

Balaam and the Star of Jacob

Today, I want to share with you one of the strangest and at times funniest stories recorded in the Hebrew Bible: the story of Balaam, a not so faithful prophet of God and his talking donkey. Beginning at Numbers 22, this story spans the next 3 chapters and doesn't reach a real conclusion until chapter 31; so I will summarize.



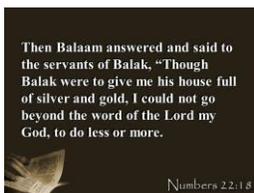
As our story opens, after 40 years of wandering, the second generation of Israelites, are now camped on the plains of Moab on the west side of the river Jordan, preparing to finally enter the Promised Land. The problem was that even though the Israelites were specifically ordered not to bother the residents of Moab, who were the descendants of Lot (Deut. 2:9-10), when you camp over 600,000 people in one place, they tend to consume all the resources in sight and there is always the chance that liking what they see, they may decide to take your land from you.

Thus fearing the Israelite's presence, King Balak wanted to find a way of driving "*these people who came up out of Egypt*" off his land. But since they greatly outnumbered his own army, Balak first wants to hire a **sorcerer** to put a curse on the Israelites, so that he might easily defeat them. Having heard of a famous sorcerer, Balaam Son of Beor -- *whomever he blessed was blessed and whomever he cursed was cursed*, Balak sends a group of officials with a generous fee to find this sorcerer and purchase his services.

The only problem was that Balaam was actually a "**diviner**" – one who sought to know the mind of God and thus predict the future – not a sorcerer who could cast spells. But the delegation having arrived with a large, tempting sum of money, Balaam asks God what he should do and is flatly told, not to take the money, not to go with the men and not to curse Israel, because Israel is under God's protection and blessing. So Balaam refuses and sends the delegation back home.

But King Balak will not take "no" for an answer, so he sends an even larger delegation with lots more money and promises of great honor back to Balaam to ask again.

Now, one difficulty to this back and forth exchange of requests, is that Balaam's home is on the Euphrates river some 360 miles or 18 days travel away from Moab; which shows just how famous Balaam was and how desperate King Balak was to rid his land of these invaders.



So, a couple of months later, the second delegation having trudged back to his door, Balaam again, at first nobly replies, '*Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God, to do less or more*' (22:18).

That Balaam acknowledges the God of Israel as also being his God is a good thing, but this delegation brought a really large sum of money and one of Balaam's weaknesses was "greed"- which got him criticized a couple of times in our New Testament (2 Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11).

So Balaam asks God again and is now given permission to go, *but to do only what I tell you to do*. The next morning Balaam saddles his old donkey – who had provided him years of faithful service – and begins the long ride to Moab. But along the way, Balaam must have thought of some method by which he could get around God's prohibition against cursing Israel ... and so God sends an angel to kill him before he can get there.

Apparently, only the donkey can see this killer angel standing in Balaam's path, ready to strike. So, in an effort to save his master's life, the donkey dives off the trail detouring into a field. While Balaam beats his donkey for what he considers disobedience, the killer angel relocates to another area where the donkey cannot escape into a field. Again seeing the angel, this time the donkey presses so close to a wall – as far away from the angel as possible – that he scrapes Balaam's leg and thus receives a second beating. The angel having relocated for a third time to a place where there was no chance of escaping, this time the donkey just lays down on the trail and receives his third beating.



Feeling for the poor animal, God open's the donkey's mouth, who having long proved his faithfulness to Balaam on other occasions, now questions his master for these three wrongful beatings. Can you imagine a talking donkey? Even Shrek the ogre was surprised to meet one. But Balaam, so angry to not even be surprised by his donkey now speaking to him, replies that had he a sword, he would kill his donkey on the spot. At which point God open's Balaam's eyes to see the angel standing there with sword in hand and so he repents of mistreating his faithful beast. Balaam then offers to return back home, but for a second time is told by the angel to go, but to speak only what God tells him to speak.

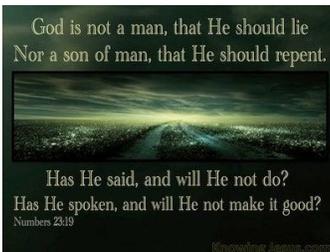


So at last Balaam and Balak meet, and the diviner again warns the king that he can only say what God will allow him to say. Perhaps not clear as to the distinction between a diviner and a sorcerer, nevertheless Balak takes Balaam to a place where he can see a portion of Israel's camp and place a curse on them. Balaam instructs the king to build 7 altars and sacrifice a bull and a ram on each (14 animals total), after which the diviner will go see what message God might have for him. Returning from his Godly consult Balaam brings, not a curse, but a blessing for Israel: *How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?*

(Numbers 23:8).

Balak of course, not pleased by this blessing, is again reminded by Balaam that he could only say what God said told him to say. But the king remains unconvinced, thinking that if this diviner could just see how many Israelites there really are, he might change his mind and put

a curse on them. So he takes Balaam to an overlook where he can see the entire camp of Israelites and is again instructed to build 7 altars and sacrifice another 14 animals, only to be rewarded - when the prophet returns - with a personal tongue lashing from God.



God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Numbers 23:9

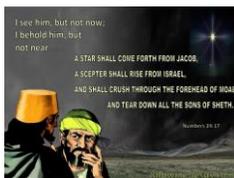
Undeterred, Balak takes Balaam to a third location saying, *perhaps it will please God that you will curse them for me from there (23:27).*

But another 7 altars and another 14 animal sacrifices later, (that's 42 animals if you are keeping count), Balaam comes back with another blessing,



God, who brings Israel out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for him; he shall devour the nations that are his foes and break their bones.... Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.' (Numbers 24:8-9).

Infuriated by this third blessing of the Israelites, Balak orders Balaam to go home, declaring that his God has denied him any reward. But before he leaves, free of charge, Balaam offers Balak yet one more: not a blessing or a cursing, but now a prophecy for Moab along with several other surrounding nations' futures.



I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near — a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the sons of Sheth...One out of Jacob shall rule. (Numbers 24:17-19).

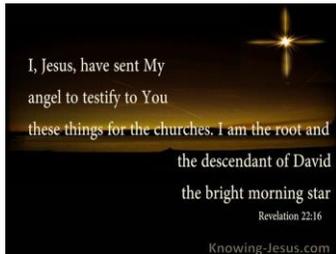
Of course at its first level, this is exactly what King David will do to all the territories surrounding Israel some 400 years later. And then Balaam returned home, while Balak went back to worrying about how to defeat all those Israelites.

I would like to say that this was the end of the story between King Balak and Balaam the diviner, sadly it wasn't. But first let's talk about a second star that would one day rise out of Jacob, before we return to conclude this sad tale.



As is their nature, most prophecies work at more than one level. So, while King David's conquering of all the surrounding nations was the immediate fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy. That prophecy also hinted at yet another star who would come out of Jacob and another scepter who would arise out of Israel.

Which is why at the time of His birth, magicians (diviners), from the land of Persia would follow a star to bring baby Jesus gifts honoring Him as the new born king of Israel. During His ministry, Jesus said that this time, He had come only to seek and to save, but the next time He comes, it will be to subjugate all the nations of the world under His divine rule (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Thus, Jesus is the ultimate scepter that rose out of Israel, which is why He closed His final letter to the churches with these words;



'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.' The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift (Revelation 22:16-17).

This is the best and most direct invitation you will ever get from the King of kings and Lord of lords who as prophesied, rose out of Israel to govern all the nations, be sure that to not hesitate to accept His invitation, for there is no other option available to you. As Scripture teaches,

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:18).

Now let's return to the sad conclusion of the story of Balaam and King Balak's attempts to defeat Israel. Having given his final prophecy, again completely in favor of Israel and ordered by the angry king to leave, Scripture records that Balaam indeed returned home. But along the way Balaam must have kept thinking of all that reward and honor Balak had promised him for helping to defeat Israel. Knowing the holy nature of the God of the Israelites, Balaam thus figured out an insidious way to defeat to Israel in spite of God's blessings and protection.

The next chapter of Numbers (25), records that while camped in the land, the men of Israel began having sexual relations with the Moabite women who also invited them to their feasts and to participate in sacrifices to the local gods. In response to this sin, God sent a plague into the camp which before it ended, had wiped out 24,000 Israelite men.

After the plague and Israel's repentance, God then instructed Moses to raise an army of 12,000 men to repay the Midianites and Moabites for their trickery (25:16, 31:1-17). The battle was swift and decisive. Every man and woman in the land of Midian killed along all their kings, along with Balaam son of Beor, who had returned to claim his reward for suggesting that the Moabite women seduce Israelite men (Numbers 31:16).

That is how Balaam the diviner, the not so faithful spokesman for God, became a Biblical example of the shame brought down upon themselves by those religious leaders who compromise their position because of greed. Thus, may you always be blessed by the promise of Israel's rising scepter and warned by Balaam's downfall. Let's pray about this.

