

BALAAAM

the Prophet of Error



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Who was Balaam, and what were his great errors?

Balaam was a mercenary prophet of the worst kind. He was famous, self-willed, double-minded, eloquent, presumptuous, and an evil counselor. Not exactly the kind of person you would want to bring home to your family for dinner and conversation.

In Joshua 13:22, Balaam is described as a “soothsayer,” while in Numbers 22:6 he is said to be a man whose blessings and curses are effective. He is from Pethor, a city in the region of upper Mesopotamia, near Carchemish, by the Euphrates River, and has an international reputation as a true prophet. This city of Pethor was located about 350 miles north of Jericho. It was near the present border of Turkey. Since he lived in a Gentile land apart from Israel, he was a Gentile. He had a gift of prophecy. On occasions, God talked directly to Balaam.

Throughout the narrative in Numbers 22-24, Balaam continually reminds King Balak that he can speak only the words God gives him to speak. Although Balaam uses sacrificial rituals to obtain God’s answer, he is not to be considered simply a diviner. In each case, Balaam seems to have direct communication with God and then speaks God’s word in the form of oracles to Balak. This is the typical form of prophetic address found in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Israelite prophets. It would seem clear that prophetic activity in the ancient Near East was not uncommon during this general time period.

Because Balaam had conversations with God, he somewhat understood which nations God would bless and which ones He would curse. He also knew that God’s blessings and curses were sure. Balaam became such a man of renown around the Middle East that even the five kings of Midian had heard of him.

The Bible does not speak of Balaam until some forty years after the Lord God brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. The astonishing miracles God performed in bringing the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, giving them victory over every enemy and guiding them to safety, was well known to all the nations in this entire region.

Our story really begins when the children of Israel are encamped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan River near Jericho.

Balak calls for Balaam

Israel was in the last staging area before crossing the Jordan River. Balak, king of Moab, was greatly alarmed at this encampment of the Israelites in the Jordan valley right next to his own territory. He was well aware of the overwhelming victory Israel had achieved over the Amorites. Because of the Israelites’ success, Balak was terrified, afraid this huge camp of Israelites would lick up everything around them. So he entered in to an alliance with the Midianites and sought the aid of Balaam, a renowned diviner by whose agency he hoped Israel could be brought under a curse.

In ancient times, when a king went out to battle, he always sought a diviner or fortune-teller to give him a favorable word. If there were no favorable words, he would not fight. The Greeks had their oracle at Delphi. The Babylonians had an extensive “science” of looking at the livers of sacrificial animals, among other types of divination. The Bible mentions Nebuchadnezzar doing this (Ezekiel 21:21).

Balak wanted to get a favorable omen, so he sent his emissaries on a journey of some 350 miles to have Balaam come and curse Israel. “He whom you [Balaam] bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Numbers 22:6). The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian brought the reward of divination to Balaam and explained what their mission was all about. Balaam, instead of rejecting the offer outright, asked them to stay for the night, and he would enquire of the Lord and tell them what the Lord said the next morning.

The Lord apparently came to Balaam that night and asked him about the purpose of the visit from these men. After explaining the situation to the Lord, Balaam was told clearly not to go with them and not to curse the people, for they were blessed (Numbers 22:7-13).

In the morning Balaam told the emissaries to return to their own land since God ordered him not to go or to curse the children of Israel. Balak was not one to be put off easily. Not being satisfied with Balaam’s answer, he sent more princes to Balaam in an attempt to get him to come and curse Israel. “Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me: For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people” (Numbers 22:16-17). Balak, being sure that a worthy diviner would listen to a sizeable honorarium, sent even more money and more honorable ambassadors this second time.

Balaam, showed his true colors when he allowed the second set of ambassadors to stay the night. There was no reason to enquire of the Lord again, for he knew the word of the Lord, but he hoped in his heart the Lord would change His mind. “And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, ‘If the men have come to call you, rise, go with the men but only what I bid you, that shall you do’” (Numbers 22:20).

So Balaam went as God had allowed, but God was “very angry.” God read Balaam’s heart and knew his duplicity. Therefore, God performed a remarkable miracle. He sent an angel, empowered a donkey, and arranged a narrow lane to get the diviner’s attention. The angel of the Lord appeared to the ass on which Balaam rode. At first Balaam could not see the angel, and in anger and frustration he struck the ass three times. Then, the ass was given the power of speech to speak to Balaam. Only after hearing the dumb animal speak was Balaam able to see the angel of the Lord and realize that he had almost been killed by the angel. The angel said, “Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? Behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me” (Numbers 22:32). Certainly, Balaam’s journey was a rash one, and his errand obnoxious and reckless before the Lord. Like an impudent child, Balaam wanted to have his own way. He didn’t take God’s word the first time, so God let him go. There are times when God will allow us to have our own way just as He did Balaam, allowing him to go with the emissaries. However, man’s ways often end up in death. Balaam, after being shown his error, did admit that he had sinned. No doubt, he knew what he was doing. He continued on his journey to the city of Moab to meet Balak. When he arrived, he said to the king, “Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? The word that God puteth in my mouth, that shall I speak” (Numbers 22:38).

The prophecies of Balaam

Finally Balaam came to realize that the Lord God was not going to do anything but bless Israel, so he did not resort to divination as he often did. Because Balaam was a sorcerer, he would look for omens or signs to give him insight to help him foretell the future. In this present situation, however, it was quite evident that God Himself was speaking, and so Balaam had no need for other signs, real or imagined. This time, he realized he was dealing with the God of Israel who was not like the gods of men's devising whom men try to control.

Again Balak attempted to get Balaam to speak against Israel (chapter 24). Still, Balaam blessed Israel.

Again he referred to the great deliverance from Egypt. Even though this took place some forty years previously, the report was enough to frighten the people (Joshua 2:10). In the very end of his prophecy about Israel, he made the following statement: "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, O Israel, and cursed is everyone who curses you" (Numbers 24:9). With such a history and with such a God, Balaam declared the children of Israel to be invincible.

At the beginning, Balak was just disappointed, but now he was exceedingly angry with Balaam. It would have been better to have nothing than to have the repeated blessing. So he sent Balaam home without the promised reward. Balaam responded by repeating his earlier response (Numbers 22: 18). A house full of money is nothing compared to the wrath of the Lord against disobedience.

Balaam, diviner that he was, has something further to teach us. God gave Balaam a further word that seems to apply to future events beyond what Balak asked (Numbers 24:14). It is possible for the phrase "in the latter days" to mean the indefinite future, or "in days to come" (NIV, NASB).

Verse 14 is clear in saying that in the future the Israelites will gain the victory over Moab. The most remarkable part of the prophecy would appear to be about Jesus Christ (Numbers 24:15-19). The star out of Jacob is often thought to refer to the coming Messiah. It could well have been this prophecy that convinced the astrologers to travel to Israel to search for the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1-2). It might at first seem unusual for God to use a sorcerer like Balaam to foretell the coming of the Messiah, but it does clearly show us that God can use anything or anyone to accomplish His plans. By using a sorcerer, God did not condone sorcery or sorcerers. In fact, the Bible condemns it in several places (Exodus 22:28; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Revelation 18:23). What it does show us is God's sovereignty over good and evil. God is capable of speaking through anyone. Scripture did not come from the creative work of the prophets' own invention or interpretation. It was God who inspired the writers, so their message is authentic and reliable. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). The Bible is written "here a little and there a little" (Isaiah 28:10,13).

After this prophecy concerning Israel, we read: "Balaam arose, and went back to his place; and Balak also went his way" (Numbers 24:25).

Balaam in the New Testament

In Jesus Christ's message to the seven churches, an astonishing warning is given to the church at Pergamos. Jesus pointed out that the Pergamos church was not perfect. He also drew the people's attention to His sharp two-edged sword. The two edges would seem to imply His ability to overcome all enemies, but may also be used for correcting the unfaithful in the Pergamos church. The Bible teaches that judgment must begin in the house or household of God (1 Peter 4:17).

"But I have a few things against thee because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam: who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornication" (Revelation 2: 14). This does not contradict what the apostle Paul wrote about eating meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10:25-30). He was dealing with meat that had been bought in the marketplace and brought home to eat. These church members in Pergamum were joining in with the heathen crowds who were worshiping false gods and committing sexual acts with heathen priests and priestesses, and also eating the meat that had been offered to the heathen idols, all supposedly to honor these heathen gods. This would be the same as if members of the Church of God today would turn around, and begin to embrace once again, the worldly spirit of Christmas and Easter.

Jesus told this church to repent (verse 16) or He would come and fight against the rebellious who held such doctrines. What was this doctrine of Balaam? A part of the answer is in this very verse, but there is more. Notice that Balaam taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel. While the church of Pergamos was faithful to Christ as a whole, there were some who were lax in their moral behavior and began following the heathen social customs of the day. They were doing what some of the Israelites did not long before Moses' death. On the advice of the soothsayer and false prophet Balaam, King Balak of Moab used the women of Moab to entice the men of Israel to come and take part in idolatrous feasts which encouraged immorality in the name of religion, therefore causing the children of Israel to curse themselves (Numbers 25: 1-5; 31: 16). Balaam was well aware that if the children of Israel continued to obey God they would remain blessed, but if they would sin, they would come under a curse of sin. Very simply, the doctrine of Balaam was to tell Balak how to cleverly cause the people of Israel to bring curses upon themselves by sinning, which is disobedience to God.

Another reason that makes this understanding of the doctrine of Balaam important to us is the fact that the apostle Peter also recorded that we should watch out for false prophets just as in ancient times. These false prophets were sensual, lustful and beguiled, unstable souls. They "have forsaken the right way and loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:15). Unrighteousness is breaking God's commandments (Psalm 119: 172; Deuteronomy 6:25).

Balaam showed Balak how to cause the people of Israel to disobey God's commandments, and these specific commandments that they disobeyed concerned idolatry and fornication.

Now notice the important information recorded in the Book of Jude. "Woe unto them!

For they have gone in the way of Cain and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward and perished in the gainsaying of Core” (Jude 11). Balaam was greedy for money, for a reward, and because of that he committed great sin and led others to sin also.

It is the many today who believe that because Christ lived a perfect life for us, we do not need to be careful in how we conduct our lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the apostle Paul stated, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God” (Romans 6:12-13).

Israel’s sin

Though it appears the story comes to a conclusion at the end of chapter 24, that is not the case. In Numbers 25, the story continues: “While Israel dwelt in Shittim the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods. So Israel became yoked to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel” (Numbers 25:1-3).

It does not say how long Israel was in Shittim but it only took forty days for Israel to fall into idolatry at Mount Sinai. This time they were enticed by the Moabite women. The sexual immorality was followed by idolatry. It is of interest to note that the men of Israel did not bring the Moabite women into the religion of Israel. As, in economics, bad money drives out the good, so one sin leads to another unless there is real repentance.

This notorious sin brought death to those who had yoked themselves to these pagan idolatrous rites. Plagues were also brought against the Israelites and twenty four thousand of them died (Numbers 25:4-9).

The brazenness of this sin became so common in Israel that a man brought a Midianite woman to his tent in the sight of Moses. When Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand, and he went after the man and woman and drove the javelin through both of them. Therefore, the plague against the Israelites was checked. Still, 24,000 died in the plague.

As the story continues we find the children of Israel waning against Midian. The battle was probably a surprise attack, and was completely successful. The five kings of Midian were killed, including Zur, whose daughter had died at the hands of Phinehas before (Numbers 25:8). Balaam, who had given evil counsel to the enemy, was killed. However, some of the women were permitted to live. Moses said to them, “Have you let all the women live? Behold, these caused the people, by the counsel of Balaam, to act treacherously against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD” (Numbers 31:15-16). Moses’ point was that the women had been prominent in seducing Israel, physically and theologically. No prisoners were to be taken except the young girls. Because these instructions were not followed, the plague returned to Israel (Numbers 31:13-24).

The treachery of modem-day Balaams

In a review of Balaam's character, it is clear that he listened to enemy suggestions that he knew were wrong. Then he showed his duplicity and weakness by asking God a second time if he might go with the princes of Moab. He knew he was wrong and guilty of sinning, but he still went with the Moabites anyway. His fear of God was still great enough to cause him to repeat only God's words, yet he still attempted to get around God. As many live their lives today, he obeyed in the letter but not in the spirit. In the end, he revealed his true motives and inability to control the treachery and avarice that drove him by deliberately telling Balak how to ensnare Israel.

The most sinister part of Balaam's sin was in deceiving the people into believing they had freedom or license to disobey God. It existed during the time of the apostles, and continues even today.

The Book of Jude has been called the "Acts of the Apostates" because it provides such a graphic description of the false teachers who plagued the Christians in the first century. Jude learned of a new breed of leaders who had slipped into the congregations. "For there are certain men crept in unawares: who were before of old ordained to this condemnation: ungodly men, turning the

grace of our God into lasciviousness: and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Jude tells us that the doom of these men was determined long before he wrote his epistle (compare Isaiah 8:19 22; Zephaniah 3:1 8).

There are many false teachers today who teach the people that it is all right to commit spiritual fornication. Spiritual fornication is an illicit affair with the pagan practices of the heathen. These pagan practices of the heathen have come down to us under different names. Today the pagan Brumalia is called Christmas. The pagan rite of fertility of the ancient goddess Astarte now masquerades under the name of Easter. Halloween is another pagan teaching concerning unclean spirits and witchcraft.

The worldly festival days with all their trappings, such as carved pumpkins, ghosts, goblins, eggs, rabbits, yule logs, mistletoe, trees, and funny fat men in red suits, all seem so innocent until you learn the history of where it all came from. What will be found is that all these worldly days are diametrically opposed to the teachings of God and Jesus Christ "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ? (Titus 2:11 13).

It seems reasonable to man that he should be able to worship God any way he chooses, but God has always given man instruction as to how He is to be worshiped. As Jesus said, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Man's ways always seem right to man. His ways are the ways of permissiveness, or license, to disobey God's plain commands. However, what may seem reasonable and right to man

always leads to death. We must not allow the grace of God in our lives to be turned into lasciviousness.

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