

This is a great Torah portion, Brody- I won't dispute it. But if we had to sum up the whole experience of the Israelites in only two things, is the story of Balak and Balaam, really what we would mention?

So many things happen in the wilderness. God provides the people with water, with manna and even with meat. God helps the people achieve victory over their enemies, including the Amalekites who attack from the rear, at the beginning of their wanderings, when the camp was disorganized and they were least able to succeed. If you are looking for drama and excitement, there was the Torah portion we read two weeks ago with an earthquake swallowing up Korach's rebellion. And above all there is the giving of the Torah at Mt Sinai, the peak moment of all of Jewish history.

So, with all these many important things to choose from, why does the prophet Micah single out the incident with Balak and Balaam as one of only two things to mention, the other being the actual liberation from Egyptian slavery.

From our Haftarah:

God speaks: My people. What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you? Testify against Me!

In fact I brought you up from the land of Egypt, redeemed you from the house of bondage, setting before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

My people, remember what Balak King of Moab plotted against you and how Balaam son of Beor, responded to him. “

Scholars and commentaries take three different approaches in explaining this choice.

First, for traditionalist, the mention of Balak and Balaam, is meant to symbolize getting to the Promised Land. In that way it's a good parallel with the Exodus from Egypt. This portion is for them the centerpiece of the book of Numbers, the watershed moment. Leading up to this week's Torah portion we have four weeks full of stories of setbacks and rebellions, the Torah portions Bahaalotecha, Shlach Lecha, Korach and Chukkat, all dealing with dissent among the people and punishment from God. But after Parashat Balak, we are on a role, as it were, downhill and into the Promised Land. The Torah portions Pinchas, Matot, and Massei deal with issues of leadership following Moses' retirement and with the distribution of land, implying that the time of settling in the Promised Land is near. So for the prophet Micah, the story of Balak and Balaam proves that God

had come through for the Israelites, taking them out of Egypt **and** bringing them to the promised land.

A second approach is taken by Professor David Freedman, who co-authored the newer Micah volume of the Anchor Bible. He sees another reason for mentioning this story. He argues that “ the situation in Micah’s day was analogous in some way, to the Exodus wanderings” and particularly with regard to the people’s being worried about the power of foreign nations and their gods.

Micah was a prophet during the period of the divided monarchy, when the 10 northern tribes seceded from Judea and defied the Davidic dynasty. It was the time of the rise of Assyria as a world power. Eventually Assyria would destroy the Northern Kingdom and set siege to Jerusalem. The people were asking of God, what have you done for us today? Taking them out of Egyptian slavery was one thing, but God’s continued help during their desert wanderings, and particularly in their interactions with powerful foreign kings was something they could relate to. Micah mentions Balak and Balaam in order to make his message contemporary to his listeners, seeking God’s help against a contemporary threat.

Finally, there is a bigger question, not only about Micah mentioning this story but about it being an entire Torah portion in the first place. The importance the Torah ascribes to Balaam, implies he was not just some run of the mill foreign prophet. The portion is lengthy and tells this story in great detail, including all three of his oracles. There are many other incidents in the period of the wanderings for which we have much less information, and to us today they seem equally or perhaps more important. Why was this so important in Biblical times?

Interestingly we have evidence from outside of the Bible that Balaam was indeed an important cultural figure in the ancient Middle East, a force to be reckoned with. Back in 1967, Dutch archeologists digging at Deir Alla in Jordan found plaster inscriptions telling a long story about, "Balaam son of Beor, who was a seer of the gods." This is our guy and it is clear, even though the texts about him are fragmented, that he was an important figure in the Iron Age in this area, a powerful prophet, a champion who saved the people when the gods threatened to destroy them.

Now the juxtaposition of two different leaders Moses and Balaam, becomes much more significant. It was like the wrestling match between two great wrestlers, and only one can be with world champion. Moses is the greatest prophet of Adonai,

Balaam the emissary of the gods that were worshipped by the nations around the Israelites. God's prevailing in this situation, and forcing Balaam to bless God's people was very important and therefore worth Micah's mention.

The prophet Micah drew on earlier Israelite traditions to shape his message to the people. Their circumstances and outlook of his time was not exactly like that of the generations before them, but the message of the stories was still able to come through. That is the ever continuing story of the Jewish people, prophets and sages, rabbis and teachers, have approached ancient texts and reinterpreted them for their own times. Micah inherited the words of earlier generations, and we inherit his words (for the Hebraically skilled, there is even a little pun as it were on Balaam's most famous words the Mah Tov) ; "The Eternal has told you O mortal what is good, (MAH TOV), and what God requires of you. Only to do justice, love mercy , and to walk humbly with your God. "