BALAQ: The Prophet Bilam and Radical Islam

Until now, most of the problems the people of Israel faced on their journey through the desert were internal: a discontented people, complaints about the food (the manna), the spies who demoralized the nation, Korach's rebellion against Moshe's leadership, and so on. That generation that left Egypt had, quite literally, to pass away.

Our Parasha, however, takes place 40 years after the Exodus. The problems have changed. They're no longer internal; now they are conflicts with Israel's external enemies.

The people of Israel are now on the eastern side of the Jordan River –today's Jordan– ready to enter the Promised Land. Balak, king of the nation of Moab, watches the Jewish people from atop his mountain, and he is afraid. He sees that these Jews are different from the first generation: they know how to defend themselves and fight, as their stunning victories over Sichon and Og made clear. Balak fears his own kingdom will end the same way. To prevent it, he comes up with an unconventional idea –something "outside the box."

THE SECRET OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

There has to be "something" supernatural to explain why Israel never lost a war, despite being neither aggressive nor warlike nor ruthless. And Balak concludes –correctly– that Israel's secret does not lie in military skill. There is something –he will later discover it is "Someone"– out of the ordinary that helps them win their wars. He assumes the secret of the Jewish victories lies in the relationship between Moshe and the God of Israel. Moshe's God, Balak reasons, is the superior one; He defeated all the gods of Egypt.

So Balak has to find a god more powerful than the God of

Israel. And if he can't, he might use someone who knows how to manipulate Israel's "God" and turn Him against Moshe and his people. In the idolatrous world, this is not strange logic. But he needed to find someone with access to that God, someone who could persuade Him to turn against Moshe. Balak is told that such a person exists –someone truly remarkable, a prophet like Moshe, who believes in and serves the very same God of Moshe! His name is Bilam, and he belongs to the people of Midian, Moab's allies.

MERCENARY GODS

For the pagans, gods were bribable, mercenary, willing to sell their loyalty to the highest bidder. Balak summons Bilam and hires him, believing that with his knowledge of this God he could "curse" Israel and make God turn against them. Bilam was the right man –or the last resort– to carry out the plan. Bilam doesn't tell Balak the truth. He hides from him that the God of Israel is not some invented pagan idol but the true God, and that the people of Israel are His chosen people. The explanation Bilam offers, to cover himself, is that he doesn't speak of his own will: "God will put the words in his mouth."

The Midianite comes before Balak, enters a trance, and tries to call on God to curse Israel. The commentators say he tried to bring up Israel's sins, the times they abandoned God, and so on. But God intervenes in Bilam's words –inspires him, possesses him– and forces the most beautiful blessings out of his mouth instead of curses. Bilam doesn't give up. He tries again and again, seven times in all, from different vantage points, with different sacrifices. But every single time, the curses he meant to hurl at Israel came out as blessings. Balak, furious, sends him away.

BILAM THE MONOTHEIST

Beyond this fascinating story, two questions remain open.

First: how did Bilam know about the God of Israel? Because

when Bilam speaks of God, he isn't referring to some generic "god." When he calls on Him, he doesn't use only the word ELOKIM, which generically means "God," but the proper name of the God of Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

I don't think the commentators take up this point. Perhaps because the answer is too simple: Bilam knows about God because he belongs to the nation of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law! In the book of Shemot we read that Yitro came to the camp of Israel praising and acknowledging the God of Israel. But later, before Israel set out for the Promised Land, Yitro returned to Midian and, according to some commentators, spread the monotheistic worship of the God of Israel there. Our episode takes place 40 years after that return. Bilam is a disciple of Yitro, and I imagine he practiced "a monotheism with some variant of Judaism." Something not unlike Islam.

Second question: why does Bilam agree to help the enemies of Israel? It's strange, because Bilam is, by all appearances, a religious man who acknowledges the same God as the Jews. If he believes in the same God as Moshe, if his religion and Moshe's were so alike –like Islam and Judaism– why does Bilam hate Israel and want to curse it? Bilam and Moshe share, ideologically, far more than what divides them. Bilam ought to be Israel's protector, or at least its most loyal ally. How do we explain his hostility?

TIME TUNNEL

Once again, I believe that to understand the biblical past we have to look at the political present. Consider: who are Israel's fiercest enemies today? Without question, the Islamists –the most "religious" Muslims– like Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic Jihad. Remember that Islam itself was built out of biblical texts and ideas: the patriarch Abraham, the Bible, monotheism, prayer, fasting. So why this hatred toward the State of Israel, when Muslims –our cousins– ought to be our protectors, or at least our "natural

allies”? How do we explain it?

REPLACEMENT THEORY

Professor Mordechai Kedar and other Israeli scholars of Islam explain that beneath all the political hatred and the idea of Jihad lies a foundation that is 100% religious. Who is the true representative of the God of the Bible –Israel, or the Islamic nation? Which is superior, the Quran or the Hebrew Bible? Who was the greater prophet, Moshe or Muhammad? Who are God’s true representatives on earth–the Jews or the Muslims? Let me be clear: this religious struggle for supremacy comes from one side only, the Islamist side. We Jews, thank God, have no need to declare a religious war to validate our standing as the chosen people, because we suffer from no inferiority complex. But on the other side there is an almost “suicidal” desperation to prove religious supremacy.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

This is exactly what happened with Bilam. Despite everything he had in common with Moshe, Bilam had no interest in drawing close to him, no wish to join his people or become his ally. Once he came to know Moshe’s religion, he appropriated it in his own mind, casting himself as the chosen prophet. From that moment on, Moshe stood in his way, eclipsing him. Bilam’s hatred of Israel was born of his own ambition: to replace Moshe and Israel. Far from being an ally, Bilam became Israel’s greatest enemy and sought its destruction.

WHAT NO ONE WANTS TO SEE

Let me illustrate with numbers. The war in Gaza, set off by Hamas’s terrorist massacre on October 7th, has now lasted roughly two years. The reported death toll exceeds 70,000, and that figure fills front pages around the world, day after day, alongside marches, emergency sessions, and accusations of “genocide.”

Now, how many people know what is happening, at the very same time, in the war between Russia and Ukraine? Last month alone, Russia suffered more than 35,000 dead and wounded. More than thirty-five thousand—in a single month. In other words, what took two years to unfold in Gaza recurs on the Russian front every few weeks. And yet that war—incomparably bloodier—barely surfaces in the headlines. No marches. No accusations of genocide. No special sessions at the United Nations.

Why? Because, just as in the days of Bilam, their problem was never the number of victims.

Their problem is Israel.

Professor Dror Eydar, former Israeli ambassador to Italy, put it plainly:

More than three thousand years have passed since then, and many peoples have followed in Bilam's footsteps, trying to halt the historical process of the Jewish people's return to their home in Tzion. The world is full of bloody conflicts whose victims vastly outnumber those of the conflict between Israel and its neighbors, and yet the world's attention fixes mainly on the Arabs of Gaza. That very scandal —the world's indifference to other conflicts— proves that it is not the Palestinians who concern those who claim to support them, but Israel. There is no other nation whose policies are not what the salons of culture, academia, and the media debate but whose very right to exist is.

But God did not let them defeat us then. And He will not let them today.