

A Nation that Dwells Alone

Introduction

A Blessing or Curse?

Bilam gives four blessings to the nation of Israel, each with its own unique images and message. The first blessing (Bemidbar 23:7-10) is the shortest and least complex. After a brief introduction explaining his inability to curse those whom Hashem has no wish to harm, Bilam declares:

(ט) כִּי מֵרָאשׁ צְרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמִגְּבְעוֹת אֲשׁוּרְנֵנוּ הֵן עִם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכְּנוּ וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְּׁבוּ. (י) מִי מִנָּה
עֵפֶר יַעֲקֹב וּמִסָּפֶר אֶת רֵבַע יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּמְתַּת נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׂרָיִם וְתִהְיֶה אַחֲרִיתִי כְּמֹהוּ.

(9) For from the top of the rocks I see him, And from the hills I behold him: Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, And shall not be reckoned among the nations. (10) Who hath counted the dust of Jacob, Or numbered the stock of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, And let mine end be like his!

The second of these verses, in which Bilam speaks of the vastness of the nation and expresses his personal desire to share the fate of the Israelites, certainly appears to be a blessing. Is the same true regarding the first verse in which he describes Israel as a "people which dwells alone" and which is "not reckoned among the nations"? Is it a blessing to be isolated? Might the nation of Israel indeed be better off were it not viewed as a power by the nations of the world?

Additional Questions

The brief passage raises several other questions as well:

- What is the connection between the various parts of Bilam's speech? How does the fact that the nation is numerous relate to its being alone?
- To what time period is Bilam referring? His words "I see / behold them" suggest that he might be speaking of the present, yet his wish that his end be similar to that of Israel implies that he is referring, instead, to the future destiny of the nation.
- The word "בְּדָד" appears in only two other verses in Torah, both of which use it to describe the nation or Hashem's relationship to it. Devarim 32 states, "וְיִי בְּדָד יִנְקֶנּוּ וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נֹכַר", while Devarim 33 declares, "וַיִּשְׁכֵּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטַח בְּדָד". What light might these verses shed on Bilam's blessing? Do they have a parallel or different message? How is the word "בְּדָד" to be understood in each?
- How does this blessing of Bilam relate to his other three blessings?
- Is Bilam a mouthpiece for the Torah's own values, or should his words be taken with a grain of salt?
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the Torah advocating for isolationism? If yes, would this apply to the religious sphere only, or also to general culture, economics, politics, etc.?

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Exegetical Approaches

This topic is currently in progress

Overview

What is Bilam wishing upon Israel when he blesses them to be "a nation that dwells alone"?

Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) reads the words to refer to Israel's future dominance over the nations, when they alone will possess the world. The message is similar to the rest of Bilam's blessings, which also relate to Israel's security and defeat of enemies. The Netziv, in contrast, asserts that Bilam is advocating a policy of isolationism. Israel should not intermingle with nor look to find favor in the eyes of surrounding nations, since this inevitably leads to antisemitism. Finally, the Keli Yekar maintains that Bilam is speaking of the uniqueness of the People of Israel who merited to be Hashem's chosen nation.

The various opinions touch upon many important issues for the modern reader. What does the Torah suggest should be the balance between involvement in the outside world and isolationism? What does it mean to have "chosen" status? Is that a privilege or an obligation? Does it necessitate being a model for others to follow? Finally, if Israel is to "stand alone" in the future, will this be due to the destruction of its enemies or to their repentance and return to Hashem, when they switch from foe to friend? Will this, in turn, result from Israel's being "a light unto the nations" or from their keeping to themselves?

Blessing of Security

Bilam's words refer to the security of the nation of Israel.

SOURCES: Targum Onkelos, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Rashi, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Chizkuni, Sforno

Meaning of "בַּדָּד"

- **Alone** – The Targumim, Rashi, and Sforno understand the word to mean alone, and assert that Bilam is prophesying that, in the distant future, the Children of Israel alone will inherit the Land and not be destroyed with other nations.
- **Secure** – R"Y Bekhor Shor and Chizkuni, in contrast, explain that the word means secure, pointing to a parallel verse, "וַיִּשְׁכַּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטַח בְּדָד" (Devarim 33:28) as support.¹ R"Y Bekhor Shor does suggest an etymological connection to the meaning of "alone", positing that one who is not afraid is called "בַּדָּד", because he is not reliant on others for security.

"וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ" – These sources disagree regarding how to understand this second part of the verse and its relationship to the previous phrase:

- **Elaboration** – According to Onkelos and Rashi, this phrase parallels the first, reinforcing the message of safety. In the future, Israel will not be counted among the nations when Hashem judges and destroys them.
- **Reason for future security** – According to Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), this phrase expresses the reason for the nation's ultimate status. Because they do not adopt the customs of the surrounding

nations, they will merit to inherit the world.

- **Reason for present security** – R"Y Bekhor Shor maintains that Israel is not considered as the rest of the nations and thus cannot be cursed.

"מי מנה עפר יעקב" – This position could explain that Bilam continues his blessing by mentioning the multitudes of the Children of Israel as a further sign of their strength.

"ה' בָּדַד יִנְחֹנוּ וְאִין עִמוּ אֵל נָכַר" in **Devarim 32** – These commentators disagree regarding the meaning of the similar verse from Ha'azinu (Devarim 32:12) and whether it parallels Bilam's prophecy:

- **Secure guiding** – Both R"Y Bekhor Shor and Rashi assume that "בָּדַד" in Devarim 32 is an adverb and that it describes how Hashem securely guided the nation during its trek through the wilderness, while the foreign gods were not capable of harming the Israelites. This is consistent with R"Y Bekhor Shor's reading of the word in our unit.²
- **Israel alone** – Sforno maintains that Israel is the subject of the word "בָּדַד" in Devarim 32. He suggests that, like our verse, it refers to the future when Israel alone will survive Hashem's judgement and there will be no more idolaters.
- **Hashem alone** – The Targumim, in contrast, assume that "בָּדַד" refers back to Hashem, and that the verse is emphasizing how, in the future, Hashem alone will guide the nation, as they will no longer worship foreign gods.

Relationship to Bilam's Other Blessings – This blessing is similar in content to the other blessings, which all touch upon Israel's strength and dominance over other nations.

Isolationism? According to most of these commentators,³ neither the verse in Bemidbar nor the verse in Devarim is speaking of the need for the nation to be isolated and disconnected from the broader world.



Blessing of Isolation

Bilam's poem speaks of Israel's tendency not to mix with other nations.

SOURCES: Shemot Rabbah, Targum Yerushalmi (Fragmentary), Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, R. S"R Hirsch, Malbim, Netziv

Meaning of "בָּדַד" – According to this position, "בָּדַד" here means alone and Bilam is emphasizing how Israel does not mingle with other nations, intermarry,⁴ or adopt their customs.

"וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ"

- **Direct parallel** – Most of these commentators view this clause as parallel in overall meaning to the previous phrase, "עַם לְבָדֵד יִשְׁכֵּן", but they differ in the way they define the word "יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ", and thus, in the details of their explanations:
 - **To be counted** – Rashbam explains that others won't be counted among Israel, as they don't mix with foreign nations, while Malbim asserts that since Israel and the nations are so distinct from one another that they cannot be counted together in one unit.
 - **To be of import** – R. Hirsch asserts that the nation will not seek its importance on the international scene, but will instead be satisfied to focus on internal concerns.

- **Inverse parallel** – Netziv uniquely views the two clauses of the verse as inverse parallels. He suggests that the first clause means that when the nation lives alone, the result will be "יִשְׁכְּנוּ", that it will be able to dwell [in peace and dignity]. However, when the nation assimilates and is "בְּגוֹיִם", then "לֹא יִתְחַשְּׁב" and it will not be considered important or worthy of respect. He asserts that assimilation always has disastrous effects, provoking antisemitism and hatred, not love and acceptance.⁵

"מי מנה עפר יעקב" – Ibn Ezra asserts that the continuation of Bilam's words shows just how extraordinary Israel's separation from others is. Had they been merely a small nation, it would not be surprising if they were disregarded by others and there was no intermingling, but given their large numbers, this is exceptional.

Nature of Bilam's Blessing – While many of these exegetes assume that Bilam is blessing Israel with isolationism, Rashbam suggests that Bilam is instead simply explaining why he was not allowed to curse the nation; they were undeserving of a curse as they do not mingle with others (and because they have countless, innocent children "מי מנה עפר יעקב").

"ה' בְּדַד יִתְחַו וְאִין עִמוּ אֵל נִכְר" in **Devarim 32** – Ibn Ezra,⁶ R. Hirsch, and Netziv read also the verse in Devarim as referring to Israel's isolationism from other nations, while Rashbam and Malbim assume that it instead speaks of Hashem, who by Himself led the nation through the wilderness to Israel.

Isolationism? This position has a positive view of Israel's separation from other nations. Some of the commentators seem to limit this to the religious sphere, speaking of adherence to Torah and commandments or intermarriage, while others expand it to other interactions as well. Thus, R. Hirsch speaks of avoiding international connections, and Netziv warns that any attempts to gain respect in the exilic world will be counterproductive.



Blessing of Distinct Status

Bilam was prophesying about the unique status of the Children of Israel, Hashem's chosen nation.

SOURCES: Ralbag, Akeidat Yitzchak, Keli Yekar

Meaning of "בְּדַד" – According to this approach, "בְּדַד" means alone, but Bilam is speaking not about the isolation of Israel, but its distinctiveness. They alone achieve holy status, and they dwell apart, having been designated as Hashem's "עַם סְגוּלָה".

"וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְּׁב" – These commentators understand the word "יִתְחַשְּׁב" to be related to counting, and that this phrase elaborates on the first part of the verse.

- Ralbag and Akeidat Yitzchak explain that, due to Israel's uniqueness, the people can not be counted in one unit together with other nations. Only objects of the same type can be considered to be a single unit.⁷
- Keli Yekar, instead suggests that, as opposed to the rest of the nations who are only considered in their totality, Israel's special status as Hashem's portion causes Him to count and care for each individual Israelite.

"מי מנה עפר יעקב" – This blessing flows from and elaborates on the above. Ralbag asserts that Bilam is prophesying that due to the Israel's stature and success, their numbers will increase.⁸

"ה' בָּדַד יִנְחֵנוּ וְאִין עִמּוֹ אֵל נֹכַח" in Devarim 32

- According to Keli Yekar, this verse, too, speaks of Hashem separating the Children of Israel to be His chosen nation. This, however, is conditional on their not having foreign gods among them.
- Ralbag and Akeidat Yitzchak, in contrast, maintain that this verse is simply speaking about Hashem's guidance of the nation through the wilderness.

Isolationism? According to this position, Bilam's words do not necessarily advocate for Israel to avoid contact with other nations and peoples. Perhaps, to the contrary, Israel's mission is to be the Divine emissary to spread His values to the broader world.

¹ This verse equates the words "בָּטַח" and "בָּדַד". In addition the context speaks of Hashem saving the nation from its enemies.

² According to Rashi, in contrast, Bilaam's words referred to the future.

³ Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) is somewhat of an exception as he does emphasize that the reason that Israel will ultimately survive is that they do not take on the customs of surrounding nations.

⁴ See Malbim.

⁵ He points to the nation is Egypt as a prime example. Soon after they decided to stop observing circumcision so as to be like their neighbors, Hashem had the Egyptians begin to enslave them. See his discussion of the Purposes of the Egyptian Bondage for elaboration.

⁶ See his second possibility.

⁷ Just as one cannot add together apples and horses, since each is its own type of entity, so too, even though Israel and other nations might seem to all be peoples, they are too different to be counted together as one object.

⁸ Keli Yekar, in contrast, posits that Bilam is saying that even though the nation is so plentiful, Hashem still counts them individually.