

Parshat Balak 5778

The self-contained narrative that makes up Parashat Balak is not straightforward to understand. In Bava Batra 14b, the Beraita states “Moshe wrote his book, Parashat Bilaam and Iyov”. Rashi explains that this refers to “[Bilaam’s] prophesy and parables, even though they do not concern Moshe, his Torah, or his affairs”. Some say this implies that this Parasha is distinct and separate from the rest of the Torah but this is not our belief as the Torah is one indivisible whole. The Maharal argues that by the fact that the Beraita tells us that Moshe included this Parasha in the Torah with explicit intention; the text must have important religious value beyond mere narration of historical events.

It is remarkable that the most prominent and explicit mention in the Torah of the messianic End of Days is found in Bilaam’s prophecies. Moreover, the poetry with which his visions are expressed has such inspirational beauty that a number of the verses are well known from their appearance in our liturgy. Bilaam is the vehicle for transmission of some astonishing blessings upon Israel, even if his original intention was to curse Israel (Devarim ch. 23). Nevertheless, Chazal called him Bilaam Harasha (the evil one), he is described as הקוסם in Sefer Yehoshua 13:22 (a practitioner of forbidden dark magic?), and moreover he was killed on account of inciting Bnei Yisrael to the apostasy of Baal-Peor (Bamidbar ch. 31).

In remarkable contrast to this denigration of Bilaam, in Bamidbar Rabbah and Sifri we are told that, “no other prophet arose amongst Israel like Moshe - but amongst the nations one might say that one did arise, and which prophet did they have like Moshe? Bilaam son of B’or!”. The Shelah holds that Moshe and Bilaam are at opposite extremes of good and evil, but their vision comes from the same divine source. As such, there is nothing in Bilaam’s vision of Israel in the End of Days that Moshe had not foreseen himself. Since the prophecy could have been said directly by Moshe, it was worthy of being included in the Torah. Moreover, there might be special significance to the blessings coming from Israel’s enemy rather than from one’s own side, similar to Jacob’s request for a blessing from the angel after their nocturnal struggle. Rabbeinu Bechaye emphasises the importance that blessings to Israel should be heard from a prophet from the other nations, especially one who is a critic of Israel. Blessing Israel was the single task that Bilaam had to fulfil, and so once he had delivered his visions, prophecy departed from him, and he presumably returned to the ‘black magic’ by which he is remembered for posterity in Sefer Yehoshua.

The Shelah further suggests that the midrash that compares Bilaam as Moshe’s equal could actually be a veiled criticism of “the followers of Bilaam” who are themselves mistaken in comparing him to Moshe. At this point, it is worth mentioning that many scholars believe that Chazal often refer to Bilaam as a euphemism for אותו האישי. One could well assume that this might have been in the Shelah’s mind (as suggested by Yeshayahu Leibowitz in his famous radio talks on Parashat HaShavua). In Pirkei Avot ch. 5, the traits and fate of the students of Bilaam Harasha are critically contrasted with great rhetorical flourish to those of the students of Avraham Avinu. This depiction of Bilaam having students and followers is not explicit in the Torah, and one could well understand this mishna in the context of contemporary rhetoric against religious adversaries.

What remains surprising is that the dramatic visions and praise of Israel in Parashat Balak should be attributed to someone who is regarded as an evil enemy. The Ramban (on 24:1) also quotes the midrash above that compares Bilaam to Moshe Rabbeinu. He explains that, though there can be no possible suggestion that Bilaam is on the same overall level as Moshe, the prophecies that Bilaam received were distinguished by being in words fully comprehensible to him. This quality was necessary so that the nations could not claim that they too would have served Hashem if only they had a prophet like Moshe.

While philosophical speculation about the End of Days is undoubtedly an important aspect of our religion, the relationship of Rabbinic Judaism to overt messianism is always complicated. At the end of the Mishneh Torah, the Rambam states that “one should not dwell upon the speculations and homilies about these messianic matters and should not make them one’s main purpose, as they bring neither fear (of sin) nor love (of God).” If אמונה “faith” means trustworthy faithfulness towards the Divine rather than holding transcendental beliefs, then I believe that indeed, messianism is a subsidiary matter from our main task of unconditionally serving God (עבודת השם לשמה) through accepting the yoke of heaven (קבלת עול מלכות שמים). To conclude, there could therefore be a subtle significance to the fact that the Torah’s most explicit excursion into eschatological visions is apportioned in the Torah to “Parashat Bilaam”.

