

Numbers 22-24

Bible Study

Review

Chapter 20—Israel has come to the 40th year of wandering

- Miriam dies as well as most of those 20 years and older (at the Exodus)
- No water--Moses strikes the rock and will not be allowed to go into the promised land
 - Israel asks permission to pass through Edom—denied
 - Eleazar is made high priest—Aaron dies

Chapter 21

- Defeat of Arad, Canaanite king of the south
- Israel now goes south and east of Edom in the hot, dry desert
 - Complaint of no water—fiery serpents
 - Journey around Moab
- Israel conquers Sihon and Og—Amorite kingdoms

Numbers 21:23-24

²³But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together and went out against Israel in the wilderness, and he came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

²⁴Then Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the people of Ammon;

Chapter 22

The last stage of the journey—on the plains of Moab

¹Then the children of Israel moved, and camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan *across from* Jericho.

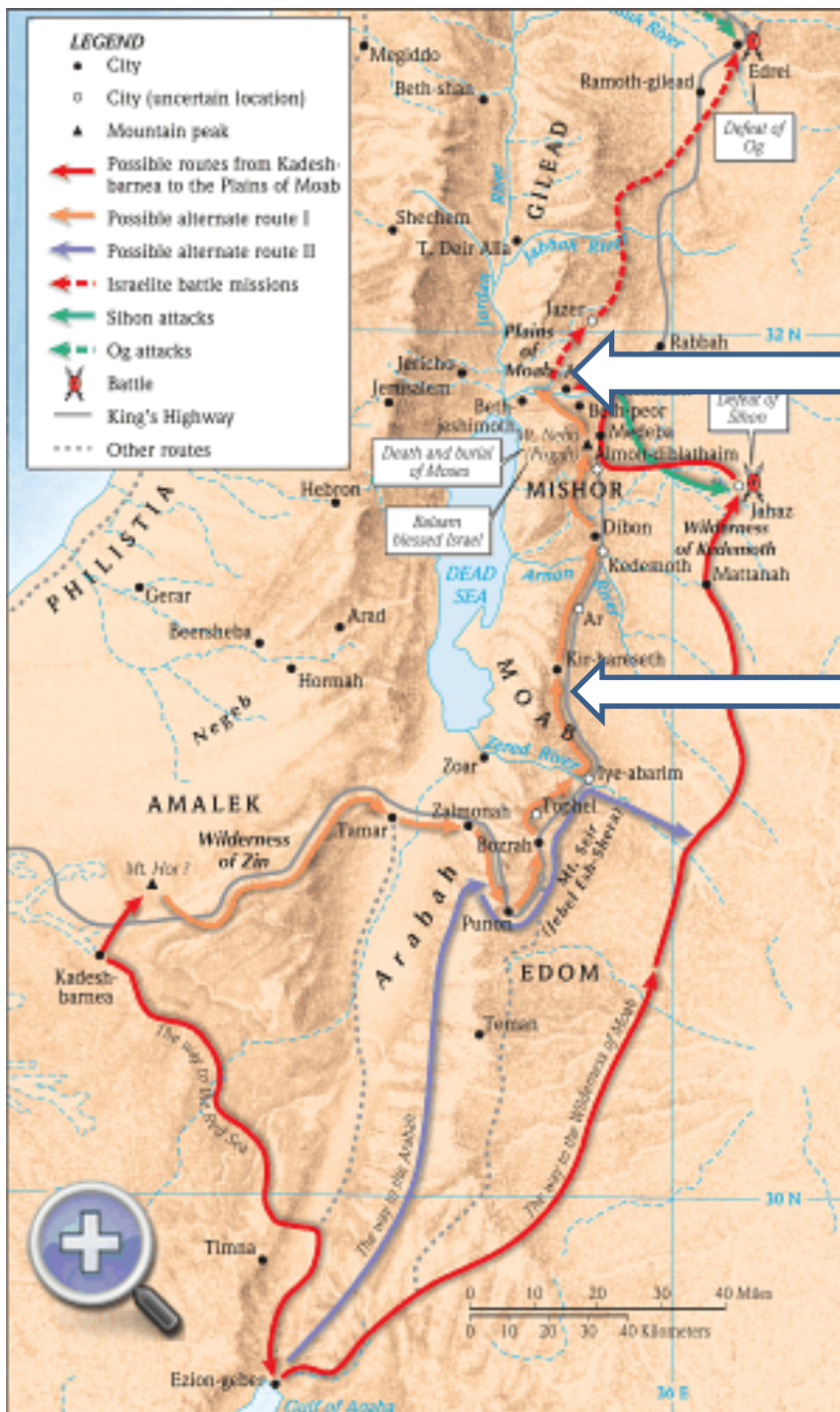
v.1 Israel camps on the east side of the Jordan river, on the verge of crossing it, to go into the land of Canaan

²Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

³And Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because they *were* many, and Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel.

Balak, the Baal worshipping king of Moab had previously been defeated by Sihon, king of the Amorites, and lost territory to him...

v. 2-3 Now Balak sees the defeat of Sihon by Israel, and he fears Israel with dread



v. 1...‘camped in the plains of Moab on the side of Jordan across from Jericho’

Moab

Deuteronomy 2:9
 9Then the Lord said to me, ‘Do not harass Moab, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you *any* of their land as a possession, because I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession.’”

⁴So Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” And Balak the son of Zippor *was* king of the Moabites at that time.

v.4 Balak advises Midian, apparently allied with Moab...of the danger of Israel’s power

▪Ox—symbol of strength and power

⁵Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which *is* near [£]the River in the land of [£]the sons of his people, to call him, saying: “Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, and are **settling** next to me!

⁶Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they *are* too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless *is* blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

v. 5 Balaam= “destroyer of people”

Pethor—a city on the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia [“the river”]

(Expositors) “Since Balak believed that there was no military means available to withstand the forces of Israel, he sought to battle Israel on the level of pagan divination.”

v. 6 Balaam was a prophet who pronounced blessings and **cursings**—in the ancient world words pronounced by such prophets were viewed as weapons like arrows or stones

⁷So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the **diviner's** fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak.

(Expositors) “Balaam was an internationally known prophet, a diviner expert in examining the entrails of animals and observing natural phenomena to determine the will of the gods.

The recovery of prophetic texts of Balaam in Aramaic from the 6th century at Deir-'Allah in Jordan shows how very famous this man was in the ancient near East.”

“diviner”

(Aid to Bible Understanding) “The birthplace of divination was Babylonia...looking into the liver in quest of omens was based on the belief that all vitality, emotion and affection were centered in this organ...the variations in its lobes, ducts, appendages, veins, ridges and markings were interpreted as signs or omens from the gods.

A large number of clay models of livers have been found, the oldest from Babylonia, containing omens and texts in cuneiform used by diviners. Ancient Assyrian priests were called *baru*, meaning ‘inspector’ or ‘he who sees’ because of the prominence of liver inspecting played in their fortune-telling religion.”

Ezekiel 21:21-22

²¹For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads, to use divination: he shakes the arrows, he consults the images, he looks at the liver.

⁸And he said to them, “Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the **Lord** speaks to me.” So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam.

⁹Then **God** came to Balaam and said, “Who *are* these men with you?”

¹⁰So Balaam said to God, “Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, *saying*,
¹¹‘Look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.’”

v.8 Balaam said to the elders of Midian: “as the Lord speaks to me”—speaks as though he is intimate with him

Balaam uses the name **Lord** (Yahweh) which is the name of Israel’s relationship with God

v. 9 “**God** (Elohim) came to Balaam and said”
➤ “God” used 4 times in conjunction with Balaam; v. 9, 12, 20

¹²And **God** said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they *are* blessed.”

¹³So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, “Go back to your land, for the **Lord** has refused to give me permission to go with you.”

¹⁴And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

¹⁵Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they.

¹⁶And they came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: ‘Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me;

¹⁷for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.’”

v. 12 God tells Balaam probably in a night vision, that he is **not** to accompany the elders of Moab and Midian, and that Israel is a blessed people by him

v. 14-15 Another group of ‘princes’ try to persuade Balaam offering whatever he would ask (a sort of blank check)

¹⁸Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the **Lord my God**, to do less or more.

¹⁹Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the Lord will say to me.”

²⁰And **God** came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men come to call you, rise *and* go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do.”

²¹So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and **went** with the princes of Moab.

v. 18 “the Lord my God”

(Expositors) “It seems best...to take Balaam’s words as examples of braggadocio. Balaam is universally condemned in the scripture for moral, ethical and religious faults.

(Jude 11; Rev. 2:14)

²²Then God's anger was aroused because he went, and the **Angel of the Lord** took His stand in the way as an adversary against him. And he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants *were* with him.

²³Now the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand, and the donkey turned aside out of the way and went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road.

²⁴Then the Angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, *with* a wall on this side and a wall on that side.

²⁵And when the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again.

²⁶Then the Angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place where there *was* no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

²⁷And when the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

The donkey could see the Angel of the Lord, while Balaam, who was supposed to be able to communicate with the gods through animals, could not

²⁸Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”

²⁹And Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!”

³⁰So the donkey said to Balaam, “*Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?*” And he said, “No.”

(Expositors) “Then the donkey spoke. Some have imagined too much here. The donkey did not give a prophetic oracle; she merely said what a mistreated animal might say to an abusive master if given the chance. There was no preaching from the donkey!

Others have stumbled at the improbability of an animal speaking, for such is the stuff of fairy tales. What keeps this story from the genre of legend or fairy tale is the clear factor that the animal did not speak of its own accord but as was given the power to do so by the Lord.

³¹Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face.

³²And the Angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because *your* way is perverse before Me.

³³The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live."

(Expositors) "The word 'then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes follow the same structure as in verse 28 'the then Lord opened the donkey's mouth.' In some ways the opening of the eyes of the pagan prophet to see the reality of the living God was the greater miracle.

The animal was but a brute beast; the prophet was a man bent on trafficking with idolatrous gods"

³⁴And Balaam said to the Angel of the Lord, “I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back.”

³⁵Then the Angel of the Lord said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak.” So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

³⁶Now when Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which *is* on the border at the Arnon, the boundary of the territory.

³⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not earnestly send to you, calling for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?”

v. 35 (Expositors) “only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak”

“This is the point of the whole chapter: Balaam the pagan mantic will not be able to speak cursing as he had planned.”

³⁸And Balaam said to Balak, “Look, I have come to you! Now, have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak.”

³⁹So Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kirjath Huzoth.

⁴⁰Then Balak offered oxen and sheep, and he sent *some* to Balaam and to the princes who *were* with him.

v. 40 “offered oxen and sheep”—not sacrifices to God, but to pagan idols or gods
“sent some”—included the livers which he used in divination

⁴¹So it was, the next day, that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, that from there he might observe the extent of the people.

v. 41 “high places of Baal” (Bamoth Baal)—a cultic center dedicated to Baal, and a place supposedly imbued with spiritual power

Numbers 23

¹Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.”

²And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on *each* altar.

³Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the Lord will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.” So he went to a desolate height.

(BKC) “There is no biblical instruction or precedent for what Balaam did, so presumably the sacrifices were part of a pagan ritual”

- An example of false religion copying or counterfeiting elements of true worship but in a superstitious way:

(Expositors) “The number seven was held in high regard among Semitic peoples in general; the many animals would provide abundant liver and organ materials for the diviner from the east”

v. 3 “stand by your offering”—representing the people of Moab in a [pagan] priestly function

v. 4 After making his sacrifices, Balaam sought a revelation from God

⁴And God met Balaam, and he said to Him, “I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on *each* altar a bull and a ram.”

“seven”—completeness in OT

(Zondervan Bible Backgrounds commentary) “A parallel use of seven is found in a Babylonian text in which a worshipper is instructed to ‘erect seven altars before Ea, Shamash, and Marduk, to set up seven censers of cypress, and then pour out [as a libation offering] the blood seven sheep”

“a bull and a ram”

(Zondervan Bible Backgrounds commentary) “In ancient near eastern culture, the bull and ram were the most prized of animals and the obligatory sacrifices for persons from the upper echelon of society.

For a divination context, this is a large offering reflecting the importance of the situation—a king acting on behalf of his people in an international crisis.

Usually a sacrifice performed in connection with divination was **just one animal** whose entrails were examined for an answer. Here Balaam offers the sacrifices in order to try to induce Yahweh to deliver prophecy through him.”

⁵Then **the Lord put a word** in Balaam's mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak."

⁶So he returned to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moab.

v. 5 God gave Balaam a message to repeat to Balak

[v. 7] The **first** of seven oracles of Balaam, all start with the words: "**he took up his oracle and said**"...whenever he prophecies, instead of cursing, he ends up blessing Israel!



⁷And **he took up his oracle and said**: "Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, From the mountains of the east. 'Come, curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!'

⁸ "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce *whom* the Lord has not denounced?

⁹ For from the top of the rocks I see him, And from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations.

¹⁰ "Who can count the [£]dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, And let my end be like his!"

¹¹Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed *them* bountifully!”

¹²So he answered and said, “Must I not take heed to speak what the Lord has put in my mouth?”

¹³Then Balak said to him, “Please come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only the outer part of them, and shall not see them all; curse them for me from there.”

¹⁴So he brought him to the field of Zophim, to the top of **Pisgah**, and built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on *each* altar.

v. 14 “field of Zophim”= ‘field of the watchmen’ (Zondervan) “probably named so because of its strategic location. Several scholars interpret this location as a known place for observing heavenly omens and making astrological observations”

“Pisgah”—one of the prominent mountain peaks in the region (where Moses had viewed the land promised land before his death; Deut. 34)

Balaam and built seven more altars and offered seven more bulls and rams in a vain attempt to curse Israel

¹⁵And he said to Balak, “Stand here by your burnt offering while I [£]meet *the Lord* over there.”

¹⁶Then the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, “Go back to Balak, and thus you shall speak.”

¹⁷So he came to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab were with him. And Balak said to him, “What has the Lord spoken?”

The same ritual of sacrifice and sign-seeking is done again...and God “put a word in his mouth” (v.16) again

Balaam returns to find Balak and his princes standing by the burnt offering (v. 17)

The second oracle of Balaam

¹⁸Then **he took up his oracle and said:** “Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor!

¹⁹ “God *is* not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

²⁰ Behold, I have received *a command* to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.

²¹ “He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The Lord his God *is* with him, And the shout of a King *is* among them.

v. 19 “that he should repent”= ‘change his mind’ (NIV)
(Zondervan) “Unlike the gods of Mesopotamia, who were often whimsical and malleable , Israel’s God was unchangeable and therefore of incomparable integrity.”

²² God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox.

²³ “For *there is* no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob And of Israel, ‘Oh, what God has done!’

²⁴ Look, a people rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain.”

v.22 Contrast: gods of the ancient near east were depicted as horned bulls or humans with the head of a bull (Baal)

▪ God **by his power** is compared to a wild ox

²⁵Then Balak said to Balaam, “Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!”

²⁶So Balaam answered and said to Balak, “Did I not tell you, saying, ‘All that the Lord speaks, that I must do’?”

²⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.”

²⁸So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, that overlooks [£]the wasteland.

²⁹Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.”

³⁰And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on *every* altar.

v. 28 “top of Peor”—another one of the peaks in the Abiram Range near the cultic site of Baal Peor

Chapter 24

¹Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness.

v. 1 “set his face toward the wilderness”—he did not use divination (Balak’s scheme) as done previously, because it was futile,
But instead looked at the tribes camped in the west in their tribal order

²And Balaam raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came **upon** him.

v. 2 “the spirit of God came upon him”—he received revelation in a different form...previously God had placed a word in his mouth (23:5, 16)

▪Probably put him in a type of visionary state

v. 2 “upon him”—there is a difference between the spirit coming upon individuals to give them insight...and the spirit in a person to dwell with them
Saul (I Samuel 10: 6,10-11)

3RD Oracle of Balaam

In the previous oracles he proclaimed God's relationship with Israel and what God had done for Israel in the past

These oracles include the vision of their settlement in Canaan (v. 5-6)...the rise of the monarchy (v.7-8)...and promises made to the patriarchs (v.9-13)

³Then he took up **his oracle** and said: "The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened,

⁴ The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open:

⁵ "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel!

⁶ Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens by the riverside, Like aloes planted by the Lord, Like cedars beside the waters.

⁷ He shall pour water from his buckets, And his seed *shall be* in many waters. "His king shall be higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted.

⁸ "God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce *them* with his arrows.

v. 7 Agag—a dynastic name among the Amalekites (like Pharaoh)

▪ This oracle pictures future victories as Israel is exalted

⁹ 'He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?'^f "Blessed *is* he who blesses you, And cursed *is* he who curses you."

¹⁰Then Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed *them* these three times!

¹¹Now therefore, flee to your place. I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the Lord has kept you back from honor."

¹²So Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not also speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying,

¹³'If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the Lord, to do good or bad of my own will. What the Lord says, that I must speak'?

v.9 Unknowingly he repeats the promise made to Abraham

v. 10 "struck his hands together"—sign of derision or defiance

v. 11 "flee to your place"

Balak sends Balaam away without paying him for his services...but Balaam tells him no amount of money would change the will of God (v. 13)

4th oracle (v.15-19)

¹⁴And now, indeed, I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the latter days.”

¹⁵So **he took up his oracle** and said: “The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, And the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened;

¹⁶ The utterance of him who hears the words of God, And has the knowledge of the Most High, *Who* sees the vision of the Almighty, *Who* falls down, with eyes wide open:

¹⁷ “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of [£]tumult.

¹⁸ “And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, While Israel does valiantly.

¹⁹ Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, And destroy the remains of the city.”

v. 14 “the latter days”—can refer to the distant future, but can also refer to the end of the age ushered in by God

v. 17 Balaam confirmed God’s promises to Abraham

Balaam prophesied the future of other peoples who had frequent contact with Israel—far into Israel’s history [Final oracles v. 20-25]

²⁰Then he looked on Amalek, and he **took up his oracle** and said: “Amalek *was* first among the nations, But *shall be* last until he perishes.”

²¹Then he looked on the Kenites, and he **took up his oracle** and said: “Firm is your dwelling place, And your nest is set in the rock;

²² Nevertheless Kain shall be burned. How long until Asshur carries you away captive?”

²³Then he **took up his oracle** and said: “Alas! Who shall live when God does this?

²⁴ But ships *shall come* from the coasts of Cyprus,[£] And they shall afflict Asshur and afflict Eber, And so shall [£]*Amalek*, until he perishes.”

²⁵So Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place; Balak also went his way.

(NSB) “The general sense is clear enough: one nation would rise against another, only to face its own doom. The Hebrew word for Cyprus was used later in reference to Rome [Dan. 11:30]”

Lessons

Balak's whole intentions was to have Israel, God's people—cursed by a pagan diviner Balaam

God turned Balak's plans against him and instead of cursing Israel they were blessed by Balaam

➤(BKC) "As the sovereign God He rules and overrules in prophetic revelation as well as in all other areas of life"

Balak builds seven altars and sacrifices seven bulls and seven rams

False religion often counterfeits elements of the true worship of God in a superstitious and sometimes ritualistic way