,/Leaps up like the king of beasts." This phrase, say the rabbis, captures the unique and surprising quality of the Jewish people. "One moment they are asleep, neglecting the Torah and its mitzvot; the next moment they awake and rise 'like a lion.' They read the words, 'Hear, O Israel; *Adonai* our God, *Adonai* is One,' and set out to apply the ethics of their Torah tradition to every aspect of their business dealings and relationships with others." They are animated by their faith and commitment to God. As a result of such behavior, explain the rabbis, Bala'am understood that he and the five kings of Midian, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, (Numbers

31:8) would be defeated. Inspired by their moral way of life, the people of Israel would rise up like a lion and not rest until its enemies were crushed. (*Numbers Rabbah* 20:20)

Bala'am's third poem of praise for the Israelites includes the following phrases:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
Your dwellings, O Israel!  
Like palm groves that stretch out,  
Like gardens beside a river,  
Like aloes planted by *Adonai*,  
Like cedars beside the water;  
Their boughs drip with moisture,  
Their roots have abundant water.

God who freed them from Egypt  
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.  
They shall devour enemy nations,  
Crush their bones,  
And smash their arrows.

(Numbers 24:5--7, 8)

Rashi interprets the verse "How fair [beautiful] are your tents, O Jacob" with an imaginative speculation about what Bala'am sees as he gazes down at the Israelite tents. Rashi supposes that Bala'am "notices that their tents are not directly facing one another." From this, Rashi suggests that the Israelites are following a unique moral principle that guarantees privacy for each home. They situate their dwellings so that one cannot look into the private space of another. Each home is guaranteed its seclusion and solitude.

Elaborating on Rashi's explanation, Nehama Leibowitz comments that "Bala'am, who had been reared among the idolatrous and immoral practices of his home country, is here praising the purity and chastity characteristic of the Jewish people." The term *tovu*, or "fair," says Leibowitz, means "perfection in all respects—beauty and charm, simplicity and purity." What Bala'am sees, Leibowitz concludes, is a remarkably "perfect" people—pure in every way. (*Studies in Bemidbar*, pp. 290–296)

Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz elaborates on this idealization of the Israelites. He argues that Bala'am "is swept away in rapt admiration of the Israelite encampments and homes arrayed har-



moniously and peacefully, a picture of idyllic happiness and prosperity.” Citing what some rabbinic interpreters have made of Bala’am’s poetic words, Hertz explains that “the ‘tents’ are the ‘tents of Torah,’ and the ‘dwellings’ (literally, ‘homes’) are the synagogues.” He concludes by declaring, “There loomed up before Bala’am’s mental vision the schoolhouses and synagogues that have ever been the source and secret of Israel’s spiritual strength.” (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 678)

To suggest that Bala’am somehow sees the future institutions of Jewish life, its schools and synagogues, is a rather farfetched idealization. Yet his poetic words, “How fair are your tents, O Jacob,/Your dwellings, O Israel!” are found inscribed on many synagogue walls and, as the first words of the *Pesukei de-Zimra*, or “Verses of Praise,” begin the Jewish worship service. While Bala’am may have meant them as praise for the people of Israel, they have come to embody the enthusiasm of Jews for their synagogues, schools, and homes.

Modern interpreter Jacob Milgrom views the phrases of Bala’am’s poetry not as praise for Jewish institutions but as a prediction of Israel’s future. The poet, says Milgrom, suggests that their tents will be set out in a lush garden environment “beside the water,” recalling the Garden of Eden. The garden will be filled with sweet-smelling aloe trees, tall cedars with boughs that drip moisture, and roots fed by “abundant water.” The people will enjoy victory over their enemies. “God who freed them from Egypt” will crush their foes and “smash their arrows.” This prediction for a people living in an arid land, fearful of enemies all about them, is reassuring. It provides hope for the future.

One common thread unites Bala’am’s three poems: anxiety about the future, the fear of unknown dangers ahead. Bala’am’s poems deal directly with the apprehensions of a people whose history has been uncertain and filled with anxiety. The first poem defines the Israelites as unique

among the nations, protected when they fulfill their covenant with God. The second promises triumph over those plotting Israel’s destruction. The third poem transforms Israel into a people enjoying an ideal existence of safety and abundance in the Garden of Eden.

In our times, concern for security and dreams of prosperity continue as central themes not only for Jews but for all human beings. Peace with justice remains elusive. Greed and hostility still endanger our human family. Politicians, fortune-tellers, fanatics, and religious frauds still promise more than they can deliver. Perhaps that explains why Bala’am’s ancient poetic art retains its power and captures our imagination.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What accounts for the negative view of Bala’am by so many commentators?
2. Philosopher Martin Buber argues that Bala’am never reaches “pure prophecy.” What does he mean? What is the significance of the distinction he makes? What does critic Robert Alter add to Buber’s conclusions about Bala’am?
3. Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut writes: “At its worst, the setting apart of the Jew has meant ghettoization, disenfranchisement, anti-Semitism, and, finally, the Holocaust. At its best, it has signified the attempt to render an entire people holy. . . .” How do those who interpret Bala’am’s poetic phrase “There is a people that dwells apart” define its meaning?
4. In Bala’am’s third poem, water is a recurring theme. How is it used? Why? Compare its use in Bala’am’s poem with its use in Genesis 2:8–10; Psalms 1:3; Jeremiah 17:8, 31:11; and Isaiah 58:11.