

## **Study 37: Balaam, Part 2 Numbers 22-24**

Last week, we began to look at the prophecy of Balaam concerning the coming of Israel's Messiah. We also looked at similar language in the book of Revelation ("soon" and "near," or "at hand"). Various "explanations" of how we should understand this language were put forth and discussed (see last week's notes).

This raises some questions:

**1. Do words mean things?** Can we simply ignore the meaning of the words we read in Scripture? Are words just empty *containers*, into which we can pour any meaning we want? Obviously, context matters, and we must take into consideration the type of literature (genre) with which we're dealing. What is the genre of Rev 1:1-3? It is straightforward *narrative*. If it was some other type of language, say poetry, we might be justified in taking more liberties with its meaning. These verses, however, are the prologue to a series of letters followed by a number of visions. The closing verses of the book are the postscript and are likewise *narrative*. Therefore, we should assume that the words are to be understood "literally," that is, in their usual and customary meanings. To make the word "soon" mean "a long time off," and the word "near" to mean "far" is to do violence to the Word of God, and is inexcusable.

**2. Is God's Word understandable?** In theology, this is called the "perspicuity<sup>1</sup> of Scripture." Should we expect that God's communication to human beings is capable of being understood? Or, should we conclude that because God is so utterly transcendent (above us), we can't possibly understand what He has to say? Does God *want* to be understood, or are we left trying to figure out what the meaning of "is" is?

**3. What if God wanted to communicate clearly with His people, and tell them that the things He was revealing were actually going to take place soon?** What words should He use in order to communicate this?

If words like "soon" don't mean what they appear to (in their "plain sense" and "normal usage"), how are we to take phrases such as "**not** soon," or "**not** near"? Now let's go back to the book of Numbers:

**Num 24:17-19** "I see him, but **not now**; I behold him, but **not near**. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth [or *all the noisy boasters*]. 18 Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. 19 A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."

Some people say that "near" and "soon" are essentially meaningless terms. They say that since God is eternal, *everything* is "near" and "soon" to Him. In an attempt to bolster this view, 2 Pet 3:8 is usually quoted at this point:

**2 Pet 3:8** With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

The idea is that God really has no conception of time (even though He *created* it), so He cannot be trusted (or *understood*) when He refers to it. Let's try applying this type of "logic" to various Scripture passages. God told His people they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years because of their lack of faith:

**Num 14:33-34** "Your children will be shepherds here for **forty years**, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. 34 For **forty years**—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you." [Emphasis added]

Can you see Joshua trying to figure out just what God meant by this? He gets out his calculator and starts multiplying: 40 [years] multiplied by 365.25 [days] multiplied by 1,000 ["a day with the Lord is as a thousand years"] = 14,610,000 years! Now, that's a long time of wandering!

Let's try another. Jeremiah was told by God:

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<sup>1</sup> "The quality of being perspicuous", i.e. "clearly expressed or presented; lucid." <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/perspicuity>.

**Jer 25:1, 11-12** The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah... 11 This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**. 12 “But when the **seventy years** are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians [or *Chaldeans*], for their guilt,” declares the Lord, “and will make it desolate forever.

Daniel used this prophecy to determine when to begin praying for the release of his people from the Babylonian captivity:

**Dan 9:1-3** In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes [Hebrew *Ahasuerus*] (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian [or *Chaldean*] kingdom— 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, **understood from the Scriptures**, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last **seventy years**. 3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

Now, because Daniel knew that the Lord is eternal, and with Him a day is the same as a thousand years, he got out his abacus and began calculating:

70 [years] multiplied by 365.25 [days] multiplied by 1,000 [“a day with the Lord is as a thousand years”] = 25,567,500 years of captivity!

You can see that trying to apply this type of faulty interpretation to the Bible leads to ridiculous conclusions. If we come to Scripture with preconceptions, those preconceptions may lead us to reject what the Word of God is trying to teach us. It’s said: “Some things have to be believed to be seen.” Can you think of a case in the Bible where people totally missed the fulfillment of prophecy because of their preconceptions?

Consider Christ’s **first** coming. Did all the Jews recognize Jesus as their promised Messiah? Why not?

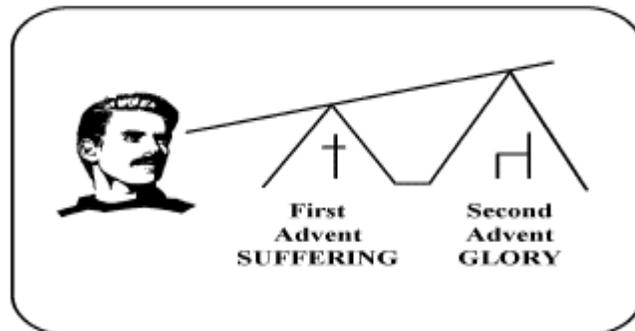
**Can God tell time?** What does it say of our God, if He that created all things lacks understanding of some aspect of it? Are we really willing to ascribe ignorance to Him? Is that even biblical? Let’s see. In **Ps 139**, David says there is nothing hidden from God’s sight, and “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (v 16).

**Isa 40:13-14** Who can fathom the Spirit [mind] of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor? 14 Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?

**Job 21:22** Can anyone teach knowledge to God, since he judges even the highest?

Obviously, God knows *all* things, and doesn’t need to be instructed in order to understand *anything*.

Another novel idea put forward is that the prophet’s vision was “distorted” by what he *thought* were near events, but were actually near *and* far. The notion is that when he looked into the future, what he saw was essentially like the peaks of two mountains. From his perspective, they looked like they were very close together, but were actually far apart (see illustration below).



So much attention has been paid to the word “near,” the focus of such attention being to make it mean “*not* near” (i.e. *far*). What do we do, then, with the prophet who says that something is *not* near? Shall we conclude that he, too, is simply using language in a meaningless way, or that his perspective is simply off?

Gallons of ink have been spilled and forests of trees have been cut down for the paper used in “explaining” why “near” doesn’t mean *near*, and “soon” doesn’t mean *soon*.

How much time elapsed between when Balaam saw his vision and its fulfillment? His vision took place around 40 years after the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, which would place it about 1405 BC. If we calculate the number of years until Jesus was born (4 BC), we come up with around 1,400 years. So, speaking biblically, 1,400 years is “not near.” Logically, therefore, we may conclude that “near” must be something *less than* 1,400 years. We can narrow it down further if we look at what the angel told Daniel regarding the ram and goat prophecy he was given:

**Dan 8:26** “The vision...that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the **distant future**.” [Emphasis added]

Daniel was taken captive around 597 BC when the Babylonians invaded Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. This prophecy of Dan 8 began to be fulfilled about 171 BC, culminating in the cleansing of the temple by Judas Maccabeus in 165 BC (2,300 days later, as prophesied).

In **Dan 12:4**, Daniel is told to “roll up and seal the words of the scroll [of prophecy] until the time of the end.” Then, in verse 9, the angel says, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end.”

A final note about Balaam: You may get the impression from reading Num 22-24 that Balaam did only what the Lord told him, and that he really wasn’t a bad guy. Notice, though, what is related in chapter 25 regarding what happened in the camp of Israel immediately following Balaam’s attempts at cursing them.

**Num 31:16** “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people.