

PARSHAT BALAK

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?

1. In Mesechet Baba Batra (14b), we find the famous passage where the Gemara identifies the author of each of the '24 books' of the Bible. In regard to Chumash itself, we find what there a very puzzling statement:

"Moshe katav sifro... - Moshe wrote his book - i.e. Chumash, the parsha of Bilam, and sefer Iyov (Job)."

In summary, the Gemara states that Moshe wrote the following three 'books':

1) His own book:

Clearly, this refers to Chumash (that's why we call it the five books of Moses)

2) "parshat Bilam":

This most probably refers to chapters 22->24 in Sefer Bamidbar - i.e. the main section of Parshat Balak.

3) The book of Iyov (Job)

The Gemara's observation concerning "parshat Bilam" is rather baffling. Considering that these three chapters are an integral part of Chumash, shouldn't parshat Bilam simply be considered part of his own book?

It is understandable why we must be told that Moshe wrote Sefer Iyov, but if Moshe wrote the entire Chumash, is not superfluous for the Gemara to tell that he also wrote Sefer Bilam?

Furthermore, if Moshe didn't write it, who did?

First, try to answer these questions on your own.

2. Next, review that Gemara in Baba Batra (14b), and Rashi's commentary:

"Moshe wrote Parshat Bilam: this refers to his [Bilam's] prophecies and parables, even though they are not his [Moshe's] needs, his laws, nor the story of his life."

Be sure that you can explain how Rashi understood the Gemara's "haava amina" [a possible original understanding] for why Moshe may not have written that section of Chumash.

According to that "haava amina" - if it wasn't Moshe, who's authorship would have that section been accredited to?

3. Finally, see Rabeinu Gershom's short commentary on this: "u'parshat Bilam: Even though Bilam himself was a prophet"

What underlying question does Rabeinu Gershom answer?

Based on the content of this entire "parsha" (i.e. chapters 22-24), what other reasons would there be to assume that Bilam may have written this entire section (and not Moshe)?

[Relate to who is aware of all the details of the conversations between Balak and Bilam.]

BETWEEN BILAM & AVRAHAM AVINU

1. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot compares Bilam to Avraham Avinu, citing the altruistic traits of Avraham in direct contrast to the selfish traits of Bilam. (See Chapter 5 Mishneh 22)

What textual parallels can you find in this week's Parsha that support this parallel?

Can you think of any thematic parallels as well?

Relate as well to Devarim 23:4-7 & Breishit 24:1-10!

[Be sure that you noted Breishit 12:1-3 & Bamidbar 22:6.]

2. You may remember as well a Midrash that compares Bilam's journey with his donkey to Balak with Avraham Avinu's journey to Har Ha'moriah (and the story of the Akeydah).

Attempt to find both textual and thematic support for this parallel.

VA'YACHEL - TO BEGIN - OR TO DEFILE

1. In regard to 25:1, how did you translate the word "va'yachel"? Note Seforno on 25:1, pay attention to what he learns from the Torah's use of this word.

Next see Ibn Ezra in this regard (i.e. his commentary on 25:1, the last line). How would he translate "va'yachel"?

Compare this with the same (or similar) usage in Breishit 9:20 (in regard to Noah and his vineyard).

Compare as well with Breishit 4:26 (see the dispute among the commentators); 6:1; and 11:6.

In your opinion, does the Torah use this word intentionally due to the dual nature of its meaning?

THREE KEY UNITS - [for those who enjoy serious study]

1. Between 23:1 and 24:14 we find the three instances where Bilam plans to curse Yisrael, but finally blesses them instead.

Review these psukim, and attempt to understand how they divide into three distinct units.

[If you didn't figure it out, try 23:1, 23:23:13, 23:27]

2. Note the textual similarities and parallel structures that exist between each of these three units.

What verb (or pair of verbs!) does the Torah use to describe God speaking to Bilam in each?

Is it the same verb (/verbs) in each three cases? If not, which case is different? Can you explain why.

[Note the preceding pasuk to each, where Bilam anticipates that God may speak to him.]

3. Compare this description of God speaking to Bilam [i.e. "va'yiker"] to other instances in Chumash of "hitgalut" [i.e. when God speaks to man, e.g. to the Avot or to Moshe Rabeinu].

In your opinion, is this linguistic difference significant?

If so, how and why?

3. In each of these three mini-units, note how often the concept of "bracha" & "klala" (blessing or cursing) appears.

[How many different Hebrew words are used for 'cursing'?

Is the pattern the same in each unit?

How does this relate to the beginning of the Parsha (see 22:6)?

Relate this as well to Breishit 12:1-3.

4. Carefully note how each of these three units end?

[i.e. see 23:12, 23:26, & 24:12-13]

What is similar about each ending, and what is different?

Can you find a progression from one to the next?

Relate your answer to God's answer to Bilam's original request to accept Balak's proposal in chapter 22!

[Note especially 22:12, 18, & 20.]

5. Note what transpires from 24:14 until the end of the chapter! How is this section different (in content and structure) to the three previous units (discussed in the question above)?

In what manner are Bilam's actions and words in this section different (from the previous section)? [Is there anything similar?]

How does this setting (i.e. after Bilam tells him leave in 24:11) relate to the content of Bilam's 'prophecy' in this final section?

In your opinion, are Bilam's comments in 24:14-24 his own opinion (or foresight), or is God telling him to say this? [Carefully compare with 24:1-3; 23:15-18; and 23:3-7.]

In your opinion, should these final words of Bilam be considered a 'higher' level of "nevuah" than the first three times that he speaks; or is this just his own opinion (or predictions)?

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PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION (for weekly shiur)

1. We all recall that Bilam is a 'bad guy', but as you study Parshat Balak, see if you can pinpoint any specific sin that Bilam commits?

If you do find such an instance, try to be his 'defense lawyer', i.e. attempt to explain his behavior in a more positive light.

In Parshat Balak, is Bilam ever punished for any of his 'wicked ways'? If so, when, where, and how?

Based on your conclusions, why do you think that Chazal reached the conclusion that Bilam is so evil [a "rasha" according to Pirkei Avot 5:22.]? Do you agree?

2. What city was Bilam from? Based on 22:5, 23:7 & Devarim 23:5, in what geographic area did Bilam live? What river does "ha'nhar" (in 22:5) refer to? Similarly, what rivers does the phrase "Aram Naharaim" refer to in Devarim 23:5?

If indeed the city of Petor is located somewhere near the Euphrates River, approximately how far away is this city from Moav (and Midyan)?

[i.e. how many days travel (approx.)]

How would this observation affect your understanding of the events that transpire in Parshat Balak?

3. Based on 23:8, why wasn't Bilam able to curse Am Yisrael?

In your opinion and based on 24:1-9, why does Bilam decide to actually bless Am Yisrael instead of cursing them?

In your opinion, does Bilam compose this blessing on his own, or does God 'put these words in his mouth' as well?

4. Review 24:25 (in its context, noting how it relates to 24:11). Where does Bilam return to when this incident is over?

How far away is this location? Does the conclusion of this story (see 24:23-25) leave you with the impression that Bilam plans to return one day to either Moav or Midyan? Based on 24:11, how (and why) does Balak say 'good-bye' to Bilam?

See Chizkuni on 24:25 re: where Bilam returned to. Compare this with Rasag's interpretation. [can be found in a Torat Chayim Mikraot Gedolot edition.]

Note also the Ibn Ezra on this pasuk. ['cute' - isn't it?]

5. Review now the final section of Parshat Balak (i.e. 25:1-9). Does the sin of Bnei Yisrael with "bnot Moav" (as described in 25:1-9) appear to be related in any manner with the story of Bilam? If so, explain how it is related. Support your answer with psukim. Is Bilam himself ever mentioned in these psukim?

6. In the ensuing war with Midyan, which is described in detail in the remainder of chapter 25 and in Parshat Matot (see 31:1-20), we find that Bilam was killed (see 31:8). In what country is Bilam killed?

Relate your answer to the above question.

Does it make sense why Bnei Yisrael would kill Bilam?

7. In 31:14-16, in his conversation with the military leaders, Moshe refers to this entire incident with "bnot Midyan" as "DVAR BILAM". In your opinion, what specific event does "dvar Bilam" refer to? [Relate to 26:1-6.]

Can you explain why this event is called "dvar BILAM"?

What can you infer from this concerning Bilam's whereabouts when the sin of "bnot Midyan" took place? How would this relate to the level of his involvement in these events?

From the above questions (especially the last two), what can we learn about Bilam's true character? What is Chazal's conclusion on this issue?

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PARSHANUT

1. In regard to Bilam's involvement in the Bnot Midyan incident, see Rashi on Bamidbar 25:1, noting his short comment regarding "atzat Bilam" [Bilam's advice].

Then see the lengthy Ramban on this pasuk, first noting why he blames the 'leaders' and not the women of Midyan. Be sure you understand how this relates to Rashi's commentary.

Later in the Ramban, he continues ("b'derech ha'pshat") to prove how Bilam was indeed involved. What is Ramban's primary source for this explanation? Why do you think he adds this point in addition to Rashi's commentary?

How does it relate to the above preparation questions?

2. Next, see Seforno on 25:1.

In what manner in his commentary different than Rashi & Ramban's?

Why do think that Seforno finds it necessary to add this point that the idol worship only happened at a 'later stage'? In your opinion, is the primary goal of this interpretation to explain what took place or to learn a lesson for future generations as well!

WHAT HAPPENED TO ZIKNEI MIDYAN?

1. Review 22:1-21, paying attention to who Balak sends to Bilam.

Who is sent, only the elders of Moav, or also the elders of Midyan? [Relate especially to 22:7 & 22:8!]

What is difficult about these psukim?

See Rashi 22:7.

How does Rashi (quoting Midrash Tanchuma 5) resolve this difficulty? Does Rashi take for granted that you noticed this question concerning 'what happened to the elders of Midyan'?

2. Now, see Ibn Ezra 22:13. How does he resolve this difficulty?

Is his answer the same or different than Rashi? Why?

In your opinion, which approach attempts to follow "pshat"?

3. Now see Ramban 22:7, noting how he first quotes Rashi & Ibn Ezra, and first attempts to support Rashi's explanation.

Why do you think that he opens his "pirush" in this manner?

Does he bring a proof to Rashi from pshat or drash?

In what manner does Ramban support (or base) his interpretation on Moshe Rabeinu's earlier relationship with the people of Midyan? Can you explain why?

Ramban later concludes: 'but the psukim do not mention this'. In your opinion, does he totally reject Rashi's view?

4. Next, Ramban quotes Ibn Ezra, claiming that he argues with Rashi. On what point do Rashi & Ibn Ezra argue? On what point do they agree? [Relate this to Ramban's own opinion.]

5. At the conclusion of his commentary, Ramban offers his own opinion. According to Ramban, did the elders of Midyan ever travel to Balak in the first place? If not, why not?

How does this solve the discrepancy in the psukim?

What difficulty arises according to Ramban's pirush?

How does Ramban solve this difficulty.

Does Ramban also attempt to explain "pshat"? In your opinion, is he convinced that his "pshat" is 'better' than Rashi or Ibn Ezra's? Relate Ramban's pshat to your answer to question #2 (in Part Two above re: where Bilam is from...).

Does this support Ramban's interpretation?

6. Finally, see Chizkuni on 22:8. How does Chizkuni solve the problem of why the 'elders of Midyan' are not mentioned?

[Note from his pirush to 22:13 that he follows Ibn Ezra.]

According to his pirush, in what country does Bilam live?!

What leads him to this conclusion? [See 31:1-8!]

Is this 'clever' pirush by Chizkuni supported or refuted by your answer to question #2 in Part Two above?

b'hatzlacha,
menachem