

# Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Balak 5784

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וַיִּשְׁלַח מֵלָאָכִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַנָּהָר אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹ לְקַרְאֵ־לּוֹ  
לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה עַם יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה כִסָּה אֶת־עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יָשָׁב מִמְּלִי:

“And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the River, in the land of his kinsfolk, to call to him, saying, ‘Behold, a People came out of Egypt; behold it covers the sight of the earth, and it is settled next to me.’” (Bamidbar 22:5).

Who was Bilaam and importantly, was he descended from anyone significant? Bilaam was chosen to enter the war for his talents, but was he chosen for any other reason?

When looking into the identity of Bilaam the Torah provides clues as to who he was. Pethor is by “the River.” The Torah calls two major rivers “the River,” the Euphrates (Bereishis 2:10) and the Nile (Shmos 2:5). The Nile is southwest of Moav and the Euphrates is to its east and north. Bilaam later says, “From Aram has Balak brought me...from the hills of the east.” (Bamidbar 23:7). Balak took Bilaam from the east not the west, from the Euphrates and not the Nile. (Side note: The Yarden is also referred to as “the River” in sefer Yehoshua but almost always it is identified as the Jordan River, or the Jordan in an adjacent pasuk.) The pasuk says, Pethor is in Aram and Moshe later recounted that “because they hired Bilaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-Naharaim, to curse you.” (Devarim 23:5). Bilaam was from Aram.

Avraham is from Aram as he tells his senior servant (on consensus identified as Eliezer) to go to his homeland (Aram) and back to his family to find a wife for Yitzchok. Interestingly, here by Bilaam, it does not say “MiPethor” from Pethor. It says “to Pethor.” This means that Bilaam was not from a Pethorean tribe or family but he lived in a town called Pethor, in Aram. He was Aramean.

Also notice about Bilaam that whoever curses him is cursed and whoever blesses him is blessed. (Bamidbar 22:6). When Bilaam tries to curse Bnei Yisroel (for the third time) he says “Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!” (ibid 24:9), referring to a prophesy that he knew was given to Avraham (Bereishis 12:4).

Balak sent dignitaries of Moav and Midyan to fetch and hire Bilaam. Why did those two nations team up together? When Bilaam talked to the dignitaries of Midyan and Moav he said “Spend the night here and I shall reply to you as HaShem may instruct me.” (Numbers 22:8). He used the proper term for HaShem “YKVK.” Later, Bilaam reports back and tells the dignitaries to leave saying “for Hashem (YKVK) will not let me go with you.” (Ibid 22:13). Gentiles use other terms for a deity and even may say “L-rd of Bnei Yisroel.” They do not use “Hashem.” Bilaam used the actual name. The servant of Avraham also used that name. (Bereishis 24:12) because he learned it from Avraham. Lavan sees the riches that his younger sister received, and he says, “Come in, O’ blessed of HaShem (YKVK)” (Ibid 24:31). Lavan uses the name of HaShem and did not hear the servant use it, and he lives nowhere near Avraham. It is clear from there that Avraham’s

family knew of HaShem and that name. This term for Hashem was passed down Lavan's family to his descendant, Bilaam.

Midyan and Moav were enemies. (Gemara Bavli Sanhedrin 105a). However, to save themselves, they combined to fight a common enemy, Yisroel. The Torah writes further that in the morning after Bilaam spoke to HaShem, "The Moavi dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, 'Balaam refused to come with us.'" (Bamidbar 22:14). Only the Moavim returned. Those from Midyan already knew that Bnei Yisroel were blessed, as they themselves are descendants of Avraham and his last wife, Ketura. (Bereishis 25:2). They knew their history and had already left the night before, once Bilaam said he has to defer to HaShem. The Midyanim knew that HaShem blessed Bnei Yisroel. (Moav, from Lot who parted from Avraham before the brochos, did not make that connection). Moav (from Lot), Midyan (from Avraham) and Bilaam (from Lavan) all had jealousy against Bnei Yisroel who were being given Eretz Canaan while they had smaller, less desirable lands. Balak urgently sent for Bilaam, even though he was 500 kilometers away (3- or 4-days journey by camel or donkey). He knew that Bilaam may feel he had a stake in the fight and come to his aid.

There are more clues. "When he arose in the morning, Bilaam saddled his she-donkey and departed with the Moabite dignitaries." (Bamidbar 22:21). Avraham saddled his own donkey (Bereishis 22:3), too. There is a familial connection to their work ethic. Interestingly, unlike against other gentiles, HaShem's anger flared against Bilaam. (Bamidbar 22:22). The Torah, otherwise, only says that HaShem's anger flares against Avraham and his descendants. HaShem did not even flare His anger against the world when He had to destroy it in Noah's time or when He destroyed Sodom and Amora

Bilaam's first curse turned blessing was "Who can count the dust of Yaakov, number the dust-cloud of Israel?" (Ibid 23:10). Avraham himself said, "I am like dust and ashes." (Bereishis 18:27). And so HaShem promised to Avraham that his descendants will be like "the dust of the Earth." (Ibid 28:14). This can also be what Balak was referring to when he said Israel "covered" the Earth, (Bamidbar 22:5) as dust covers the entire Earth. It also refers to the prophecy given to Ephraim and Menashe. (Bereishis 48:16).

Finally, about heritage, it says of Avraham that his primary heir was Yitzchok, "but to Avraham's sons by concubines Avraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Yitzchok eastward, to the lands of the east." (Bereishis 25:6). Meaning, while his main descendants would be Yitzchok's sons, he gave over his heritage, tutelage, and inspiration to his children of other wives, Hagar and Keturah. The "land of the east" could be in or around Pethor, where Bilaam's ancestors settled and lived, in Aram, on the Euphrates.

The point is clear. Avraham's heritage is strong. Not only does Bnei Yisroel get the "gifts" of Avraham but it also gets his yerusha, heritage, and estate. Just as Bnei Yisroel's cousin could not come to curse it, so too, Jews should not come to curse each other. Jews are one family, not even cousins. Jews have a strong heritage of giving, chessed, fear of HaShem, kindness, and righteousness. May Jews always tap into that heritage and continue on as progeny of Avraham in his good ways.