Chukkat and Balak: A thematic relationship

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Instead of reading just one sidra today, we read two together, Chukat and Balak. On some other Shabbatot of the year we also combine two sidrot into one week's reading. This is necessitated by the peculiar arrangement of our Jewish lunar calendar, with its 354 days in a regular year. If you divide 354 days by 7, to give you the number of weeks, you get just over 50 weeks. The problem is that there are in fact 54 sidrot in the Torah to be accommodated. Hence the combining of two sidrot together on four, sometimes five, occasions during the year. Even in a leap year, with four extra Shabbatot, we need to combine sidrot in order to compensate for those Shabbatot left out by the incidence not only of Shabbat and the days of Yom Tov but also of Chol Ha-mo'ed, Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, when we do not read the usual sidrah, but the special festival reading.

Now, among the reasons for the choice of just some specific sidrot for 'couplet-combination' was the fact that they shared common or similar themes. And we shall demonstrate this by the example of the two sidrot we read this week.

The most obvious link concerns the antipathy of Moab towards Israel and the former's abortive attempts to destroy Israel. Although these are described mainly in the sidrah Balak, the clue to Moab's military impotence is provided in Chukkat. There we are told that, as a result of his refusal to allow the Israelites safe passage through his land, Israel destroyed Sichon, king of the Amorites, and occupied most of his lands (21:21-25). We are then informed that, in an earlier battle between Sichon and the Moabite king, the latter were totally overwhelmed. So a clear assessment of the comparative strength of Israel's enemies is provided, with Israel occupying the position of super-power—notwithstanding her as-yet unsettled state—followed by the two vassal states

of the Amorites and, weakest of all, the Moabites. So Chukkat provides the essential background to the following sidrah, Balak, and accounts for the fact that the Moabite king, Balak, was 'running scared' (see 22:3) of the Israelites, and hence was constrained to resort to the services of a soothsayer to curse them, and, when that failed, to alienating them from their God— the source of their strength— by enticing them into immorality and idolatry (chap. 25).

A second link is that Chukat describes the episode wherein Moses doesn't obey the word of God to "speak" to the Rock, and instead strikes it. The following sidra, Balak, expresses the supreme irony of Bilaam saying, "only the word that God puts in my mouth - *otto adabber* - that can I speak (Nu 22:38. See also 23:12, 26). ***Adabber*** has an echo of God telling Moses ***Vedibarta*** *el ha-sela* "You speak to the rock." Ironically, Bilaam feels constrained to fulfil the ***dibbur*** of God, whereas Moses does not! Perhaps that is why God makes Bilaam's ass speak, as if to show Moses how easy it should have been for him to have spoken to the Rock, instead of striking it. After all, if an ass can speak when instructed to do so by God, then surely Moses should have done so!

A third point of contact between the two sidrot, as well as between the latter two episodes, is that in both sidrot someone wields a rod. In the first sidra it is Moses who thoughtlessly wields his staff and strikes the Rock (20:11); in Balak, we have the heathen prophet using his staff when striking his ass for crushing his leg against a wall (22:27).

Finally, in Chukat there are two references couched in cryptic phraseology. The first is contained in a chronicle which went by the name, *Sefer milchamot Hashem*, 'The Book of the Wars of the Lord' (21:14). Its cryptic style is apparent in its description of Israel's ability to provide wells of water for the people through its occupation of land bordering on Moab:

Vaheb in Suphah,
And the valleys of Arnon,
And the slope of the valleys
That incline toward the seat of Ar,
And lean upon the border of Moab...
Spring up O well—sing unto it—
The well that the princes dug,
Which the nobles of the people hoed,
With the sceptre, and with their staves…
And from the wilderness to Mattanah (or 'to a gift'),
And from Mattanah to Nahaliel;
And from Nahaliel to Bamot;
And from Bamot to the valley
That is in the field of Moab,
By the top of Pisgah
Which looks down on the desert.
(21:14-20)

This is followed by a reference to *moshlim* (21:27-30), bards who created cryptic poetry, and who are quoted here as expressing jubilation over the Amorites' rout of the Moabites (referred to above).

Our second sidrah, Balak, is, of course, replete with the heathen prophet, Bilaam's cryptic ravings as he muses on the nature of Israel, its relationship with God, its destiny and its enemies' doom, in a genre referred to as *mashal*, 'parable' or 'oracular utterance' (23:7, 18; 24:3, 20, 21, 23). Herewith, just a sample of Bilaam's cryptic utterances:

And he looked on the Kenite, and took up his parable, and said:
Though firm be your dwelling-place,
And though your nest be set in the rock;
Nevertheless, Kain shall be wasted;
How long?
Ashur shall carry you away captive…

Alas, who shall live after God has appointed him?
But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim,
And they shall afflict Ashur, and shall afflict Eber,

And he also shall come to destruction.

(24:21-24)

Rashi underscores the connection between the two sidrot in his observation that the *moshlim* referred to in the sidra Chukat were, in fact, Bilaam and his father, Be'or who employed that *mashal* to uniquely powerful effect (See Rashi on Nu.21:27).

A textual problem to be resolved

King Balak's first delegation, to invite Bilaam to undertake the mission of cursing Israel, was rebuffed on the grounds that he could not succeed in doing so, 'since God refuses to give me leave to go with you' (22:13). Balak then sends a second, much larger and more prestigious, delegation to convince him, with a far greater inducement (v.17). Bilaam responds that, however great the inducement, he cannot ignore the will of God. However, he offers to petition God a second time to let him accept the assignment.

God's response is mystifying: אם לקרא לך באו האנשים קום לך אתם, 'If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them' (v. 20). Is it not obvious that 'the men have come to call'?! What exactly did God mean by that phrase, and why would He have changed his mind?

Suggestions to resolve the problem are invited. The most plausible will be included in next week's Dvar, together with my own.

שבת שלום ותהיו בריאים

Rabbi Jeffrey