

**THIS JUST IN: DAVID’S VICTORY OVER
GOLIATH WAS *NOT* AN UPSET!**

Gregory H. Harris
Professor of Bible Exposition
The Master’s Seminary

The story of David and Goliath is perhaps the most famous of any of the biblical narratives, used throughout the world in both religious and secular circles anytime an underdog defeats a heavily favored champion. There is only one problem with this interpretation: the Bible clearly shows that David defeating Goliath was anything but an upset.

The expression “David versus Goliath” to explain a contest has become ubiquitous in the sport and political worlds so that no explanatory information is needed. Virtually everyone knows this as the biblical record of David, the brave young shepherd, going to battle against Goliath, the giant who was a seasoned warrior. The odds were so overwhelming against David it is generally viewed that his victory would be extremely unlikely. Thus, when the weaker participant defeats the heavily favored, stronger opponent, this would be considered a David versus Goliath upset.

Only one major problem exists with this line of reasoning: it is *totally* opposite from how the Bible uses it. Scripture makes it exceedingly clear that David’s victory over Goliath was anything but a one-in-a-million type of upset. As we will see, God had announced the outcome multiple times before David ever went out to fight the Philistine. It will be shown that instead of the David versus Goliath scenario being only a historical note of interest, how one understands—or misunderstands—this biblical account will factor into to the interpretation of other texts past that chapter.

God’s Original Promise in Genesis 12:1–3

In what would eventually become the Abrahamic Covenant, God promised Abram the following in Genesis 12:1–3:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great;

and so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”¹

While these promises seem straightforward enough, how one interprets these verses is one of the most argued components of biblical theology. For instance, Stephen Sizer, in writing as an antagonist against dispensationalism, concludes, “There is, however, no indication in the text of Genesis 12 that this promise of blessing and warning and cursing was ever intended to extend beyond Abraham.”² Further, Sizer concludes that the “idea that the Jewish people continue and enjoy a special status by virtue of the covenants made with the Patriarchs is in conflict with the clear and unambiguous statements of the New Testament.”³

It is difficult to over-emphasize how important the study of the Abrahamic Covenant is because its interpretation affects the interpretation—rightly or wrongly—of virtually the entirety of Scripture:

It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the covenant with Abraham is one of the important and determinative revelations in Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches its fulfillment in the New. In the controversy between premillenarians and amillenarians, the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provisions and the character of their fulfillment set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth.⁴

Essex adds regarding both the issue and the interpretational importance of the Abrahamic Covenant: “All segments of evangelicalism recognize the importance of a proper understanding of this covenant. Interpretative decisions concerning it will determine one’s theological perspective. Therefore, it is imperative that every Bible student study the Abrahamic Covenant carefully.”⁵ Additionally, “The Lord’s determination to bless mankind leads to the narrative concerning the Abrahamic Covenant.

¹ All Scripture references used are from the NASB 1971 edition unless otherwise stipulated. The “Thee” and “Thou” usage have been updated to modern norms.

² Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester Lei 7GP, England: Intervarsity, 2004), 148.

³ *Ibid.*, 149. Sizer would go so far as to imply that anyone who makes a distinction between Israel and the church may be committing heresy (*Ibid.*, 150). See also Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960): 27–29, for a similar assessment of the dangers of seeing Israel as having any special standing with God. Sizer likewise understands the belief in a future for the Jewish people to be only a relatively recent development in history as a man-made doctrine that certainly has no biblical basis: “In Europe, a larger proportion of evangelicalism would identify with a covenantal perspective than in the United States. But just as British evangelicals exported dispensational Christian Zionism to the United States in the nineteenth century, so now, through the popular writings of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, for example, evangelicals in the United States are exporting their apocalyptic dispensational pro-Zionism to the rest of the world, with devastating consequences for the Middle East” (*Ibid.*, 25).

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1959), 139.

⁵ Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1999): 191. See also Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., “The Covenant with Abraham and its Historical Setting,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (July-September 1970): 241–57, and Robert Saucy, “The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational

The foundation of the Abrahamic Covenant is in the promises to Abraham that would be developed in Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17 . . . Genesis 12:1–3 is pivotal because it stated the essential features of the Lord's promises to Abraham that would be developed in the ensuing narrative.⁶

Genesis 12:3 contains an aspect of what God revealed that would eventually become the Abrahamic Covenant: "And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." While obviously all items regarding the Abrahamic Covenant are important, all of them cannot be covered in this study. This article will focus on one of God's specific concluding promises in Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you" (וְאֲבָרְכָה וְאֲבָרְכָה) "and the one who curses you, I will curse" (וְאֲקַלֵּל אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִקְלֵל) that would ultimately include Abraham's physical descendants.⁷ God chose two different Hebrew words for "curse" in Genesis 12:3 with the first one being a reference to those who slighted Abraham while the primary emphasis here is the absence (or reversal) of a blessed or rightful state and lowering in esteem to a lesser state.⁸ The second use of "curse" in Genesis 12:3 is a much stronger term, where God promised not just to disdain or slight someone but instead to "bind under a curse."⁹ The verb form means "to snare, bind," and the noun form means "noose, sling," and "to bind (with a spell), hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist."¹⁰ Thus the original curse in Genesis 3:14, 17, "cursed are you above all cattle" and "cursed is the ground for your sake" means "you are banned/anathematized from all the other animals" and "condemned be the soil (i.e., fertility to men is banned) on your account."¹¹ Similarly, God's word to Cain, "you are cursed from the earth" means that Cain is banned from the soil, or more specifically, he is banned from enjoying its productivity.¹² It should be noted

and Non-Dispensational Systems," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/1 (Fall 1986): 149–65 for a survey of key interpretational issues between these two groups.

⁶ Essex, "The Abrahamic Covenant," 197.

⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 26, writes: "This is immediately apparent in Genesis 12:1–3, the initial and programmatic statement of the covenant. Abram was told that he would be made into a great nation that would be the means by which Yahweh would bless all peoples on earth. God's concern was still clearly universalistic, but the *means* of addressing that concern was very specific—the nation of Abram" [emphasis his].

⁸ Leonard J. Coppes, "קָלַל," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 volumes. Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2:800–801. For various derivatives that convey the ideas of to curse, to be insignificant, to have a low opinion of; to be insignificant, contemptible to despise, disdain, have scant regard for, despise, see "קָלַל," Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson, electronic ed., Accordance 10 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1994–2000), 3:1103.

⁹ "אָרַר," *HALOT*, 1:91.

¹⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, "אָרַר," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:75. Further, the majority of "curse" sayings fall into three categories: (1) the declaration of punishments, (2) the utterance of threats, and (3) the proclamation of laws. "It is interesting that all these curse-sayings are a reflex of one violating his relationship to God" (*Ibid.*).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

that as is so often the case in Scripture, no middle ground or third option exists, only blessing or cursing. The one who “slights” Abraham, by not recognizing the exalted status granted to him by God Himself, God will bind under His curse.

Are the previous examples of God’s cursing declared in Genesis and God’s promises made in Genesis 12:3 to be understood as literal promises? If so, the Bible should contain multiple examples of God being true to His Word and responding accordingly. However, and of equal importance, if God has replaced the nation of Israel with the church, as some claim, then a specific terminus should be evident of when that replacement happened. In other words, if replacement theology is the correct biblical interpretation, then it should be evident biblically when God ceased honoring His promise to curse the ones who curse Israel and thus no longer to be operative. Furthermore, no future promises or prophecies that show God blessing or cursing national Israel should be in effect beyond that determined terminus. One of Sizer’s quotes contains the key words and phrases and the core issue: “no indication from the text (of Gen. 12), that “the promise of blessing . . . and cursing, was ever intended beyond Abraham.”¹³ So with Abrahams’s death recorded in Genesis 25, if Sizer’s view if correct, then no biblical support past Genesis 25 should be expected that God still curses those who curse Israel.

Consideration of Pertinent Promises God Made to National Israel

Part of the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant, where God told Abram: “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (Gen 15:13), includes an implementation of the Genesis 12:3 pronouncement of “I will curse the one who curses you,” as would be expected if God kept His previous promise, “But I will judge the nation whom they will serve,” which, of course, was ultimately Egypt. Exodus 2:24–25 and 3:8 reiterate that God brought about the exodus in keeping with His Word based on His covenant faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant. Exodus 2 concludes: “So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them” (Exod 2:24–25). In the commissioning of Moses, as the human agent whom God would employ, comes this clear reminder that God is the true redeemer and again refers to the Abrahamic Covenant promise: “So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite” (Exod 3:8). All of the events in Exodus did not merely happen; God acted because of His covenant vow *and* in keeping with what He had previously promised the descendants of Abraham.

Yet it was not only the Egyptians whom God cursed in judgment for cursing national Israel. Another such response by God occurred when the people grumbled against Moses and put God to the test shortly after God had punished Egypt and the

¹³ Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*, 148.

nationally redeemed Jewish people had been brought out of Egypt. In the immediate context, God had instructed Moses:

“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us, or not?” (Exod 17:6–7)

Kaiser summarizes the significance of this event:

Thus the dual name brought out both the people’s testing of God (*Massah* “test”) and quarreling (*Meribah* “contention,” “strife”; NIV mg., “quarreling”) (v.7). In less than six months they had witnessed ten plagues, the pillar of cloud and fire, the opening and shutting of the Red Sea, the miraculous sweetening of the water, and the sending of food and meat from heaven; yet their real question came down to this: “Is the LORD among us [*beqirbenu*] or not?”¹⁴

The very presence of God in a unique way should not be overlooked in this passage. It is not only that God had performed a miracle, but rather that God’s special presence was there that day as God had explicitly promised Moses in saying “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.”¹⁵ The Apostle Paul later reveals the messianic significance of this event: “For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:1–4).¹⁶ In answer to the question, “Is the LORD among us or not?,” the LORD certainly was at Rephidim with preincarnate Messiah present.

¹⁴Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Exodus*, in Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:406–07.

¹⁵Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 2:391.

¹⁶McClain argues “. . . we find the Apostle Paul applying the historical Name to the Son of God in other passages where the reference to His pre-existent state is unmistakable. (cf. Heb 11:26 and 1 Cor 10:4, “the rock was Christ.”)” Alva J. McClain, “The Doctrine of The Kenosis In Philippians 2:5–8,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:1 (Spring 1998): 90. See also along these same lines Norman L. Geisler, “In Defense of the Resurrection: A Reply to Criticisms (A Review Article),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:2 (1991): 244; Julius R. Mantey “New Testament Facts About The Apostle Peter,” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 21 (September 1978): 212; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 726–27; David K. Lowry, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 526. See further Paul Ellingworth, Howard Hatton and Paul Ellingworth, *A Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 217, who regard the “last part of this verse, *and the Rock was Christ*, contains Paul’s interpretation of this tradition.” For a study of this verse and Jewish tradition, see Peter E. Enns, “The ‘Moveable Well’ in 1 Cor 10:4: An Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 23–38.

In Exodus 17:8–13, after the special presence of God had been revealed, Aaron and Hur hold Moses' arms up during the battle as God gives Israel the victory over the Amalekites. Following the defeat of one Gentile king and his people who had attacked national Israel, and in keeping with Genesis 12:3, God also issued this divine pronouncement in Exodus 17:14–16:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

And Moses built an altar, and named it The LORD is My Banner; and he said, "The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation."¹⁷

It is of utmost importance to note that the ramifications resulting from the battle with Amalek in Exodus 17 went far beyond the immediate situation. "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" is literally "war for Yahweh against Amalek from generation [to] generation,"¹⁸ which is another way of saying that Yahweh had declared holy war on the Amalekites. Stuart offers details of some of the characteristic of a Jewish holy war: "The Israelite encounter with the Amalekites at Rephidim represents an example of Old Testament holy war, an instance that anticipates the fuller delineation of the concept in later texts. The principles of holy war are codified in Deuteronomy 20:1–20, but important examples and supplemental aspects of the concept are found in many locations."¹⁹ Therefore, God's declaration, "I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven," constitutes a very early "oracle against a foreign nation," a common form of oracle found later in the prophetic books, with such oracles predicting the destruction or suppression of an enemy of Israel (and thus automatically an enemy of God) at some time of God's choosing in the future.²⁰ Cole concurs by writing, "Presumably the idea in either case is an oath of perpetual war, taken with the right hand on YHWH's altar or on some tribal 'banner' symbolizing his presence."²¹ Regarding the importance of God's instruction after the battle, it was not only for the immediate situation, but "in order

¹⁷ Kaiser, *Exodus*, 2:407–08 writes, "The Amalekites lived in the desert, south of Canaan around Kadesh (Gen 14:7), otherwise known as the northern part of the Negev (Num 13:29; 14:25, 43). Amalek was the son of Eliphaz (Esau's eldest boy) by a concubine named Timna (Gen 36:12) and became a 'clan' or 'chief' in the tribe of Esau (Gen 36:15). Thus the Amalekites were distant cousins to the Israelites. There is every possibility that they had known about the promise of the land of Canaan that had been given to Esau's twin brother, Jacob; therefore, they should not have felt any threat to their interests in the Negev had this promise been remembered and taken seriously."

¹⁸ See Noel D. Osborn and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 424, for various translation issues regarding precisely what God promised.

¹⁹ Stuart, *Exodus*, 395. Stuart argues that holy war may be summarized by twelve propositions, among which are (1) no standing army was allowed; (4) holy war could be fought only for the conquest or defense of the promised land, and (5) only at Yahweh's call could holy war be launched (*Ibid.*, 395–97).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 399–400.

²¹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

that he might carry out this decree of God on the conquest of Canaan, but to strengthen his confidence in the help of the Lord against all the enemies of Israel.”²² Kaiser notes the importance of these ones who had cursed Israel by their actions as being more representative of a deeper and future battle:

Amalek's assault on Israel drew the anger of God on two counts: (1) they failed to recognize the hand and plan of God in Israel's life and destiny . . . and (2) the first targets of their warfare were the sick, aged, and tired of Israel who lagged behind the line of march (Deut 25:17–19). Thus Amalek became the “first among the nations” (Num 24:20)—in this case, to attack Israel. They are placed in juxtaposition with another group of Gentiles in the next chapter (Jethro's Midianites) who believed in Israel's God. These two chapters illustrate two kingdoms and two responses to the grace of God from the Gentile world.²³

Elsewhere, Kaiser writes by comparing another enemy Edom: “Edom alone is singled out because of her marked hostility toward the people of God. Their role was similar to that of the Amalekites, the earliest nation to represent the kingdom of men (Exod. 17:8; Deut. 25:17–19), which stood violently against the kingdom of God.”²⁴

Here is biblical evidence of God cursing an enemy of Israel who had cursed them—just as He had promised—and obviously one that went well beyond Abraham's life.²⁵ If God's declaration in Exodus 17:14–16 is to be understood as a literal promise, then one would expect (1) for God eventually to blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven, and (2) that the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation.²⁶ Yahweh, though sometimes over centuries delayed, determines by His sovereign counsel the time when such divine retribution will occur—as well as the means of that retribution—of “cursing the one who curses you.” Even more striking in the Exodus 17 account is that this military victory for Israel was directly due to the presence of God and His divine intervention. The key issue is not who won this initial battle; the key issue is that Yahweh was utterly faithful to His promise of Genesis 12:3 to “curse the one who curses you.” Simply expressed, the “I will curse the one” promise goes beyond the immediate military victory and points to divine action by God at some point(s) in the future.

(Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 2:144.

²² Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., trans by James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 2:82.

²³ Kaiser, *Exodus*, 408.

²⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of Gentiles (Amos 9:9–15 and Acts 15:13–18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20:2 (June 1977): 103.

²⁵ Contra Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*, 148.

²⁶ For consideration of different approaches by those who wrestle with what they consider to be the moral dilemmas of God declaring a holy war on people yet to be born, see Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87:3 (July 1994): 323–46. For another article dealing with the supposed way the redactors of Scripture interpreted this, with a focus on teaching later Jewish generations that the true hero of the story being Yahweh instead of Moses, see Bernard P. Robinson, “Israel and Amalek: The Context of Exodus 17:8–16,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (June 1985): 15–22.

God's Promises to National Israel from the Mosaic Covenant

After the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 24, the nation of Israel received specific instructions concerning their military outcomes, all contingent on their covenant obedience or lack thereof.²⁷ Even though Yahweh ultimately promised to curse the ones who cursed Israel, military victory against those who cursed Israel was not guaranteed unless the nation walked in covenant obedience before Yahweh. In Leviticus 26:6–7, God promised certain and on-going blessings by military victory when the nation lived in obedience to Him:

“I shall also grant peace in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making you tremble. I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land. But you will chase your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword.”

Yahweh later reiterated this promise of military victory if the nation walked in covenant obedience to Him in Deuteronomy 28:7: “The LORD will cause your enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way and shall flee before you seven ways.”

However, such military victory was never automatic; the same God also would pronounce His cursing of the nation—including military defeat—when Israel strayed from Yahweh and into sin (Lev 26:14–39). Yet regardless that Israel’s blatant sin would eventually lead to her exile among the Gentiles, Leviticus 26 concludes with God’s utter covenant faithfulness to regather the Jewish people to their promised land in spite of their unfaithfulness at some undisclosed time in the future (Lev 26:40–45).²⁸

The Theological Significance of God's Promises in Numbers 22–24

For those who take God’s Word to heart with a literal-grammatical hermeneutic, nothing—other than God’s grace—should be surprising in how He dealt with His own people Israel (Lev 26), or in how he dealt with those who cursed the Jewish nation (Gen 12:3). Yahweh had done precisely what He had promised—repeatedly—and nothing within the text (other than a presupposition brought to the text) allows for anything other than the natural understanding of God’s Word that these were actual events based on the literal promises of God. So the importance of Numbers 22–24 in detailing more precisely the unfolding revelation from God should in no way be underestimated. While all particulars of these chapters cannot be dealt with in detail here, certain matters must be noted because of their utmost importance,

²⁷ See William D. Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1999): 213–32 for this and particularly how the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant does not annul any of the previous covenant promises of Yahweh. Also see John H. Sailhamer, “The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 241–61.

²⁸ For an excellent article about the future regathering of the nation of Israel back to the promised land, see William D. Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 16:1 (Spring 2005): 95–126.

namely, (1) the oracles in Numbers 22–24 are God's word, not Balaam's word, (2) national Israel as a people are repeatedly referred to within the text, (3) the blessing/cursing of Numbers 22–24 is the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant issue, (4) the unfolding, revelatory light concerning the promised Messiah expands and harmonizes with God's previous promises, and (5) the importance of Amalek as a past and future enemy of Israel is emphasized.

The Oracles in Numbers 22–24 Are Yahweh's Word—Not Balaam's Word

While virtually universally referred to as “Balaam's Oracles,” or “the Oracles of Balaam,” this is not how God viewed these prophecies.²⁹ The wonderful promises and revelation that occur in these chapters are neither Balaam's thoughts nor his opinions, nor do they transpire by means of any learned technique on his part; he was simply a mouthpiece for God to communicate these holy truths. Repeatedly, the text emphasizes that these are the very words of God. For instance, God told Balaam to go with the king's emissaries, “but only the word which I speak to you shall you do” (Num 22:20). After Balaam's terrifying experience with the Angel of the Lord, God warned Balaam, “Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you” (Num 22:35). Numbers 23:5 says, “God put a word in Balaam's mouth and said. . .” concurring with Numbers 23:16: “The Lord met Balaam and put an oracle in his mouth,” again instructing him precisely what he must speak to Balak. In Numbers 24:2 the text states that “the Spirit of God came upon [Balaam].” As Allen writes in his superb article on Balaam, “Nevertheless, when Balaam spoke the Word of God, he spoke just that: *the Word of God*. The corrupted nature of Balaam *left no scratch* on the record of the Word of God.”³⁰ Consequently, any attempts to downplay the importance of what is revealed in these chapters should not be accepted since they are the very words of God Himself. Kaufmann thusly concludes about the efficacy of God's spoken word:

In pagan thought blessings and curses are a variety of incantations; they are regarded as automatically effective, and—since the gods also used and are affected by them—transcendentally potent. YHWH neither uses nor is affected by incantations. He acts by the word; but that this is no more than an expression

²⁹ The person and work of Balaam has sparked much interest and debate as to who or what he was. For instance, for a more positive interpretation of what Balaam brought in regard to “the virtue of a man, his contribution to Israel's well being, and indeed the well being of all nations” see George W. Coats, “Balaam: Sinner or Saint?” *Biblical Research* 18 (1973): 21–29 [quote cited from page 29]. Also see J. R. Baskin, “Origen on Balaam: The Dilemma of the Unworthy Prophet,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37:1 (March 1983): 22–35. For the conclusion that Balaam was not only a believer but a prophet of Yahweh, see Michael L. Barre, “The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22–24,” *Interpretation* 51:3 (July 1997): 254–66. See also, Ulrike Sals, “The Hybrid Story of Balaam (Numbers 22–24): The Theology for the Diaspora in the Torah,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16:4 (2008): 315–35.

³⁰ Ronald B. Allen, “The Theology of the Balaam Oracles,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*. Edited by John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 107; [emphasis in original]. Allen sees Balaam as “neither a false prophet nor a true prophet in the usual sense of those terms . . . Balaam is best understood as a pagan who unwittingly steps into the focus of the drama of the people of Israel and their God, and finds himself totally overwhelmed by what happens to him” (87–88).

of his will is indicated by the fact that he never used fixed words or formulas. . . . His utterances simply say what he wills at a given moment: “Let there be light. . . . Let there be a firmament. . . .”³¹

So the Word of God given by means of Balaam in Numbers 22–24 should be received as any other part of the Word of God elsewhere in Scripture.

National Israel as a People Occurs Repeatedly Within the Text

Contra Sizer, (“There is, however, no indication in the text of Genesis 12 that this promise of blessing and warning and cursing was ever intended to extend beyond Abraham”),³² the designation of the nation of Israel as a people occurs frequently in Numbers 22–24. For instance, in the immediate context there was a “great fear because of the people” [of Israel] (Num 22:3). Numbers 22:5 gives this description by Balak, “a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me,” with his following request for Balaam to “come curse this people” (Num 22:6, 17). Before beginning one of the oracles that God gave him, Balaam saw “a portion of the people” (Num 22:41). Elsewhere, God by means of Balaam describes Israel as “Behold, a people who dwell apart” (Num 23:9), and “a people who rises like a lioness” (Num 23:24).

Of even infinitely more importance was Yahweh’s own statement in Numbers 22:12 as He instructed Balaam concerning the nation of Israel’s present (at that time) status before Him. When Balak’s messengers first approached Balaam, Yahweh warned him, “Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people; for they are blessed.” God considered the blessing that He Himself had given as still operative for the Jewish nation at this time and certainly not restricted only to the original promise He had made with Abraham. The nation of Israel’s current status was that “they are blessed” before Him because of the unfailing love and the covenant promises given by Yahweh.

Finally, beyond the present situation at that time, God by means of Balaam informs Balak and others what will transpire in the future in Numbers 24:14: “And now behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come.” The significance of this verse will be developed in an upcoming section of this article, but suffice it to say that the burden of proof is on those who would want to remove any of the references made to the people of Israel instead of understanding it in its normative way.

³¹ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg; reprint (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 84. This author would not be in full agreement with Kaufmann’s assessment of Balaam: “In the Balaam story (Num. 22–24) the pagan magician and Israelite prophet are combined. Balaam the magician is a potent dispenser of blessings and curses; this is the belief of Balak and his officers, and is accepted by the Bible as part of its belief in the reality of non-divine magical forces. Despite his uncanny power as magician, however, Balaam cannot curse ‘one whom God has not cursed.’ But he is also a prophet, in Israelite style, and as such he speaks only the word of God” (Ibid.). The position of this article is that of Allen’s whereby Balaam is neither a false or a true prophet in the normal sense of the terms (Allen, “The Theology of the Balaam Oracles,” 87–88).

³² Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*, 148.

The Blessing/Cursing of Numbers 22–24 Is the Heart of the Abrahamic Covenant Issue

Balak's request to have Balaam curse Israel is more than just an inappropriate choice of words: they are the very heart of whether or not God's promises to national Israel were still in force. Based on the three victories found in Numbers 21, Numbers 22–24 is one unit that further develops in more detail the same theology with the repeated emphasis throughout this account of either blessing or cursing. Allen offers this introductory thought to the section:

The specific contribution of the Balaam incident in the Old Testament theology appears to be its graphic development of the concept of Yahweh's blessing of Israel. The story is an unexpected event. It appears to be an extended excursus on the theme of blessing, but an excursus acted out in the arena of human history. The setting, the personae, the conflicts, and the very subject matter all contribute to one of the most eloquent expositions of Yahweh's deep and abiding relationship with His people Israel.³³

While the immediate context for Numbers 22–24 was the three victorious battles that God granted in Numbers 21, the earlier context since the exodus has not spoken well of Israel as a whole and includes such things as the evil reporting by the spies and God's subsequent judging of that generation (Num 13–14), Korah's rebellion (Num 16), and Moses sinning by striking the rock the second time (Num 20). Thus, "the theological drama" of the moment should not be overlooked that in spite of Israel's sins, Yahweh still would honor His word:

Hence, when the reader comes to Numbers 22:1 and reads that Israel has finally reached the shores of the Jordan River and is encamped across from the land of promise, the questions might well arise, is this indeed the people of promise? Does this nation really have a unique relationship with the God of the universe? Is Israel really the chosen people?

The answers to those questions come in a most unexpected manner. The reader is taken to the enemy camp and is given an inside view of the machinations of Israel's foes in their attempts to destroy the nation. The threat of Israel is felt to be so great to Moab that that nation turns to a superstitious and supernatural means to attempt to ward off the enemy. The resort to which Moab turns is the curse. And then God breaks in. Yahweh, the God of Israel, confronts an internationally-known pagan diviner in his homeland, far removed from the people of Israel. Yahweh, the God who spoke to Moses, now speaks to a heathen mantic prophet. Yahweh, the God of patriarchs, breaks into the dealings of a power play on the part of unbelievers in the realm of the occult. And God says, "You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed" (Num. 22:12).³⁴

³³ Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," 84.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 84–85.

Even more to the point, Genesis 12:3 becomes the basis for the Balak-Balaam encounter: “It is a test case for the Abrahamic Covenant in its most elemental and fundamental level. Balaam was called by Balak to put Yahweh to the test, though neither Balaam nor Balak knew the nature of the roles in which they found themselves.”³⁵ Again the core issue:

The institution of Israel’s blessing is to be found in Yahweh’s choice of the primal patriarch, Abraham, as described in Genesis 12. It seems nearly impossible to overestimate the seminal significance of the Abrahamic Covenant in Old Testament theology. At the very beginning God’s intent for this new people was quite clear. To Abraham He said, “I will bless you” (Gen. 12:2). The Balaam story may be regarded as a frontal attack by Satan on the foundational blessing of God’s people—a frontal attack that was countered and defeated by the intervention of Yahweh Himself.³⁶

Numbers 22:1–3 explains the fear that is based on the victories Yahweh had recently given Israel in Numbers 21: “Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho. Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel.” Balak’s invitation to Balaam came with a specific purpose: “Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Num 22:6). This statement cannot be true, for Genesis 12:3 has already indicated that blessing and cursing are exclusively reserved for Yahweh, especially at it relates to national Israel. Hamilton adds:

Readers of the Torah know that Yahweh had promised Abraham that he would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him, and so Balaam’s prospects are not bright. Try as he might, he simply cannot curse Israel. So, in the darkened wisdom of those who do not know God, Balaam keeps trying. His first oracle seems to reflect the awareness of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Balaam acknowledges the difficulty in cursing whom God has not cursed, denouncing those whom God has not cursed (Num. 23:8).³⁷

God appeared to Balaam warning him, “Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people; for they are blessed” (Num 22:12). Notice should be made that Yahweh considered the Jewish people then currently blessed, with the basis of this blessing originating from the Abrahamic Covenant, not the people’s repeated failure

³⁵ Ibid., 112, n. 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 85.

³⁷ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 118.

at keeping the Mosaic Covenant.³⁸ So Balak's second plea for Balaam to curse the people (Num 22:17) is met by Balaam's response: "I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD my God" which, as subsequent events will show, is not a true indication of Balaam's spiritual status. Nonetheless, Balaam was completely accurate in his statement about not being able to speak contrary to God's word nor His will.

The second attempt to have Balaam curse Israel follows the episode of Balaam, his donkey, and the terrifying presence of the Angel of the LORD with drawn sword in hand (Num 22:22–34), who sent Balaam to Balak but who strongly warned him to speak only what God revealed to him (Num 22:35–41). Thus, Balaam pronounced a discourse directly from the LORD (Num 23:5). When Balak requested "Come curse Jacob for me" (Num 23:7), Balaam had no response other than "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I renounce whom the LORD has not renounced?" Worded differently: "The history of the Jewish people is replete with examples of attempts to curse and destroy them. But the Balaam incident seems to be the test case for the objective reality of the blessing of Israel."³⁹ Consequently, Numbers 22–24 should not be considered as some minor offense against Yahweh, but rather as "a direct, studied, and frontal attack on the blessing of God's people. But those who wished to curse Israel found themselves cursed. Israel's blessing is unique (Num 23:7–10); it is based on her unique relationship to Yahweh (Num 23:18–24); and it has an ultimate fulfillment in her Deliverer from all of her enemies (24:15–19). The enemies of Israel, present and future, are under the very curse that they wished had been placed on her (Num 24:20–24)."⁴⁰ This point, too, is well taken: "This passage in itself, and in the larger context, never allows Israel to take center stage. The genuine theological truth presented in the testimony to the uniqueness of Israel is the fact that Israel was related to the incomparable Yahweh. It is only because Yahweh is beyond compare that His people become distinct,"⁴¹ and this alone is by God's sovereign election of national Israel (Rom 9–10).

Another attempt at cursing Israel was just as futile as the others (Num 23:11–30). Again, "the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth" (Num 23:16). It is within the discourse that follows that the famous verse Numbers 23:19 occurs: "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" This separates liberal theology from true biblical theology (Dan 2:10–11, 27–28). Also, from Genesis 1:1 through Numbers 23:19, other than items yet to be fulfilled (e.g. Lev 26:40–45), can anyone legitimately challenge and prove that God has not done what He has promised and that He has not made good every bit of His Word? Not only has

³⁸ See David Andrew Dean, "Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant," *JETS* 57:2 (June 2014), 281–308, who concludes: "The Abrahamic Covenant is founded upon the promise of God himself and does not depend upon the performance of its vassal party, Israel. Its fulfillment is as certain as the faithfulness of God himself, who does not lie. His faithfulness to his word is 'an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil' (Heb 6:19 NKJV)" (*Ibid.*, 308).

³⁹ Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

Yahweh repeatedly done what He said He would do, but He Himself is the One who said “do not curse these people for they are blessed” (Num 22:12), based on His own previous blessing of them.

The Unfolding Revelatory Light Concerning the Promised Messiah Expands and Harmonizes with God’s Previous Promises

Obviously, time and space limitations do not permit a fuller treatment of all pertinent texts up through Numbers 24 regarding God’s promises. However, three texts in particular relate to God’s promises in Numbers 24, namely, Genesis 22, 27, and 49. Initially is the additional revelation from God regarding the promised seed in Genesis 22:16–18, after the Angel of the Lord abruptly stopped Abraham from sacrificing his own son:

“By Myself I have sworn,” declares the LORD, “because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

“And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

Later, Yahweh appeared to Abraham’s son Isaac and further promised in Genesis 26:24: “And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.’” Isaac later reaffirmed to his son Jacob what God previously had promised: “Now may God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine; May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; Be master of your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you” (Gen 27:28–29).

Many understand this promise in Genesis 22 and 27 to be an expansion of the promised seed.⁴² Hamilton writes regarding the promises to Abraham’s seed and their development in Scripture:

⁴² The term “seed” can denote both a singular or plural idea since the noun does not have a distinctive singular or plural form. The singular form can also function as a plural, as a collective noun. T. Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 363. For a more developed argument see James M. Hamilton, Jr. “The Seed of Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 59 (2007): 253–73. For a more detailed account of Paul’s use of the seed in reference to Jesus and Israel, see also Michael Riccardi, “The Seed of Abraham: A Theological Analysis of Galatians 3 and Its Implications for Israel,” *MSJ* 25/1 (Spring 2014), 51–64.

We must also note that the promises made to Abraham are passed on to his seed, and as the narrative unfolds these promises are clarified. What has been promised comes into sharper focus as the original blessings are restated with new promises layered onto the old ones.⁴³

That Genesis 27 and Numbers 24 promise much the same but are more fully developed, Sailhamer writes:

Commentaries generally agree that the purpose of citing Genesis 27 in Numbers 24 is to identify the king in Numbers 24:7 as the promised seed of the Abrahamic blessing. However, since the “king” in Numbers 24:7 is commonly but wrongly identified with Israel, the “seed” in the Genesis promise narrative is also sometimes understood to be collective Israel. I . . . argue . . . that the king of Numbers 24 is not a collective, but is an individual king who is, in fact, contrasted with Israel. Numbers 24 is thus to play a major role in the identification of the “seed” of Abraham as an individual king.⁴⁴

Regarding the future Messiah there is a sense of the collective plus the individual seed:

To be sure, at numerous points with the promise narratives, the identity of the “seed” of Abraham is clearly understood collectively. But, as true as that observation is, it is not the whole story. By connecting the poetic texts to the promise narratives, the author of the Pentateuch moves decisively away from a collective reading of the promise narratives and toward an individual understanding of Abraham’s “seed” (Gen. 12:3–7). It is hard to avoid the implication that in the quotation of Genesis 27:29 in Numbers 24:9b, the author identifies the individual “king” in the Balaam oracle (Num. 24:7–9) with the “seed” of Abraham in the Genesis promise narratives. The king whom Balaam foresaw is the individual “seed” of Abraham through whom the nations will be blessed.⁴⁵

However, regarding the future Messiah:

Regardless of the sense of the details in these texts, everyone seems to agree that the citation of Genesis 27 in Numbers 24 establishes an intentional connection between all the major poems and the promise narratives in the Pentateuch. That connection lies at the highest thematic level within the Pentateuch—that

⁴³ Ibid., 262–63. Sailhamer connects that the individual “seed” promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 22 is identified as “the scepter from the tribe of Judah” in Genesis 49 and the victorious king in the oracles from God through Balaam in Numbers 24, and develops and traces the “seed promises” in Genesis with the “king poems” of Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 33, all with a view toward “the seed of Abraham” as an individual king and “part of the picture of the biblical Jesus.” John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 472–80.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 476.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 478.

is, the composition as a whole. At that level this link identifies Abraham's "seed" in the promise narratives with the king in Numbers 24. In addition, since the king in Numbers 24 is also identified here with the king in Genesis 49 that king (Num 24) cannot be a collective figure for Israel. According to Genesis 49, he can only be the promised king from the tribe of Judah.⁴⁶

By the time of the events of Numbers, God had already revealed much regarding both Abraham's promised seed (plural) and the promised seed (singular). He has also given much more definitive information regarding His promised Messiah. For instance, Genesis 49 adds additional information not only regarding Israel, but also regarding specific prophecies related to the future promised Messiah found in God's oracles by means of Balaam:

The second and third oracles are concluded with words reminiscent of Jacob's blessing on Judah (23:24; 24:9; cf. Gen. 49:9). Balak dismisses Balaam in frustration, but this elicits yet another blessing on Israel, ancestral voices prophesying war, speaking of a scepter and a star that will arise out of Jacob to crush the head of the seed of the serpent (Num. 24:17).⁴⁷

Sailhamer argues that the Pentateuch has a unified, single structure of composition based on, to a large degree, the homogeneous poetic theme that links Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 32 is the messianic theme in each of these poems. "They are the primary means for developing what the narratives are about."⁴⁸ Sailhamer adds further as to the future relevancy of such promises from God:

As we have suggested above, the central theme of each of the major poems is the promise of a coming "king." As an introduction to each of these poems we find the phrase "in the last days." This is terminology that is paralleled closely in the messianic eschatology of the prophets. It can hardly be accidental that

⁴⁶ Ibid. Essex adds, "Ultimately, according to Gen 49:8, [the one from whom the royal lineage aspect of the promised seed of Abraham] will be Judah, particularly the final ruler from Judah (Gen. 49:10), 'whose hand will be on the neck of your enemies.' . . . He will be the one whom the peoples will obey and who will lavish blessing to all (49:10–11). Truly, 'all the nations of the earth will gain blessing for themselves' (22:18) (22:18) through the obedience to 'the lion from the tribe of Judah' (Rev 5:5). Therefore, it seems best to understand the 'seed' in Gen 22:17b and 18 in the singular; the final fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant comes through Abraham's 'seed,' the king of the sons of Israel from the line of Judah. All of this is certain because Abraham obeyed God's voice (22:18)" (Essex, "The Abrahamic Covenant," 205–06). Merrill agrees, writing, "The patriarchal seed, Israel herself, was that remnant, a nation that would exist as a microcosm of the kingdom of God and the vehicle through which the messianic king would come to reign over all creation (Gen. 49:10)," Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," 30.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 118.

⁴⁸ John H. Sailhamer, "The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001): 19. Sailhamer adds, "Nevertheless, as in the prophetic books, there is also a message of hope to be found in the Pentateuch. Like the prophets, it is a message centered on a coming king. It is that king that is the center of the focus of the poems in the Pentateuch. Each major (and minor) poem in the Pentateuch centers on his coming. He is the king that will arise from the house of Judah. He will rule over the nations, and he will restore God's good land to all humanity. The Pentateuch leaves little doubt when this king will come. He will come בְּאַחֲרֵי יְמֵי ("in the last days")" (ibid., 20).

each of these poems stress the coming of the king is set in the context of “the last days.”⁴⁹

Within these oracles that God gave came a developing clarity about the identity of the One to come. Numbers 23:21b states: “The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them.” Allen notes the significance of this extremely important prophecy: “Amazingly, Balaam was the first to be given the revelation that Yahweh was the King of His people Israel.”⁵⁰ Further: “The ascription of the term *king* to Yahweh is a first in the theology of the Pentateuch (cf. Deut. 33:5). This is remarkable. One of the grandest titles of God, and one that becomes the designation of the Lord Jesus Christ, was first used by Balaam, the pagan mantic, who was used as Yahweh’s tool.”⁵¹

With a glimpse into the future, God also explained how He currently viewed national Israel in spite of their multiple high-handed sins: “For there is no omen against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel; at the proper time it shall be said to Jacob and to Israel, what God has done” (Num 23:23). Ever the slow learner, King Balak hoped that perhaps another change in location would render a different result (Num 23:25–30). This sets the stage for the magnificent divine revelation of Numbers 24 with the emphasis again being that this is ultimately God’s Word—not Balaam’s—as “the Spirit of God came upon him” (Num 24:2). Hamilton writes regarding the theological development up to this point:

The placement of the allusion to the ruler from the line of Judah (Num. 24:9a) next to the allusion to the blessing of Abraham (24:9b) interweaves these lines of promise. If it was not clear before Numbers 24:9 that these promises belong together, this verse sounds the note that unites the themes. This union means that the blessing of Abraham will come through the king who will arise from the line of Judah, reminding readers of the Pentateuch of the promise to Abraham that he would sire kings (Gen. 17:6; see the references to Israel’s king in Num. 23:21; 24:7). Balaam’s oracles, then, clarify the blessing of Abraham by linking it to the king from Judah.⁵²

Among other things, God through Balaam promised: “He shall devour the nations [*goyim*] who are his adversaries, and shall crush their bones in pieces, and shatter them with his arrows. He crouches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him? (Num 24:8–9a). Immediately after a pronouncement of what the Messiah will eventually do to His adversaries follows the reiteration of God’s earlier promise in Genesis 12:3 now restated in Numbers 24:8–9: “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.” In Numbers 24 the focus turns to God’s promise to deliver Israel in the future, especially by means of His own “deliverer” (Num 24:8c–e).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20–21.

⁵⁰ Allen, “The Theology of the Balaam Oracles,” 103.

⁵¹ Ibid., 118, n. 66 [italics his].

⁵² Hamilton, “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” 264.

Within this same passage another marvelous messianic preview is given in Numbers 24:17–19:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth. And Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also shall be a possession, while Israel performs valiantly. One from Jacob shall have dominion, and shall destroy the remnant from the city.”

The tremendous significance of these verses should not be understated as it relates to the future work of the One of whom the prophecy speaks. Again, the future aspect is not only that the Messiah will fight, but also of the enemies whom He and His descendants will fight in the future: “[Numbers 24:17] is a passage that has fulfillment in the wars of conquest (holy war) of David and of successive Davidites; ultimate fulfillment is in the person of Messiah who will win final victory over the enemies of Israel, represented in this passage by Moab and Edom.”⁵³ Cole likewise marks the importance of these verses:

Now in the fourth oracle the contents project the reader/hearer immediately into the future; the knowledge Balaam has received from Yahweh applies not to the now, for the time is not yet at hand for this glorious kingdom . . . The glory of this King is portrayed using two metaphors, the “star” (*kōkāb*) and the “scepter” (*šēbet*). Isaiah used the star imagery in the context of royalty in describing the coming fall of the king of Babylon (Isa 14:12–13), and in the New Testament Jesus Christ is referred to as the royal “Root and Offspring of David, the Bright Morning Star” (Rev 22:16). His birth as the incarnate King was declared by the heavens in the appearance of a star over Bethlehem (Matt 2:1–10).⁵⁴

Hamilton offers this summary of the Messianic promises highlighted in Numbers 24:

In the context of Numbers 24, Moab is the nation over which Balak is king (22:4), and it is his desire to have Israel cursed (22:6). Understanding Israel’s enemy, Moab, as the seed of the serpent, the statement that the ruler of Israel will crush the forehead of Moab can be understood as a poetic reformulation of the statement that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the serpent.

The Balaam oracles in Numbers 24, then, knit together these significant strands of promise. The blessing of Abraham is firmly linked to the king from Judah as the language of Genesis 49:9 is set next to the language of 27:29 and 12:3 in Numbers 24:9. The sceptre of the ruler from Judah mentioned in Genesis

⁵³ Allen, “The Theology of the Balaam Oracles,” 118 n. 68.

⁵⁴ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 426.

49:10 is then set next to what appears to be an allusion to Genesis 3:15 in Numbers 24:17. Thus, it seems valid to conclude that these texts indicate that the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham would be realised through a triumphant king of Israel, descended from Judah, who would defeat Israel's enemies. These enemies of Israel are regarded as the seed of the serpent, so that their defeat is simultaneously Israel's victory. Israel's victory is God's victory.⁵⁵

With the promises made by God from Genesis through Numbers 24, a composite sketch of the promised Messiah emerges. The future King will have the service of an obedient Israel (Gen 27:29; 49:8) whom He has brought back into the land, in accordance with His covenant faithfulness (Lev 26:40–45). This King will ultimately rule over the nations as well (Gen 49:10; Num 24:17–19), will possess the gates of his enemies (Gen 22:17), will have His hand on the neck of His enemies (Gen. 49:8), and will exercise dominion over them (Num 24:19). Genesis 49 depicts the promised king as fierce, crouching and lying down like a lion, and no one will dare to rouse him (Gen 49:9; Num 24:9), and—most significantly—it is through this promised individual king that both the blessing and the cursing will come in its fullness (Gen 12:3; 27:29; Num 24:9).

It is difficult to argue that God considered His promise to curse those who curse Israel as having been completed during Abraham's lifetime,⁵⁶ since the core component issue to bless/curse national Israel repeatedly occurs in Numbers 22–24 and is part of the rationale for God's instruction to Balaam and the revelation about the nation, the coming Messiah, and the future reign of the king. Not only is the promise to bless/curse of Genesis 12:3 still present and operative, but also God more greatly expands His previous revelation to include the Messiah as both a beneficiary of the promise as well as the ultimate means by which it will be fulfilled. Sizer and others would have to explain the following: (1) would they take all, any, or some of the promises that God gave in Numbers 22–24 as literal promises, (2) on what basis should they be considered as either literal or allegorical, and most importantly, (3) if the promises that God made and expanded in these chapters are not literal truths regarding the nation of Israel and the Messiah, exactly what did God mean by reaffirming and expanding these passages using either very similar or identical language in what He had previously promised?

The Importance of Amalek as a Past and Future Enemy

Also included in this section where the ultimate victory and reign of the One who will have the scepter of Israel is God's remembrance by means of Balaam of what He had previously promised: "And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, 'Amalek was the first of the nations but his end shall be destruction' (Num 24:20). That the Amalekites were "the first of the nations" is interpreted in various ways, some of them having merit of varying degrees. For instance, one

⁵⁵ Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 265–66.

⁵⁶ Contra Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*, 148.

way to see this is that the Amalekites “considered themselves among the preeminent of the nations,”⁵⁷ or in a much more generalized way, they were first among the nations “in the sense that their ancestry could be traced back to Esau, making them an ancient people (cf. Gen. 36:16).”⁵⁸ Wenham offers an expanded explanation regarding the Amalekites’ ancient status:

The first of these short sayings about other nations is cast in proverbial form and concerns the tribe of Amalek. They lived in the Sinai peninsula and were implacable foes of Israel (cf. Exod. 17:8–16; Num. 14:43–45; Judg. 6:3, 33, etc.). They considered themselves *the first of the nations*, either because of their antiquity (they are termed Meluhha in third-millennium inscriptions) or because of their quality (cf. 1 Sam. 15:21; Amos 6:1). But in sharp contrast ‘his end’ (literally ‘his last’) will be ‘utter destruction’ (NEB).⁵⁹

But beyond these explanations, that Amalek was first among the nations holds a very important distinction regarding matters in their future: “as the first heathen nation which opened the conflict of the heathen nations against Israel as the people of God.”⁶⁰ Kaiser likewise notes the importance of this one who had cursed Israel by his actions, writing, “Thus Amalek became the “first among the nations” (Num 24:20)—in this case, to attack Israel. They are placed in juxtaposition with another group of Gentiles in the next chapter (Jethro’s Midianites) who believed in Israel’s God. These two chapters illustrate two kingdoms and two responses to the grace of God from the Gentile world.”⁶¹

The fact that the Amalekites were the earliest of the nations to be hostile to national Israel after the exodus implies that there have been many more such hostilities from other nations throughout history and that there will be many more in the future. Furthermore, as was shown, several eschatological prophecies occur in the immediate context of Numbers 24 regarding the king (24:7) who shall devour the nations (24:8), and is in harmony with “the end of the days” prophecies in Genesis 49:1 and the Lion who is from the tribe of Judah and His Scepter (Gen 49:8–12; Num 24:9). It is in this context of the Messiah’s future presence in national Israel that Yahweh reiterates His promise: “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you” (Num 24:9b). Even more to the point, the section that contains the reference to Amalek, begins with the opening phrase, “come, and I will show you what this people will do to you people in the days to come” [“end of the days”] (Num 24:14).

⁵⁷ Cole, *Numbers*, 429–30.

⁵⁸ Eugene H. Merrill, “Numbers,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill: Victor, 1983), 245.

⁵⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 4:203 [italics his].

⁶⁰ Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3:195.

⁶¹ Kaiser, *Exodus*, 408. Elsewhere Kaiser describes the Amalekites as “the earliest nation to represent the kingdom of men (Exod. 17:8; Deut. 25:17–19), which stood violently against the kingdom of God” (Kaiser, “The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of Gentiles,” 103).

To summarize this enormously important section, the Bible contains many references proving that God literally and repeatedly fulfilled His promise to curse the ones who cursed national Israel up through Numbers 24. In fact, not one of the enemies that Israel encountered was exempt from the promised cursing; every enemy that attacked Israel received immediate judgment, and sometimes (as with Amalek) God also promised future punishment. Everything Sizer stated about the promise of God in Genesis is incorrect, and his inaccuracies are repeatedly repudiated by Scripture. Instead of “There is, however, no indication in the text of Genesis 12 that this promise of blessing and warning and cursing was ever intended to extend beyond Abraham,”⁶² the people of Israel are often referred to in Numbers 22–24 in both the immediate context, including God describing them as “They are blessed” (Num 22:12), as well as in subsequent promises about their future. Nor is Sizer’s statement correct: the “idea that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a special status by virtue of the covenants made with the Patriarchs is in conflict with the clear and unambiguous statements of the New Testament.”⁶³ These covenants are certainly not in conflict with additional revelation made by God Himself up through Numbers 24. Finally, it would likewise be wrong to label these prophecies as “exported dispensational Christian Zionism . . . in the nineteenth century,”⁶⁴ because God alone is the author of the prophecies made about the Messiah and the people from which He would emerge.

In fact, not only is the promise to bless those who bless and curse those who curse national Israel still operative up through Numbers 24, but also this promise is added to and expanded by God so that it begins to show more frequent and profound glimpses of this coming King who will emerge from that nation. Well beyond the Genesis 12:3 original promise, Numbers 24:9 becomes God’s reiterated and expanded promise to include the future Messiah not only as a participant in this promise as a Jew, but also to fulfill this promise to the fullest degree when Messiah will reign (Num 24:8). Incredibly, some of the most precise messianic prophecies come in this section, as well as another promise of the future destruction of Amalek (Num 24:20). Replacement theologians such as Sizer would have to explain not only what God meant by these additional promises given through Numbers 24, but also why anyone should ever believe God’s first revelation given in Genesis 12 because centuries later the same God will make the same (and expanded) promises to Abraham’s descendants. If God did not intend to keep His subsequent promises in Numbers 22–24, why should anyone believe them when He first gave them in Genesis 12:3? These promises harmonize perfectly with what He has previously promised, including matters related to “the end of the days” (Gen 49:1; Num 24:9), yet we are told that these verses have no reference to national Israel in eschatological matters.

Hamilton best summarizes the position of this article:

Yahweh even turns an attempt of a pagan prophet to curse his people into an opportunity to remind them of his promises. Not only does Yahweh reiterate his

⁶² Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*, 148.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁴ *Contra* Sizer, *Ibid.*, 25.

promises; he weaves several lines of promise together. Numbers 24:17 refers to a “scepter” and “star” that will arise out of Jacob and “crush the forehead” of Moab. The head crushing alludes to Genesis 3:15, and the “scepter” is reminiscent of the “scepter” that will not depart from Judah (Gen. 49:10). The many references throughout Numbers 22–24 to the impossibility of reversing Yahweh’s blessing on Israel reminds of the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Thus, the Balaam oracles connect the seed of the woman to the blessing of Abraham and the promise of a king from Judah who will judge the enemies of Israel.⁶⁵

Numbers 24 concludes with the “I will bless/I will curse” promise fully in place, as Numbers 24:9 clearly shows: “He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.”

God’s Further Instruction in the Pentateuch Regarding Amalek

Written to the children of the mostly wicked wilderness generation, Deuteronomy reveals additional details that are not disclosed elsewhere as Yahweh repeatedly reviewed His covenant faithfulness to Israel. For instance, in reviewing the three victories over the Gentiles recorded in Numbers 21, Yahweh disclosed this new revelation concerning what He had performed for national Israel: “This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who, when they hear the report of you, shall tremble and be in anguish because of you” (Deut 2:25). In a sovereignty of God passage that would be completely behind the scenes unless God also revealed it came this truth: “But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today” (Deut 2:30). It is noteworthy that Moses reviewed the military victories of Numbers 21 in Deuteronomy 3, which was the historical setting for Balak imploring Balaam to curse Israel (Num 22–24), but completely omits this part and goes to the sin at Baal-peor (Num 25:1–3; Deut 4:1–4). Along with other reasons, it may very well be that at least Balak the king had enough fear of God that he himself would not curse the people, for instead he departed and “went his way” (Num 22:25). Technically speaking, Balak did not specifically curse Israel and fight against them and thus receive the explicitly promised cursing from Yahweh.

As was previously shown, God declared holy war on Amalek in Exodus 17 “from generation to generation,” and the foretelling of his future demise also occurs in Numbers 24:20: “And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, ‘Amalek was the first of the nations, but his end shall be destruction.’” Elsewhere, Deuteronomy clearly shows that Yahweh had not forgotten Amalek’s sin (Exod 17), or His own divine word by means of Balaam regarding their future destruction as the first of the nations (*goyim*) to fight against the nation of Israel after the exodus. Consequently, it should not be surprising that Yahweh fully intended to carry out His

⁶⁵ Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 119.

decree as He gave this explanation, command, and warning in Deuteronomy 25:17–19:

“Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.”

“Therefore it shall come about when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget.”⁶⁶

Three points are of special importance. First, the core problem with Amalek was that “he did not fear God” (Deut 25:18); his subsequent actions against Israel proved this. Because of Amalek’s cowardly actions, the LORD placed the Amalekites under His judgment (Exod 17:14), promising to bring them to utter ruin (Num 24:20).⁶⁷ If Scripture revealed nothing else about this, one would/should expect that these truths that Yahweh revealed here are the literal promises which He expected in the literal judgment on the Amalekites once the nation of Israel had entered their land promised to them by Yahweh, and yet these promises are also tied in eschatologically with Messiah’s reign at “the end of the days” (Num 24:14). Second, Yahweh revealed the means by which He would accomplish His judgment on the Amalekites, namely, by using the Jewish people: “you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Deut 25:19). Third, God concludes this section by admonishing the Jewish people of the seriousness of what He had just instructed them to do regarding Amalek as He ended His instruction to Israel saying, “you must not forget,” which became a command rather than a statement: “Do not forget!” or “Remember this!”⁶⁸ employing an emphatic enforcement of the word “remember.”⁶⁹ This strong command “Do not forget!” is the last of nine such commands in Deuteronomy and was to be taken most seriously by the Jewish people.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Kalland sees more of a generalized cursing of God on the Amalekites “on the same basis as the destruction of the pre-Noahic people (Gen 6:5–7) and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20–21; 19:24–25). Their incorrigible wickedness was such that annihilation was necessary. Besides this the Amalekites, by their attacks on God’s people—and that against the weak and worn-out ones—indicated that ‘they had no fear of God’ (v. 18)” Earl S. Kalland, *Deuteronomy*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 3:154. Thompson notes the holy war aspect of what Yahweh had called for: “In terms of the conduct of the Holy War these foes were to be exterminated along with those from whom Israel wrested the promised land (Deut. 20:10–15, 16 18).” J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 5:276–77.

⁶⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 4:330–31.

⁶⁸ Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Deuteronomy*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 418.

⁶⁹ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., trans by James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 3:425.

⁷⁰ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 307.

God's Judgment on Amalek in First Samuel 15

In spite of God's specific instruction to the Jewish people in Deuteronomy 25, the people did forget about Amalek and did not carry out God's commands against the descendants of Amalek. First Samuel is one of the books which clearly reveals that God indeed carries out His Word (Num 23:19), that Yahweh had not forgotten His previous declarations, and that He was about to act. First Samuel 15:1–3 is the account of God remembering His previous prophecies regarding Amalek:

Then Samuel said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

If one did not know that this command was centuries removed from the previous ones, it would seem as if it were given only a short time after God's previous commands in Deuteronomy 25:19: "Therefore it shall come about when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget." Obviously, nothing can be shown at this time in history that Genesis 12:3/Numbers 24:9 had either ended or had been fulfilled. God based His command entirely on His promise in Genesis 12:3/Numbers 24:9 to curse those who curse Israel and the holy war promise God had made regarding Amalek (Exod 17:14–16).⁷¹ Davis' comments on God's commandment to Saul are cogent:

Samuel strikes the keynote of the chapter in verse 1: "Listen," he orders Saul, "to the voice of Yahweh's words." The verbal root *šāma* ' (listen, hear; obey) occurs eight times (vv. 1, 4, [not discernable in English translation], 14, 19, 20, 22 [twice], 24). That is a covenant king's first priority: he must submit to Yahweh's will. That is the matter that matters in this chapter.⁷²

Baldwin adds:

When Samuel appeared suddenly to Saul, it was to point out to him that he was king, not primarily by popular acclaim, but by the Lord's appointment. His duty,

⁷¹ For a critical assessment of the historical narrative, see Diana Edelman, "Saul's Battle Against Amalek (1 Sam 15)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (June 1986): 71–84. Edelman writes, "1 Sam 15 gives a seemingly genuine account of a battle between Saul and the Amalekites" (80), but also concludes, "Individual events apparently could be reshaped to conform to larger views of history, without qualms or repercussions" (Ibid.).

⁷² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking at the Heart* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000), 153.

therefore, was to carry out the commands of the Lord, and in particular the command, *go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have*. The verb . . . 'utterly destroy', is used seven times in this account, as though laying stress by repetition on this special act of consecration to the Lord of hosts, who directed and gave victory to Israel's armies.⁷³

Indeed, such commands for utter destruction were seen in Yahweh's declaration of Holy War centuries earlier against Amalek and future generations:

The command required Saul to "attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them" (v. 3). The destruction was to include "men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." This kind of warfare, called *herem*, was practiced only against peoples who had come under the Lord's severest judgment (e.g., Jericho). It required the destruction of all people and possessions captured in battle. The task was a solemn and holy one since those Israelites who carried it out functioned as the Lord's agents of judgment. The soldiers were not to profit from their assignment through the acquisition of slaves or booty; like Aaronic priests who offered up burnt offerings (*ōlāh*) to the Lord, they were to receive no compensation for their efforts other than the satisfaction of having fulfilled a divinely mandated mission.⁷⁴

Saul, however, carried out only partial obedience to Yahweh's command in 1 Samuel 15:8–9: "And he captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed." Davis comments regarding Saul's lack of obedience in executing Yahweh's command of holy war:

Some readers, however, are bothered not with Saul's partial obedience but with Yahweh's severe command. The total "curse of destruction" sounds horrid. How can these be the words of the God whose compassion is over all that he has made (Ps. 145:9)? How can we claim this passage as the word of this God? To begin a response . . . First it *is* horrid. Second, our claim is only that Scripture

⁷³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 8:121 [italics in original].

⁷⁴ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 7:168. Roger L. Omanson and John Ellington, *A Handbook on the First Book of Samuel*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2001), 311, conclude: "This holy-war practice, which was followed also by Israel's neighbors, consisted of devoting everyone and everything to the god or gods that the people worshiped. This devotion to the deity required the total destruction of everything captured in war (see Josh 6:17). All of the nouns that follow are singular in Hebrew, referring to particular classes or groups. The sense is plural, since these nouns are collective, that is, 'men,' 'women,' 'children,' and so on."

is true, not that it is sanitized. Third, Yahweh's vengeance should not be repudiated but praised if it is virtuous vengeance, that is, if it is just vengeance.⁷⁵

Partial obedience to God's command seemed to Saul as only a minor offense, and additionally Saul ultimately blamed the people for what had happened as he repeatedly protested to Samuel that he was obedient to Yahweh's command (1 Sam 15:13–21). Saul's disobedience impugns both God and His character because God had promised that His eradicating judgment would come to Amalek, and King Saul failed to completely fulfill the requirements of God's command.

Because Saul had rejected God's Word, God had rejected Saul from being king over Israel (1 Sam 15:22–28). Bergen adds, "God's immutable action was taken as punishment for Saul's failure to fulfill Torah commands. It serves as an object lesson of how seriously God reacts to willful disobedience."⁷⁶ In spite of Saul's eventual and very late repentance and his attempt to cling to Samuel's robe, the following certainties were revealed: "But Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.' And as Samuel turned to go, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. So Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you'" (1 Sam 15: 26–28).⁷⁷

As was previously shown, part of God's prophecies by means of Balaam was the destruction of Amalek and his descendants, since they were the first of the nations (*goyim*) to fight against the redeemed people of Israel after the exodus (Num 24:20). It was also in this section that the divine revelation of Numbers 23:19 was given: "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" This previous pronouncement of the utter and absolute faithfulness of God to His Word becomes the basis for Samuel's strong rebuke and renunciation of Saul and connects with the divine prophecies in Numbers 22–24: "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (1 Sam 15:29). "To emphasize the finality of the judgment against Saul, Samuel created a new title for Yahweh, *nēšah*, "the Everlasting One" ("the Glory") and attached

⁷⁵ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 154–55 [emphasis in original]. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 2:395–97, argues that holy war may be summarized by twelve propositions, among which are (1) no standing army was allowed; (4) holy war could be fought only for the conquest or defense of the promised land, and (5) only at Yahweh's call could holy war be launched.

⁷⁶ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 7:167. John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb, *Israel: From Conquest to Exile* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1989), 221 add, "Like Samson, he [Saul] was a man of talent and ability, but these were an asset to his leadership only as they were committed to God and brought into conformity with His will. The experiences of Saul are an unmistakable lesson to believers of all ages. The possession of physical attractiveness, talent, and popularity does not guarantee divine blessing or success in one's pursuits."

⁷⁷ Hamilton argues that Saul's protestation that he wants to "worship" in 1 Sam 15:30 has more to do with his desire expressed "to honor me now before the elders of my people," than it has to do with genuine repentance and a desire to worship Yahweh, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 168, n. 60.

it to an indirect quotation from the Torah (cf. Num 23:19): “the Everlasting one does not lie or change his mind” (v. 29). Thus, the words of judgment spoken against Saul by an eternal God would stand unchanged forever.⁷⁸

Ultimately, the prophet Samuel—not the previously anointed King Saul—accomplished Yahweh’s stated will before the very presence of Yahweh:

Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal (1 Sam 15:32–33).

At the very least, Yahweh’s promise to curse the ones who curse Israel is still clearly operative up to 1 Samuel 15. Nothing in the text makes sense otherwise; all of the subsequent actions are based entirely on God’s stated word and promises. In addition to this, key considerations up to this point in Scripture should be marked: (1) Yahweh clearly meant what He had said in Exodus 17, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 25 concerning the destruction and annihilation of Amalek due to the holy war that Yahweh had pronounced against him and his descendants; (2) a literal-grammatical hermeneutic is evident in both the prophecy and its fulfillment; (3) centuries removed from pronouncement to ultimate fulfillment in no way nullifies the clearly stated decrees and promises of God; (4) because Amalek was the first of the nations to wage war against Israel after the exodus (Exod 17), that his end shall be destruction was based entirely on the “I will curse the ones who curse you” promises of God in Genesis 12:3 and Numbers 24:9; (5) therefore, similar fates should be expected for other Gentile nations who would wage the same kind of war against Israel not only in the biblical account but also throughout history, unless God has indeed abrogated his promise to national Israel; and finally, (6) “the replacement” of replacement theology definitely has not occurred by 1 Samuel 15.

The David Versus Goliath Account in View of God’s Previous Promises

With this background thusly presented, the account of David versus Goliath may now be read through the biblical grid that God established. As was shown previously, Yahweh rejected Saul from being king of Israel (1 Sam 15). God then instructed Samuel to go to Jesse of Bethlehem and anoint the new king of Israel (1 Sam 16:1–11), with God’s emphasis not on the outer appearance but on man’s heart (1 Sam. 16:7). God by His sovereign election chose the shepherd youth David as the next king of Israel. After Samuel anointed the future king, “the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13), but the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit was sent to terrorize him (1 Sam

⁷⁸ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 7:174. Ronald F. Youngblood, *1, 2 Samuel*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 3:678, adds, “Samuel gives to the unchangeable God a unique name by calling him the ‘Glory’ (*nesah*) of Israel (the word is also used once as an attribute of God; cf. NIV’s ‘majesty’ in 1 Chronicles 29:11).”

16:14). With God’s anointing of the next king, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon David (as He came upon the judges before him), thus enabling him to fulfill the specific tasks which God assigned to him.”⁷⁹

Therefore, the account of David and Goliath in First Samuel 17 is much more than a good example of a wonderful lesson to teach in children’s church; instead, it is another example of Yahweh being completely faithful to His revealed word in what He had previously promised. First Samuel 17 records the Philistines going to war against the nation of Israel by using Goliath, their Philistine champion, and this battle becomes the perfect background for God to demonstrate His covenant faithfulness to His people. The fact that the Philistines stand in battle against disobedient, unbelieving King Saul shows the poor spiritual condition of both the king and his people (1 Sam. 17:1–18). As was the case before, the problem for Israel was not a military one; it was a spiritual problem.

The Philistine champion Goliath defied “the ranks of Israel” (1 Sam 17:10, 25) and did so morning and evening for forty days (1 Sam 17:16). Consequently, the Genesis 12:3/Numbers 24:9 promise of “I will curse the one who curses you” ultimately applies to Goliath and to the Philistines as well. However, since the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 24), “the blessing or the curse” from Lev. 26/Deut 28 also applied to the nation of Israel. Yahweh promised military victory against the enemies of Israel only if the nation was in covenant obedience to Him (Lev 26:6–8; Deut 28:7), but certain military defeat if the Jewish nation lived in covenant disobedience before Him (Lev 26:23–25; Deut 28:25). Yahweh offered no middle ground: as always, it was an “either/or proposition” for the nation of Israel based on their spiritual condition; their only hope for victory was in obedience to Yahweh. Saul and the nation were living in covenant disobedience before Yahweh when they encountered Goliath and the Philistines; David, however, was living in covenant obedience before Yahweh and had confidence in Him, correctly appraising the situation based on the truthfulness of God to His Word.⁸⁰ Bergen asserts, “David, the Lord’s anointed one, discerned a theological purpose in warfare. This perspective is one that must be examined because it is of utmost importance for understanding the mind-set of orthodox Israelites in the Old Testament.”⁸¹

In 1 Samuel 17:26b, David asks in more of a challenge mode than a mere question: “For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” Bergman writes:

David was deeply disturbed that a Philistine, who was uncircumcised and therefore outside of a covenant relationship with the Lord, would so boldly heap shame on (NIV, “defy”; v. 26) “the armies of the living God.” Goliath’s words were not just an insult directed against the Israelite army; they were also an assault on “the living God,” since the army was composed of members of the Lord’s covenant community.⁸²

⁷⁹ Davis and Whitcomb, *Israel: From Conquest to Exile*, 223.

⁸⁰ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 7:196.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7:196.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7:192.

Throughout the remainder of the chapter, David's basis for the victory he knows will come is that this Philistine has taunted the armies of the living God (1 Sam 17:36–37):

Next, he [Goliath] “cursed David by his gods” (v. 43). The author's use of the term “cursed” (Hb. *qālal*) here is theologically significant; readers knowledgeable of the Torah would know that by cursing this son of Abraham, Goliath was bringing down the Lord's curse on himself (cf. Gen 12:3)—a favorable outcome to the battle (from an Israelite perspective!) was thus assured.⁸³

As a sad indication of the spiritual condition of Saul and the nation, First Samuel 17:26 contains the first reference to God in the entire chapter: “Then David spoke to the men who were standing by him, saying, ‘What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?’” This is in keeping with the vastly different spiritual conditions of David (1 Sam 16:12–13) and Saul (1 Sam 16:14) and as seen in their subsequent actions. Once David rightly refers to God's name (1 Sam 17:26), the name Goliath does not occur in the remainder of the chapter. “Goliath” occurs only in 1 Sam. 17:4 and 23. After this, he is repeatedly referred to as, for example, “this uncircumcised Philistine” (1 Sam 17:26), “this Philistine” (1 Sam 17:33), or merely “the Philistine” (17:41ff.)—just another in the long line of Gentile enemies of God and His people, but absolutely nothing more. God's promise in Genesis 12:3/Numbers 24:9 and Leviticus 26/Deuteronomy 28 (as an enemy of national Israel) applied just as much to this uncircumcised Philistine as it did to all other enemies of Yahweh and His people:

In righteous indignation David implicitly offers himself to fight Goliath (v. 26), and in David's eyes the presence of Goliath the “uncircumcised Philistine” . . . has already brought on Israel disgrace that must be removed. The Hebrew root for “disgrace” in v. 26 is the same for “defy” later in the verse: Goliath is disgracing/defying Israel, and David—with God's help—intends to remove that disgrace/defiance.⁸⁴

Goliath cursed David by his—the uncircumcised Philistine's—gods (1 Sam 17:43). David repeatedly referred to Yahweh as the basis for his victory as 1 Sam 17:45–47 shows:

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know

⁸³ Ibid., 7:195.

⁸⁴ Youngblood, *1, 2 Samuel*, 3:698.

that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and He will give you into our hands.”

Hamilton rightly surmises regarding David:

As he challenges Goliath with these words, it is clear that David relies on Yahweh, not his own boyish might (17:47). Moreover, David is defending not his own reputation but Yahweh's, whom Goliath defied (17:45). David is not concerned with the reputation he will gain, but he wants all to know that there is a God in Israel (17:46). Through the judgment on Saul comes salvation by David through the judgment on the Philistine champion for the glory of God.⁸⁵

Although this is a unique situation, the core truth of this encounter should not be overlooked: contrary to virtually universal modern usage, *David defeating Goliath is not an upset of the underdog against seemingly overwhelming odds*. David's victory is just another example of Yahweh being true to His Word, especially the Genesis 12:3/Num. 24:9 promise to curse the ones who curse Israel and the promise to grant military victory to national Israel when they were in covenant obedience to Him (Lev 26; Deut 28). This is also another in a long line of examples of Numbers 23:19: “Has He said, and will not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” Baldwin concludes: “This was no ordinary battle, but one in which God's honour was at stake, and in this circumstance David's exposure to danger permitted God's honour to be more clearly acknowledged than if David had more obviously been a match for the Philistine. At no point did David take any credit for the successful outcome, which he confidently expected.”⁸⁶

Summary and Significance

Although the world at large and many theologians often do not deem it so, David's victory over Goliath clearly was not an upset. Upsets are sometimes as high as the “one in ten thousand” chance of something to occur. In David's victory over Goliath, God had not established “the odds.” God had previously revealed and announced this outcome long before the 1 Samuel account.

It should also be noted that *nothing* that God promised or its ultimate fulfillment should be taken in anyway other than the normative, literal, grammatical hermeneutic. From God's initial promise to “curse the ones who curse” Israel (Gen 12:3), up to God's promise to curse Amalek for his attacking Israel (Exod 17), to His reiteration of these promises in Numbers 22–24, His additional warnings for national Israel not to forget to fulfill the promised destruction of the Amalekites up through 1 Samuel 13, all make perfect sense with the normative use of language. To put this another

⁸⁵ Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 169. Youngblood adds: David fights Goliath “in the name of” the Lord—that is, “as his representative” (*BDB*, p. 102; cf. 25:5, 9; 2 Sam 6:18; Exod 5:23; Deut 10:8; 2 Chronicles 14:11). One of the names of the “God of the armies of Israel” is the regal name “LORD Almighty” (lit., “LORD of Hosts/Armies”), (Youngblood, *1, 2 Samuel*, 3:701).

⁸⁶ Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 8:137.

way, God Himself employed the literal, grammatical hermeneutic in both the pronouncement of His cursing Amalek and descendants and its subsequent fulfillment.

Also, when Goliath cursed Israel by his gods in 1 Samuel 16, the Genesis 12:3/Numbers 24:9 curse rested on him as well. With David walking in covenant obedience to Yahweh under Mosaic Covenant, the military outcome was already determined before the two representatives faced each other. Not only was David's victory not an upset, under these circumstances, the outcome would have been the same each time. Further, let one thousand Goliaths or more appear under these same conditions, they all would have been defeated—every time—just as God's Word has repeatedly promised. After all, the Spirit of the LORD had come upon Samson mightily (Judg 14:19), resulting in Samson slaying one thousand Philistines with the fresh jawbone of a donkey (Judg 15:15–16). When this same Spirit came mightily upon David (1 Sam 16:13), would one expect any less striking of a victory, all in keeping with God faithfully keeping His covenant promises?

Finally, as has been repeatedly shown, with God's pinpoint precision of both His pronouncement and fulfillment, one should confidently expect Him to continue fulfilling His Word in the normative, literal, grammatical hermeneutic past this point as it relates to future prophecies and their fulfillment. With the careful faithfulness of God to honor His Word up to First Samuel 17, the burden of proof is on those who would switch to allegorical interpretations of related prophecies before or after David's victory over Goliath and with those who would curse national Israel.