

Balaam

Balaam—Numbers 22-25

In our series about wild and crazy stories of the Bible, perhaps the wildest is the story of Balaam and the talking donkey found in Numbers 22-25. The nation of Israel has been wandering around in the wilderness for about 40 years because they would not go into the promised land the first time God led them there back in Nu. 13-14. At the end of the 40 year period, God led Israel around to the east of Canaan through the land of the Amorites, Edom, and Moab. The Amorites tried to prevent them from passing through so Israel defeated them, and then defeated Og the king of Bashan as well. Israel camped in the plains of Moab east of the Jordan River opposite Jericho. Balak, the king of Moab saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites so he greatly feared Israel, and sought a way to stop them other than just fighting. Therefore Balak sent messengers to a famous diviner/seer named Balaam, offering him fees to curse Israel.

Questions Arise

This story gets so wild that theologians have many questions that may seem unanswerable, but let's delve into them anyway.

1. What is this cursing thing? Why did they think it would work?

It was clear that Israel was being divinely protected. They had previously easily defeated all opposition. They appeared militarily invincible. Being superstitious, Moab thought the only way was to weaken them by turning the gods against them. Balaam was famous for supposedly being able to communicate with the gods.

2. Was Numbers 22 added much later to the original book of Numbers? Many commentators believe it was because it has the appearance of being inserted. They wonder why God would tell Balaam he could not go, then later tell him he could, but on the trip God got mad at him for going and blocked his way. This appears to be inconsistent so they think someone added it much later.

Answer: Would an editor add something contradictory on purpose? No, typically they add to clarify. An obvious solution is that Balaam stubbornly held onto the desire to go with a motive for the "blank check" they were offering. Notice in the story that although Balaam told the emissaries he could not go, he kept them there, and he never told them why he could not go. He was keeping the door open. God may permit people to choose what is not best for them, but since Balaam knew what God's will was, pleading for permission was foolishness. God often let people find this out the hard way. He continued to appeal to God, therefore God sovereignly used Balaam's desire for riches for God's own purposes--to bless Israel, curse Moab, and to teach Israel and us about conflicting worldly desires. Balaam was trying to have his cake and eat it too. He thought he could claim to obey God, but also receive all the "fees" of Moab. Balaam never told them he could not curse Israel, thus he was deceptively leading them on. God knew what was in his heart so along the way, God's righteous anger caused Him to send His messenger to block the way and give him yet another warning. In Nu.22:32 the angel said "your way was contrary to the Lord", and Balaam's response was "I have sinned". Balaam's contrary way was his wrong motives and intentions, and he admitted it. God was letting him go to bless Israel, but Balaam was in it for the gold. This is all backed up by his later actions of teaching the Moabites how to seduce the men of Israel and entice them into idolatry (Nu.25:1-3,18; 31:15-16).

3. How could a donkey talk? Donkeys don't have sufficient vocal cords to speak, nor is that part of their brain developed for speech.

Answer: Well DUH, no one believes in talking donkeys, but in the story it is the angel of the Lord that was blocking the donkey's way. The angel of the Lord was actually talking to Balaam through the donkey. The text says, "the Lord opened the donkeys mouth" and God spoke to Balaam. The irony can't be missed that even a dumb animal sees the danger of going against God, but "the seer" can't see it. Balaam the seer is more blind to the presence of God than the beast of burden. This whole episode of the angel blocking his way and then speaking through the donkey was a reminder and a confirmation of God's will in contrast to Balaam's desire. Possibly even a greater miracle was that "the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam" and he saw the angel. The angel's direction to Balaam confirms what God was getting across, "Go with the Moabites, but you shall

“speak only the word which I tell you”.

4. According to the New Testament references, what is the “teaching of Balaam”?

Answer: Found in Rev.2:14, 2 Peter 2:15, and Jude 11, the teaching of Balaam deceptively lured the men of Israel into idolatry through the enticement of beautiful women, ie sexual immorality. Rev.2:14 says Balaam “kept teaching Balak, King of Moab to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel”, and the desire for sexual immorality led to participation in idolatry. 2 Peter 2:15 also tells why Balaam did it---the “wages of unrighteousness”. This means he did something wrong for big money, what a surprise. Jude 11 repeats that he did it “for pay”. Therefore, even though God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam was able to counsel Moab that Israel’s weakness was sexual enticement, so they sent the award winning Midianite Bikini Team over to the Israelite camp, and it worked.

5. Was Balaam a sinner or a saint? If he was a bad guy, why would God use a bad guy?

Answer: The text in Numbers 22 does not make it clear what kind of a guy he was, or whether he was saved or not. Nevertheless, his later counsel to Moab that corrupted Israel, and God’s command to kill all the leaders of Midian including Balaam (Nu.31:8), make it certain that Balaam was accounted to be one of the pagans who were guilty and worthy of death. In addition to this, the New Test. authors paint him in a very bad light. God used Balaam to speak a blessing on Israel and make predictions about Moab and Israel’s other surrounding enemies. As one commentator put it, “The Lord can strike a mighty blow with a crooked stick”.

6. Is there any extra-biblical evidence to prove that this story is true? Is it possible that Balaam could be a real historical person?

Answer: Amazingly, yes, in 1967 archeologists discovered in Transjordan a remarkable ancient text of 34 lines concerning Balaam, son of Beor (also his father in Nu.22:5). It was discovered at a site called Deir Alla near the Jabbock River and in the Jordan River valley which is exactly where all the action of Numbers 22-25 occurred. It dates from about 900 BC. It is assumed the story existed in oral form before, so the dates match up. The writing also mentions that Balaam was a seer/diviner famous for putting curses on people, so it is entirely consistent with the Balaam of the Bible. In addition there are many ancient Jewish writings that treat Balaam as an historical character

The Teaching of Balaam in the Twenty First Century

We also can easily find ourselves blind to the obvious message of God. We also have received the Word of God concerning problem areas in our lives. Perhaps it involves sexual immorality or materialism---both prevalent issues in our time and culture as they were in Balaam’s. Frankly, even a dumb animal has better spiritual vision than we do at times. If God is gracious, He will block our way as He did with Balaam, and he will speak to us through circumstances and consequences. We also will come under much pressure from the world to conform, to “play ball”, as Balaam was pressured three times by King Balak. We also will be enticed by riches, and we may also try to have our cake and eat it too.

Can you have it both ways? Can you leave the door open? The reality is that most people consider themselves Christians, but they leave the door open. They consider themselves as law keepers and good deed doers, but they still sell out to this materialistic world---we all struggle with it.

Is the teaching of Balaam still alive and active now? Absolutely, he taught the Midianites and the Moabites to approach Israel at their weakest link. It was folly to try and fight them head on. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Their weakness was sexual immorality, they were suckers for the Midianite Bikini Team. The fertility religions of Moab and Midian emphasized ritual prostitution and sexual orgies. These religious celebrations were supposed to stimulate the gods and goddesses to their own sexual acts, which were thought to guarantee the fertility of the land and animals. At any rate, the locals could certainly

enjoy their religion. By enticing the men of Israel into the sexual orgies, the next step of participating in the idolatry was easy, and they were soon corrupted, and fallen out of God's favor---subject to God's wrath. Ironically the teaching of Balaam actually did curse Israel, but it backfired on Balaam. According to Nu.31:8, he never got to spend all that money. That was his weakest link. What are you a sucker for? What is your weakest link?

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What would Balaam teach our adversary? What is your weakest link? How will the enemy approach us? Pray that God will block your way, speak to you in some amazing way, and "open your eyes" to see spiritual reality.