

Parasha #117
Torah: Numbers 23:1–25:9
Haftara: Isaiah 49:2–26
Apostolic Scriptures: John 10:27–30

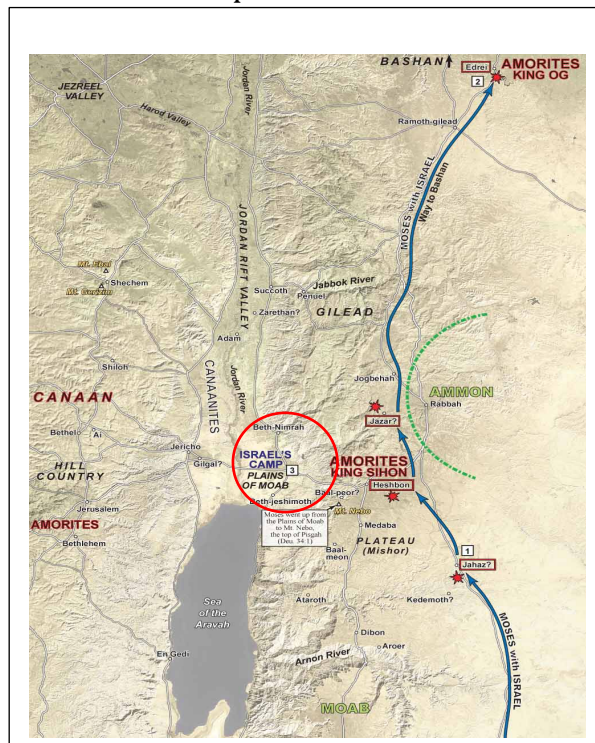
WHILE ISRAEL PLAYED...

Numbers 25:1 tells us that while Israel was at Shittim, they played the harlot with Moabite women. Meanwhile, the bulk of this parasha centres on what God was doing behind the scenes in order to make it possible for Israel to take possession of the Land. Hence, what God was doing will be the topic of this week's commentary. Thus, while Israel played the harlot with the Moabite women on the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (**25:1 ff.**) ...

- I. God was spreading Israel's reputation among the nations.
- II. God was stifling Israel's enemies.
- III. God was sanctioning the supernatural.
- IV. God was surrounding Israel with His Grace.
- V. God was speaking.

I. GOD WAS SPREADING ISRAEL'S REPUTATION AMONG THE NATIONS

Below is a map of Israel's location.¹



Israel may have been playing the harlot with the Moabites and the Midianite women and flirting with their gods (or was it the other way around?), but God certainly did not forget them. One thing God was busy doing was that He was making sure that the surrounding nations received a healthy dose of awe and respect for the might of Israel. Or, perhaps we should say, what Israel's God was doing for them. Hence, **22:2–3** says, “Balak, son of Zippor, saw all that Israel had done to the

¹ William Schlegel, *Satellite Bible Atlas*, Map # 3.3

Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.”

Whatever sin Israel was engaging in down in the Jordan Valley on the Plains of Moab, up in the mountains to their east, God was making sure that their enemies were seeing Israel through different eyes. The Almighty was presenting the *real* Israel to them. They were viewing an Israel that God had created, a redeemed community, powerful with the strength of His might.

The application of this point is simple but powerful. We see here a demonstration of the grace of God. Israel certainly did not deserve the fear/respect of the nations. They were acting just as other godless people act. However, God had created a different Israel. He desired that the godless nations get a glimpse of the true Israel, the Israel of God’s making, His precious, peculiar, holy community.

The truth of the matter is that for all believers in Messiah, even though we may act like Israel was acting in Shittim, the real us is completely different. Often, God grants us His mercy, in that, despite how our flesh behaves, people may still see us as we really are inside as new creations, and fear God because of what and who He made us to be.

II. GOD WAS STIFLING ISRAEL’S ENEMIES

This parasha presents a clear contrast between two kingdoms: the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. We see them pitted against each other. On the one hand, there is the Almighty, the Lord, the King of the Universe, the Lord Most High, the Guardian and Keeper of Israel. On the other hand, there is the sorcerer, the diviner, one of the most skilful of all diviners, Bil’am.

A. The Torah Testifies Against Bil’am.

Enter: Bil’am. The text indicates that this famous sorcerer was from a place called “Pethor.” From several sources we can identify this location as Pitru, on one of the tributaries of the Euphrates River south of Carchemish in ancient Aram. (See map below.) This was about a 20-day journey from Moab. Since the Torah describes four such trips, then the entire time span of this story must have been about 3 months.²



² Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers (JPS Torah Commentary)*, 186.

How proficient was Bil'am as a pagan sorcerer? We can examine three sources of evidence for his powers. The first piece of evidence is the text in Numbers itself. Balak, the leader of the Moabites was so confident in Bil'am's ability to practise his evil craft that he said of Bil'am, "For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is accursed (**22:6**)."

Confident of his ability, Balak was willing to pay good money to have Bil'am speak evil things about Israel. Thus, the Torah testifies concerning Bil'am's dark ability to practise his ungodly curses.

B The Jewish Sages are Against Bil'am.

The second evidence of Bil'am's reputation comes from the tradition of the ancient Jewish sages. Just how proficient Bil'am was at his sorcery is amply illustrated for us in the Talmud. In fact, the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105, is devoted almost entirely to rabbinic comments and interpretations of this Torah Portion. These comments are extremely severe. They cast Bil'am in the worst possible light.

C. The Apostolic Scriptures are Against Bil'am.

At first, we really did not think that Bil'am was such a wicked man. On the contrary, it seems that the text paints him in a rather favourable light. For example, several times we find him refusing to speak ill concerning Israel as Balak was requesting him to do. Moreover, Bil'am makes some lofty statements that may be interpreted as representing a close relationship between him and the Adonai (יהוה), Israel's God. For example, in **23:26** Bil'am seemingly rebukes Balak when he said, "Did I not tell you I must do whatever the Lord (יהוה) says?" Again, notice the platitudes Bil'am expresses in **23:18-24**. This sounds like one of the Psalms of praise from King David himself!

While there is real truth in Bil'am's words, this truth hardly expresses the reality of his heart and mind. For whatever reason, the weight of Scripture is against him. It was not just the rabbis who had a problem with his sincerity before the Lord, but the Apostolic Scriptures also expresses this condemnation. We can see at least two examples. The first is from 2 Peter 2:15 where Peter compares false prophets with men like Bil'am. He says, "They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Bil'am, son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey — a beast without speech — who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness."

A second and even more remarkable passage is from the Epistle of Judah (commonly known as Jude), who gives several examples of the worst type of godless people: Cain, Korach, and Bil'am. He says that these godless people (one of whom was Bil'am), "serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (verses 7-11).

Both Peter and Judah come close to echoing the tradition of the rabbis recorded in the Talmud! This similarity suggests that the Apostles were more familiar with and educated in rabbinic tradition than we may have originally thought. Nonetheless, their characterization of Bil'am is clearly the most definitive because they were writing under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. Because of this evidence, we were forced to change our whole theory regarding the goodness of Bil'am and to agree with the sages, Peter, and Judah about the wickedness of Bil'am.

D. A Mixed Review

It seems that the main evidence that all of the biblical writers, as well as the Jewish Sages, have against Bil'am is the testimony in **Numbers 31:16** that it was Bil'am who attempted to seduce Israel with the prostitutes and the false gods. He is also accused of spiritual blindness when his donkey saw the angel while he did not. However, Bil'am also comes across in this parasha as somewhat of a hero. He is repeatedly portrayed as the one who consistently informs Balak that he would not speak ill of Israel but, instead, do what God said and bless His people.

We are not alone in the mixed reviews about Bil'am. Other biblical passages also see him in a more favourable light. Such a one is Micah. Micah, an 8th century BCE prophet of God, almost defends Bil'am's character when he says, "My people, remember what Balak the king of Moab counselled and what Bil'am son of Beor answered" (Micah 6:5).

There is even some extra-biblical evidence that portrays Bil'am in a favourable light. One example is found in *Pseudo-Philo*. *Pseudo-Philo* is from the late 2nd Temple Period (or early post destruction period). It is from a Jewish writing called *Biblical Antiquities*. This is a rather lengthy chronicle retelling biblical history from Adam to the death of Saul. "Lengthy portions of Scripture are briefly summarized or completely bypassed. Other sections are paraphrased, with occasional verbatim quotations. Still others are interpolated with prayers, speeches, or narrative expansions."³ The most ancient copy in existence today is in Latin, "which is generally thought to be a translation from a Greek translation of a Hebrew original. The author is unknown, but the work came to be attributed to Philo of Alexandria because it was transmitted with genuine works of Philo."⁴

In this piece of ancient Jewish writing, we find a passage that records a prayer Bil'am supposedly offered to God where the writer of *Pseudo-Philo* pictures Bil'am in a favourable light.

Moreover, in one midrash, Bil'am is considered to be a man who was "greater in wisdom than Moses."⁵ Another midrash says that "There were three features possessed by the prophecy of Bil'am that were absent from that of Moses."⁶ Thus, according to at least this one extra-biblical writing, "Bil'am was in some respects even superior to Moses."⁷

An extremely fascinating ancient commentary was written about Bil'am. This was found by a Dutch archaeologist digging in 1967 in an ancient delta formed by the juncture of the Jabbok and Jordan Rivers. Here he found inscriptions in what may have been a dialect of old Hebrew, on the walls of a temple dating from the 8th century BCE. This inscription, which was not in the best of condition, mentioned Bil'am. This is startling because it is the oldest extra-biblical confirmation of the story. Moreover, it was found in a geographical area just north of where the story took place. Bil'am is not even introduced, hinting at the fact that he was well known to the people who wrote this inscription.⁸ In addition, in this inscription.

Bil'am is presented as a seer, not as a sorcerer, in keeping with the biblical narrative...Equally significant is that Bil'am is presented in a positive light, again in agreement with the main biblical story...It has also been noted...that the prophet Micah, also of the eighth century, holds a favourable opinion of Bil'am. However, the accusation that Bil'am devised the scheme to have the Moabite women seduce Israel into worshipping Baal-peor may be traceable to Deir 'Alla's assertion that Bil'am founded a pagan (fertility?) cult. This means that both views of Bil'am, positive and negative, are contemporary.⁹

Thus, according to different sources of evidence, the study of Bil'am's character is extremely complex. He is at once both a hero and a villain.

³ Michael, E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, and Josephus*, 107.

⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

⁵ Milgrom, *op. cit.*, 470, citing a midrash called "Seder Eliyahu Rabbah" 26:142.

⁶ *Ibid*, quoting Exodus Rabbah 3:1 and Numbers Rabbah 14:20.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Todd Bolen and Williaml Schlegel, *The Geography of Transjordan*, Field Study Notes from the course on Transjordan by the authors at IBEX, (the Israeli campus of The Master's University), 6.

⁹ Milgrom, *op. cit.*, 476.

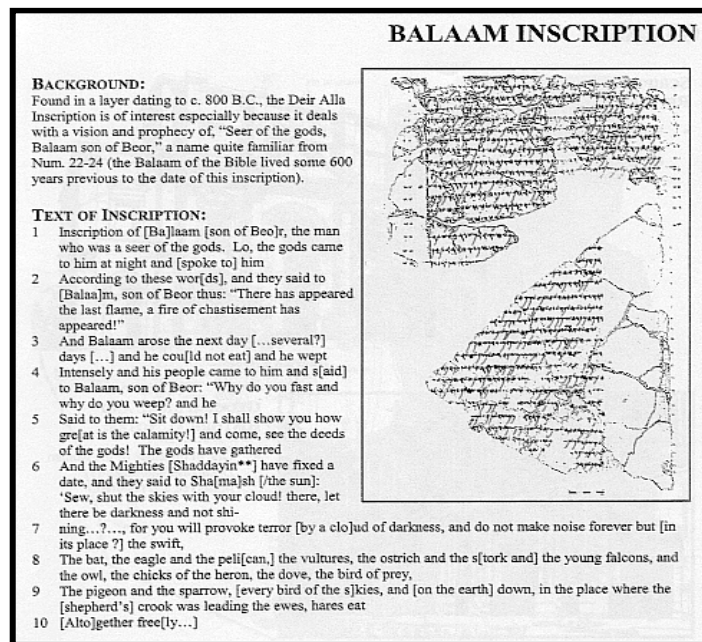


Figure 1-The Bil'am Inscription

E. Bil'am's Power Was Stopped.

As far as Balak was concerned, however, Bil'am had the reputation as one of the region's top sorcerers. Therefore, aware of what kind of person he was, Balak summoned him to curse Israel. However, much to the amazement — of even Bil'am himself — Bil'am could not utter one curse against Israel. The Sovereign of the Universe took control and forced him to utter only blessings upon Israel.

The rabbinic Sages also agree with this understanding. "'And the Lord put a word in Bil'am's mouth,'" Rabbi Eliezar said: "An angel", Rabbi Yohanan said: "a hook".¹⁰ Moreover, according to Rabbi Yohanan, "He uttered the blessings in spite of himself, forced against his will, struggling and in distress like a fish that is hooked, to do the bidding of his master."¹¹

We should say a word about this concept of a curse before moving to the next main point.. This parasha uses two words that we usually translate "curse." "A striking fact is that there is such a proliferation of words in Hebrew which have been generally all translated 'to curse.' The list includes at least six: *arar* אָרַר, *kalal* קָלַל, *alah* אָלָה, *kavav* קָבַב, *nakav* נָקַב, and *za'am* זָעַם. To group all of them together under the one general English equivalent, "to curse," is much too superficial."¹²

The first use of "curse" from this parasha is from the verb *arar* (אָרַר). It is found first in 22:6 but used throughout this parasha. It stresses the idea of binding someone or rendering them powerless.¹³ In this passage, Balak "wants the magician to say some word or recite some incantation that will 'immobilize' the Israelites, giving the Moabite king the necessary opportunity to defeat his numerically superior foe."¹⁴

¹⁰ B. Sanhedrin 105b

¹¹ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 284.

¹² R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT), 75.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The second word in this parasha that we translate “curse” is *kavav* (קָבַב), found first in **22:11**. This word stresses the idea “to despise, abuse, or ignore.”¹⁵ Others suggest that it has to do with “the act of uttering a formula designed to undo its object.”¹⁶ In fact, “The most frequent use of our root relates to the incident involving Baalam and Balak. Certainly the “magical” belief and intent of Balak is prominent there.”¹⁷

Later in the parasha, we learn exactly what was intended by using the words “curse.” We read in Numbers 23:23 “For there is no omen against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel...” By cursing, Balak intended that Bil’am utter an “omen” and to use “divination” against Israel. The word “omen” is *nachash*, נָחַשׁ. It has to do with uttering a magic curse where someone would have bad luck or misfortune.¹⁸ The second term, *kesem* (קָסַם) has to do with “consultation by lots and fortune-telling.”¹⁹ Another source says that these two words “describe two techniques of consulting gods. The first concerns omens generally, perhaps the flight of birds (*HALOT* 690 s.v.). The second relates to casting lots, sometimes done with arrows (*Ezekiel* 21:26).”²⁰

These things were what Balak intended for Israel, and he tried to use every pagan technique he knew to render Israel powerless against him, his people, and his kingdom. God would not let it happen!

III. GOD WAS SANCTIONING THE SUPERNATURAL

Israel was in Shittim, on the Plains of Moab, playing the harlot with both women and idols. However, the God of Israel was hard at work behind the scenes protecting Israel’s very existence. Supernatural powers of darkness wanted Israel to be destroyed. The medium of their evil was through the potential curses of their servant, the sorcerer Bil’am. In addition, human foes also sought their demise. While Israel was busy imbibing in the ways of the world, the Lord was astounding this world with His supernatural power. God demonstrated His supernatural power in at least three ways.

A. Turning Curses into Blessings

The first demonstration of God’s magnificent power was to turn potential curses into blessings. Given the description above of Bil’am’s abilities and character, this was no mean task. However, to understand the importance of it we need to look for a moment at the nature of a blessing and the nature of a curse in order to understand what was going on.

A reasonable amount of material has been written about the subject of cursing and blessing, all expressing various viewpoints. Some seem to suggest strongly that the power of blessing/cursing comes in the very words themselves. It works itself out in that the words provide great impetus and encouragement for the Powers of Darkness (demons) or the Powers of Light (God’s angels) to accomplish their assigned tasks.

Jewish commentator, Nechama Leibowitz, expresses another plausible outlook. She argues in favour of a slightly different approach. Citing various scholars to support her point, she suggests that “...it is not necessarily demons nor angels who were/are encouraged by the blessings/curses, but human powers.” Given the extent of popular belief in the power of curses and blessings and what a sorcerer could accomplish in uttering them, Leibowitz cites Abravanel saying, “Had Bil’am cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have picked up courage and gone to battle with Israel

¹⁵ HALOT, 1060.

¹⁶ TWOT, 783.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ HALOT, 690.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1115.

²⁰ NET Bible Notes, comments on Numbers 23:23.

on the strength of the curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master...and would lose all desire to fight His people.”²¹

However, Leibowitz also expresses another equally fascinating viewpoint about the blessings and curses. She says that the Lord.

was concerned to protect all His creatures from error. He does not want to be instrumental in bolstering superstition. Had Bil’am cursed Israel, the Moabites would certainly have assumed that the reason why the Israelites refrained from attacking them was due to their effect, and not because the Almighty had forbidden them...²²

Despite how one views the matter of curses and blessings, at the very least, we can say that while Israel was playing in the plains of Moab, God was protecting them in ways beyond human comprehension. He was doing this by stifling the powers of the demons who wanted to consume Israel, and by stifling the idolatrous nations who wanted to devour them as well. It was a mighty, supernatural protection against attacks from the vicious and powerful forces of darkness whose sole intent was to destroy God’s people, thereby foiling His plans.

B. The Angel

The second supernatural demonstration was the sending of the angel in **22:22**. Bil’am was making a journey to play into the hands of Balak, the king who desired to curse Israel. God warned him not to go, but despite his assurance to the Lord that he would speak only that which God told him, **22:22** says, “But God was very angry when he went.” Bil’am, his mind set on making the journey, was then confronted along the way by the appearance of an angel, sent by God “to oppose him” (**22:22**).

Anytime an angel appears in the realm of human existence, it is a supernatural event, but this one certainly stands out as one of the most memorable. For, while the angel was sent to deal with the human Bil’am, nevertheless, it was not he who saw the angel, but his donkey! Moreover, it was not just a singular appearance; the angel manifested himself several times. On each occasion, the human was oblivious to him, but the animal wasn’t!

The lesson here is profound. Here was a man bent on doing evil. He came into direct contact with the realm of the supernatural — and did not even notice it. Instead, his donkey saw it! In like manner, how many of us do not see what God is doing or hear what He is saying because we are set on acting according to our flesh, ignoring what the Spirit wants to do?

C. The Donkey

Perhaps the most famous supernatural demonstration by the Holy One in this parasha is the talking donkey. Of course, sceptics abound, who insist that it is foolish to assert that an animal can have dialogue with a human. Some suggest that it was a prophetic vision. Others, such as Luzatto, assert that, “The ass did not actually utter any words, but made a plaintive sound which implied protest...Bil’am, in his anger, answered the ass much as any man might shout at his beast of burden.”²³

Despite all of the rationalizations, we must let this passage stand as it is. For one thing, although the text does not specify this, we must remember what an affect this would have had on a pagan sorcerer. His own awareness of his spiritual inability to see the angel would have been amplified by hearing the Most High speak through one of the lowliest of animals. Beyond that, however, any one sceptical about the reality of a talking animal needs simply to ask himself: Why not? If there is

²¹ Leibowitz, *op. cit.*, 305.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 298.

a Most High God Who made the heavens and the earth, including all that is in them, surely it must be within His capability to miraculously cause a donkey to speak.²⁴

The lesson to Bil'am, as well as to us, is that the Holy One is the Sovereign of this universe. As such, only He has the power to determine what should be said and what should not be said. If He has decreed that only blessings should have come from the mouth of Bil'am, or that a donkey may speak human words, it is His prerogative to do so, and no one may challenge Him or thwart His will. In short, it is as the Midrash says, "And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey — to teach him that the mouth and the tongue are in His power; that if he sought to curse — his mouth was in His power."²⁵

IV. GOD WAS SURROUNDING ISRAEL WITH HIS GRACE

Such drama was going on in the mountains of Moab among people who cared not for the Holy One and His ways! The Holy One was pulling out all stops in revealing Himself to them. At the same time, He was also taking great pains to make sure that His peculiar people were protected and remained the objects of blessing from even the idolaters.

In this parasha, we see clearly the extent of the grace and mercy of God. Someone once defined the difference between grace and mercy in this way: "Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. Mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve!" In chapter 25, Israel deserved wrath and annihilation for their immorality and idolatry.

To be sure, an unspecified number of Moabites and their allies, the Midianites, worked hard for Israel's destruction, hoping to accomplish it through their curses. To counter their efforts, the Lord stifled their chief sorcerer from doing that. Seeing that they could not accomplish Israel's demise through the curse, they attempted to do so through enticing them into idolatry and its accompanying immorality. "For the worship of Baal-Peor, (literally 'the lord/Ba'al of the mountain of Peor'), was associated with, and partly consisted in, the most licentious rites."²⁶ This crime was enough to kindle the wrath of God (25:3). Although God dealt severely with those who were guilty, nevertheless, He spared the nation from being totally consumed by His anger. This was His mercy. He did not give them what they deserved!

Not only did the Lord grant mercy to Israel, He also abundantly poured out His grace to them. He gave them blessings, which they did not deserve. Look, for example, at the various gifts that He gave them, even when they were most undeserving: He protected them, He forgave them, He preserved them, He supplied their needs, He confounded the idolatrous on Israel's behalf, He spoke blessings to them, He stopped the plague, causing it to afflict only those who were guilty, and, much, much more. God did all of this for at least two reasons. First, He loved them. Secondly, He was determined to be faithful to His covenant that He made with them. "A fitting and ironic conclusion to the Bil'am story: Balak of Moab wished to curse Israel; instead, his hired seer, Bil'am, curses Moab — a measure for measure principle."²⁷

V. GOD WAS SPEAKING

Throughout most of the parashiyot we have heard God speaking. He spoke to Moshe. He spoke to Aaron. He spoke to others, but in this parasha, He is almost silent towards Israel as they were wandering away from Him and talking up a storm to the idolaters! One of the most amazing aspects of God speaking in this parasha is that He was not just commanding the idolatrous Bil'am,

²⁴ Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 671.

²⁵ Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12

²⁶ J. H. Hertz, *op. cit.*, 681.

²⁷ Milgrom, *op. cit.*, 208.

as one might think the Sovereign of the universe has a right to do, but He was actually carrying on a negotiating dialogue with Bil'am. Many people ask, "Does God hear the prayers of the unsaved?" In answering, we need to keep in mind how the Holy One conversed with this most unholy one!

A. God Spoke to the Idolatrous

To whom was God speaking? He was speaking, first of all, to the idol worshipers and sorcerers, Balak and Bil'am. He was revealing Himself to them, speaking through an angel — even through a donkey!

Another way God spoke was by means of what might be referred to as a "Torah Picture". We are referring to **24:1ff** where Bil'am looked out and saw the formation of the Camp of Israel on the plains beneath him. It must have been a powerful picture of the presence of the Holy One among the Israelites. What a portrait of beauty, orderliness, atonement, and fellowship with God he must have seen. God, indeed, spoke to Him from this gigantic picture. So much so that we read that when he saw the Camp, "the spirit of God was upon him" and then he began to speak a most beautiful blessing upon Israel.

Another way God spoke to Bil'am, of course, was supernaturally through the donkey and through the angel. We have already discussed this. The fourth way God spoke to him was by direct revelation. In **24:2** the "spirit of God" was upon him. This phrase is reminiscent of the way the biblical prophets received their revelations. When God's Spirit came upon them, they spoke what God told them through His Spirit.

B. God Spoke to Israel

God also spoke to Israel, but His manner of speaking was very unusual. Most of the time, He spoke through His servants, the Prophets — from Moshe to Malachi. In this parasha, however, God spoke to Israel through the mouth of one who had the most power to do them harm. He spoke through an idol worshiper. However, by the time Bil'am spoke to Israel, he no longer had the spiritual blindness that prohibited him from even seeing the angel. Instead, he spoke as "the man with the open eye". This came after seeing the powerful Torah Picture of the encampment of Israel. Apparently, he was shocked into spiritual reality, even if for only a brief time.

People everywhere who love the Lord and His people, Israel, have forever revered what God spoke through this man, once he had had his eyes opened. It has even found its way into the Siddur and chanted every Shabbat in the synagogue:²⁸

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel stretching out like brooks, like gardens by a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars by water. Water shall flow from his wells, and his seed shall be by abundant waters, his king shall be exalted over Agag, and his kingdom shall be upraised (**24:5-7**).

C. God Spoke About the Messiah

God spoke to Israel yet in one more way. In **24:17**, the Lord, through the mouth of Bil'am says, "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab..." The prophecy continues to expand to include the descendants of Edom who will suffer destruction by this "Star" as well.

²⁸ Hertz puts it so poetically: "He is swept away in rapt admiration of the Israelite encampments and homes arrayed harmoniously and peacefully, a picture of idyllic happiness and prosperity."²⁸ This phrase has become somewhat of a by-word among Jewish people, that it enjoys the honour of introducing one of the opening prayers in the Shacharit (morning prayer) service.

In the Ancient Near East, the term “star” was commonly used to refer to a royal figure.²⁹ During the Second Temple Period in Israel, the rabbis also thought of it in that way. Hence, The Targum interprets the word “star” here to refer to a “king”. In this prophecy, Bil’am was predicting the downfall of Moab and Edom, the two nemeses of Israel who sought to curse them and refused the right of passage to them. A certain strong and important ruler, the “Star”, would ultimately accomplish this downfall. Ancient Jewish interpretation seems unanimous that while King David would fulfil some of it, King Messiah would be the one to ultimately subdue all of Israel’s enemies. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls picked up on this theme and actually said that the “Star” in Numbers was a prediction of the Messiah!³⁰

Furthermore, during the days of the Bar Kochba revolt against Rome (132–135 CE), this verse was applied to Shimon Bar Kochba the “Son of a Star”, the leader of the revolt whom the famous Rabbi Akiva declared to be the Messiah. To support his messiahship, his name was actually changed from “son of a liar” (bar Kosiba) to “son of a Star” (bar Kochba). Numbers 24:17 was the biblical text which was used to support this claim. All of this evidence points to the fact that from ancient days, this passage was understood by the people of God as a Messianic text, predicting something about the person and work of the Messiah.

This passage, interestingly enough, is never used in reference to the messiahship of Yeshua in the Apostolic Scriptures, except perhaps a reference to Yeshua in Revelation 22:16 where Yeshua is called “the bright morning star.” However, when we examine His Person and Work, we can confidently say, as does Harrison, “Jesus fulfilled supremely the role predicted by Bil’am of a divinely appointed King who far exceeded the work of His earthly ancestor David by ushering in God’s kingdom upon the earth (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20).”³¹

God was doing all of these things while Israel played the harlot on the plains of Moab, as they were about to enter the Promised Land. For the most part, Israel was totally oblivious to all that the Holy One was accomplishing for them while they played.

If only we could be aware of the unseen work our loving Father does for us, especially in the times when, like Israel, we too may walk in our flesh. This sidra, perhaps, more than any other one confirms to us the truth of Romans 8:28–39, which speaks of the unfathomable and unconditional love the Father has for all of us who have placed our faith in the “Star,” King Messiah.

²⁹ Timothy R. Ashley, *Numbers (NICOT)*, 500.

³⁰ Milgrom cites the following ancient Jewish texts which saw this star prediction as messianic: Other ancient Jewish writing that saw this as a messianic passage include Targum Onkelos, Targum Jonathan, Dead Sea texts such as: 1QM 11:6–7, CD 7:19, also Apocryphal writing such as Testament Patr. Levi 18:3, Testament Patr. Judah 24:1. See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers (JPS)*, 322.

³¹ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, 324