

THEIR RULER SHALL RISE ABOVE AGAG (NUMBERS 24:7): DOES THIS BIBLICAL VERSE REFERENCE THE FUTURE KING SAUL?

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Numbers 24:1-11 records how, much to the chagrin and vexation of King Balak, Balaam blesses the Israelites for the third time. In order to understand these verses, it is critical to read them in context and I therefore bring verses 5-11 below:

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 the LORD, Like cedars beside the water; Their boughs drip with moisture, Their roots have abundant water. Their ruler shall rise above Agag, Their sovereignty shall be exalted. 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 :They crouch, they lie down like a lion, Like a lioness; who dares rouse them? Blessed are they who bless you, Accursed they who curse you!

Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. "I called you," Balak said to Balaam, "to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! Back with you at once to your own place!

Of these verses, the reference in v 7 that: *Their ruler shall rise above Agag, their sovereignty shall be exalted* is quite peculiar. After the very poetic, picturesque and tranquil depiction of the flourishing Israelite nation, the stark and sharp break to military victories, devouring enemies and crushing bones seems to be sorely out of place.

Furthermore, classical commentators such as Targum Neophiti, Rashi, Rashbam, Bekhor Shor, Ramban, Rabbeinu Behaye, Ralbag, Abrabanel, Malbim, *Meshekh Hochma*, *Or Hahayyim*, Reggio and from modern commentators, Alter, Berlin and Brettler, all understand this to be a reference to

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King Saul and his later battle against Amalek and their king, Agag, as recorded in I Samuel 15. For the classical commentators, the foretelling of the name of the future king of Amalek is a prophecy,¹ while for Berlin and Brettler, it is an anachronistic feature hinting to a later date of composition.

It is hard to imagine that the explanation of this verse was passed down generation to generation about an anonymous Israelite king, or even more unlikely, of Saul's reign in particular, and his glorious victory over Agag. There is no indication in I Samuel 15 that Saul feels he is being given the chance to live out the destined oracle to be the Israelite king to conquer Agag as set out by Balaam. Similarly, Agag may have had opportunity to hear about this oracle and perhaps would have been superstitious or believing enough to be wary of battling against an Israelite king that could lead to his downfall.

Maintaining that this verse refers, even in retrospect, to King Saul, is a difficult position to espouse for other reasons as well. The remainder of the verse: *and his kingdom will be exalted* (translated by the JPS above as *their sovereignty shall be exalted*) should ostensibly be referring to King Saul as the subject of "his" kingdom, as he was the subject of the first half of the verse and identified there as the king. However, Saul's reign was not exalted as a result of his battle with Agag and instead was actually the reason why Saul *loses* the monarchy. The classical commentators, sensitive to this point, explain that these words of an exalted kingdom, suddenly refer to King David's monarchy. Indeed, during King David's rule, the Amalekites are further eradicated (see I Sam. 30:17) and David's kingdom is described as being exalted (II Sam. 5:12). Despite these literary references, such a radical shift in subject matter within the same verse is no less than interpretive duress.²

Finally, were Balaam projecting into the future, he would have given Balak some indication of this. In verses 24: 14-24 Balaam advises what will be of the Israelites in the days to come (lit, *the end of days* v. 14) and while he *sees him* – *it is not now, and while he gazes upon him – it is not soon* (v.17). Most notably, in that future-oriented vision, there is also explicit reference to Amalek and their bitter end (v.20). Therefore, if Balaam was referring to the future of the Israelite kingdom already in v 7, he should have made an introductory comment as he does later on and, more poignantly, he should not have split the foretelling of the Amalekite future into two separate odes.

In light of these difficulties, I would like to suggest that verse 7 does not refer to King Saul and the battle recorded in I Samuel 15. As suggested by Rashbam, Ramban, *Daat Zekenim*, *Hadar Zekenim* and the *Hoil Moshe*, Agag can be understood as a generic title for all Amalekite kings, just as Pharaoh is a generic title for Egyptian rulers. As such, one can understand the verse as referring to an ancient King Agag already extant at the time of Balaam. In this manner, all of Balaam's blessing depicts the scene he sees before him, just as the previous two blessings depicted what he saw and knew about the Israelites at that time. The verses at hand can thus be understood as follows:

Like cedars beside the water - Balaam's verse of cedars beside the water alludes to the splitting of the Reed Sea where the waters *were for them like a wall on their left and their right* (Ex. 14: 22, 29). This is reminiscent of the verse in the Song of Songs (1:17): *Cedars are the beams of our house* which similarly employs cedars in a house imagery.

Their boughs drip with moisture – this refers to the episode of Marah (Ex. 15:22-26) where the bitter waters were sweetened by Moses' throwing a branch into the water. The dripping bough depicted alludes to the sweet waters dripping from/resulting from the bough that was tossed into the waters.

Their roots have abundant water – literally "seeds". This refers to the episode of Masah and Merivah (Ex. 17:1-7) where the people complain about the foreboding doom to their children, whom in Balaam's ode are reflected by the roots – "seed" in Hebrew. In that episode, Moses obediently hits the rock from which flows water. Hence, Balaam employs a play on words in stating there were abundant waters – *rabim* – which in the Hebrew can also be read as *ravim* indicating strife – using the same root of the word referenced in Exodus 17:2 and 7, describing the strife.

Their ruler shall rise above Agag – At this point, the reference is clear. It is not to a future battle of the Israelites with Amalek but to the Israelite's *previous* battle with Amalek.³ The generic Agag refers to the Amalekite king at the time of Balaam. Surveying the remainder of the verse, we note that the literal translation from the Hebrew of these words is: And his King will be raised above Agag. As later depicted (Num. 24:20), *Amalek is the foremost/fiercest of the nations* and, therefore, their king held in high esteem and reverence. As a result of the Israelite battle in Exodus 17:8-16, weakening Amalek, God's kingdom is indeed exalted above that of Agag and God swears by His throne

to battle Amalek from generation to generation. Therefore, the king referred to in this verse is God – the King.

Their sovereignty shall be exalted – in the Hebrew literally *and His kingdom will be exalted*. The proposed explanation allows the subject to remain the same, God. God's sovereignty will be exalted by His steadfast battle against Amalek for generations.

Furthermore, the added benefit of the above understanding is that it also provides insight to the remainder of Balaam's blessing as well:

God who freed them from Egypt Is for them like the horns of the wild ox - Balak had called Balaam describing the Israelites as an ox who chews up the grass of the field (Num. 22:4). Balaam now explains to Balak that the powerful antlers of this wild-ox are none other than their God fighting their battles. As God did and will do with Amalek, so too will he do against you should you battle them.

They shall devour enemy nations, Crush their bones, And smash their arrows. This refers to the Israelites' stunning victories in their battles against Sihon and Og (Num. 21:21-35). These battles are what prompted Balak to hire Balaam in the first place (Num. 22:2). Again, these precedents illustrate the Israelites' connection with their God and foretells doom to those who would battle against them. The chance of Balak's military success against the Israelites is thereby reduced to a nullity.

They crouch, they lie down like a lion, Like a lioness; who dares rouse them? Balak had hired Balaam in the hopes that Balaam's curse would assist Balak to battle the Israelites and chase them away (Num. 22:6, 11). Balaam is now explaining to Balak that his request is folly. The Israelites are crouched like lions and as a lioness that no one can get to move. Indeed, the Israelites are described in Numbers 21:31 as dwelling in the land of the land of the Emori, i.e., the Israelites pitched their tents in the captured cities. There was no moving them from their war prize. Balak's hopes of chasing them away are thus utterly lost.

Blessed are they who bless you, Accursed they who curse you!

Balak had hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam now informs Balak that this plan will fail, as anyone who curses the Israelite are themselves cursed and will not succeed in plotting against them. Balak's attempt to utilize Balaam's cursing abilities is, therefore, sheer futility.⁴

Upon hearing that Balaam has utterly negated all the objectives set out for him upon his hire, i.e., the Israelites will not be moved, they cannot be defeated militarily and they are not prone to curses, Balak is utterly exasperated. It is at this particular point in the narrative that he expels Balaam, as opposed to after either of the previous two blessings recorded. It is only now that Balaam completely undermined any possibility of fulfilling the task at hand. *Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. "I called you," Balak said to Balaam, "to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! Back with you at once to your own place!"*

NOTES

1. According to these exegetes, at least this portion of Balaam's statements are of a prophetic, future-oriented nature. This is not easily determined. It is not clear if the "spirit of God" that overtook Balaam as recorded in 24:2 afforded such abilities. Indeed, the verses surrounding 24:7 seem to describe what Balaam currently sees without any futuristic element to them.
2. It would be a worthwhile inquiry to better understand what motivated all these seasoned exegetes to adopt this forced reading.
3. Cf Rashi Ex. 18:1 where the news of the splitting of the sea and the battle with Amalek had reached far and wide and thus would be something in Balaam's purview.
4. Having identified each element of the ode with a previous Israelite episode, leaves only verses 5-6 unaccounted for. While not in sequential order of the events as recorded in Exodus, one can see Balaam's praise of the Israelite tents and dwellings as referring to the Manna which surrounded the camp (Exodus 16:13). More poignantly, Balaam's reference of *Like palm-groves that stretch out, Like gardens beside a river, Like aloes planted by God* in verse 24:6 can refer to Israel's arrival and encampment at Eilim where there were 12 pools of water and 70 palm trees. This would complete the identification of the entire ode as referring to events in the Israelites' journeys up until that point.



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