

## NUMBERS 22-24 GOD WILL BLESS

### INTRODUCTION TO THE CASTS

Spend some time and read through the account in Chapter 22. Can you name the main parties in this story?

Do you think Israel know of these things? (Think of Job 1) Why is these chapters included in Numbers and in the Torah (Torah = the Law books or the first 5 books of the Old Testament)?

There are many sub-plots and lessons we can derive from Numbers 22-24. Can your group take a guess as to the main theme for the story on Balaam?

### SCENE 1: THE CALL ON BALAAM NUMBERS 22:1-21

What is the background to the story in Numbers 22-24? What can you gather from verse 1 to 4?

What was Balak seeking for in verse 5-6? Why?

---

We now want to learn some lessons from Balaam in this account:

Let us try and draw a portrait of Balaam.

Background of Balaam:

Where is he from (verse 5) [c.f. Deuteronomy 23:4]?

In verse 5, he is said to be living near the river; what do you think that river is (clue: see Gen 31:21; Exodus 23:31; Joshua 24:2-3)?

What is his occupation (verse 7)?

Note: the word diviner can also be translated as soothsayer. In particular, Balaam probably can be understood as a *Baru* diviner of the Mesopotamian type.

The *baru* belongs to the priestly class, and his specialty is “seeing” what will happen on the basis of phenomena that escape the common person, but are found e.g., in the liver of a ritually slaughtered animal, or in the configuration of drops of oil on water, or in the stars, or in the shape of the clouds. Such *barus* were believed to be able to influence the will of the gods because of their secret knowledge and mysterious manipulations, and to force the gods to do, or not to do, a given thing.<sup>1</sup>

Here are a few things we can observe about his work:

Verse 22:41

Verse 23:1-2

Verse 23:3

Compare these to the typical Jewish sacrifices.

Checkup these verses and describe God’s verdict on the practice of soothsaying:

Leviticus 19:26

Deuteronomy 18:10

Deuteronomy 18:14

---

Look up in your group the following verses and discuss among your group Scripture's assessment on Balaam:

Numbers 31:8, 16

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Joshua 13:22

Joshua 24:9-10

Judges 11:23-25

Nehemiah 13:1-3

Micah 6:5

2 Peter 2:15-16

Jude 11

Revelation 2:14

What I think the character Balaam represents today:

---

### Let us analyze the passage (7-14)

<sup>7</sup> So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak. <sup>8</sup> And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the Lord [Yahweh] speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam.

<sup>9</sup> Then God [Elohim] came to Balaam and said, "Who *are* these men with you?"

<sup>10</sup> So Balaam said to God [Elohim], "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, *saying*, <sup>11</sup> 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.' "

<sup>12</sup> And God [Elohim] said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they *are* blessed."

<sup>13</sup> So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go back to your land, for the Lord [Yahweh] has refused to give me permission to go with you."

<sup>14</sup> And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us."

<sup>15</sup> Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. <sup>16</sup> And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: 'Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me; <sup>17</sup> for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.' "

<sup>18</sup> Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the Lord [Yahweh] my God [Elohim], to do less or more. <sup>19</sup> Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the Lord [Yahweh] will say to me."

<sup>20</sup> And God [Elohim] came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men come to call you, rise *and* go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do." <sup>21</sup> So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

One of the conundrum of the story of the call of Balaam is the apparent contradiction in God not allowing Balaam to go (verse 12), the subsequent relenting (verse 20) and then the anger of the Lord (verse 22) sufficient to want to kill Balaam and finally letting him go after the confession (verse 35). God appears to be someone who changes his mind on a fancy. We need to dive a little into the text to see what it is trying to teach us.

1. I have given the text and have added in square bracket the actual Hebraic name used. Yahweh is the specific revealed name of God and Elohim is the general word for God. Have a look at the usage in the text from verse 7-21. See if you can discover something from the pattern (don't worry too much if you can't, and try not to spend too much time here)?
  2. Why do the Lord ask Balaam the question in verse 9? Is it possible that God do not know the identities of those who visited Balaam? Look up these texts where God directed questions at man (Gen 3:11; Isaiah 6:8) and discuss among your group God's likely purpose for the question.
-

3. Compare verses 10-11 from Balaam's answer to God with Balak's request in verses 5-6. What did Balaam left out?
  
  4. Note God's reply to Balaam. God is faithful to his promise (Genesis 12:1-3)
  
  5. Now compare Balaam's reply to the envoy in verse 13. What did he not say in his refusal? Now read verse 15-17 on Balak's response to Balaam's refusal. What do you think Balak sees in Balaam's answer?
  
  6. Now look closely at Balaam's response in verse 18. It certainly looked very pious. Compare verse 12, 18 and 19; discuss in your group the true heart and desire of Balaam.
  
  7. Verse 20 is the difficult one. God seem to relent and then in verse 22 got angry that Balaam actually went with the envoy. Is God being unreasonable? Think back on verse 9 on God's question to Balaam. In verse 20, God continues with the question "if the men comes to call you ..." What do you think if the choice place before Balaam? What did Balaam action tell us on his preference?
  
  8. We are given the action that Balaam took in verse 21. Again, what do you think was missing here? What does that tell us about Balaam?
-

SCENE 2: BALAAM AND THE DONKEY (NUMBERS 22:22-35)

Scene 2 is certainly one of the climax of the story. There are many contrasts being brought out here and we want to discover some of them.

1. Let's do a recap, what is the role, status of Balaam? Can you give a few synonyms to soothsayer? What kind of image do they convey concerning the person who has these titles? Now can you also give another common/crude name for donkey? What sense does this term usually conveys?
2. What did Balaam threatens to do in verse 29? What is the reality of the situation given to us in verses 23-24? Can you see the irony?
3. Again we come back to the role of the soothsayer (seer). What is expected to be the source of knowledge for such a person? In the account (especially from verse 28-30) what became his source of revelation instead?
4. Compare the seeing of Balaam to what we know of Moses throughout the account in the Pentateuch. Can you pick out some of the differences?
5. In verse 34, Balaam confessed that he has sinned. How would you view this confession (it would be useful to read chapter 25 and 31)? What lessons can you learn concerning our sin confessions?

Concluding remarks on chapter 22:

---

PRELIMINARY BACKGROUND NOTES ON CHAPTER 22-25

*That this section of the Book of Numbers has a character to a great extent peculiar and isolated is evident upon the face of it. The arguments indeed derived from its language and style to prove that it is by a different hand from the rest of the Book are obviously too slight and doubtful to be of any weight; there does not seem to be any more diversity in this respect than the difference of subject matter would lead us to expect. The peculiarity, however, of this section is evident from the fact that these three chapters, confessedly so important and interesting in themselves, might be taken away without leaving any perceptible void. From chapter. 22:1 the narrative is continued in chapter. 25, apparently without a break, and in that chapter there is no mention of Balaam. It is only in chapter. 31 (verses. 8, 16) that two passing allusions are made to him: in the one his death is noted without comment; in the other we are made acquainted for the first time with a fact which throws a most important light upon his character and career, of which no hint is given in the section before us. Thus it is evident that the story of Balaam's coming and prophecies, although imbedded in the narrative (and that in the right place as to order of time), is not structurally connected with it, but forms an episode by itself. If we now take this section, which is thus isolated and self-contained, we shall not fail to see at once that its literary character is strikingly peculiar. It is to all intents and purposes a sacred drama wherein characters and events of the highest interest are handled with consummate art. No one can be insensible to this, whatever construction he may or may not put upon it. Probably the story of Balaam was never made the subject of a miracle play, because the character of the chief actor is too subtle for the crude intelligence of the age of miracle plays. But if the sacred drama were ever reintroduced, it is certain that no more effective play could be found than that of Balaam and Balak. The extraordinary skill with which the strangely complex character of the wizard prophet is drawn out; the felicity with which it is contrasted with the rude simplicity of Balak; the picturesque grandeur of the scenery and incident; and the art with which the story leads up by successive stages to the final and complete triumph of God and of Israel, are worthy, from a merely artistic point of view, of the greatest of dramatic poets.*

*There is no such minute drawing out of an isolated character by means of speech and incident to be found in the Old Testament, unless it be in the Book of Job, the dramatic form of which serves to give point to the comparison; but few would fail to see that the much more subtle character of Balaam is far more distinctly indicated than that of Job. Balaam is emphatically a "study," and must have been intended to be so. Yet it must be remembered that it is only to modern eyes that this part of the varied truth and wisdom of Holy Scripture has become manifest. To the Jew Balaam was interesting only as a great foe, greatly baffled; as a sorcerer whose ghostly power and craft was broken and turned backward by the God of Israel (Deut. 23:5; Josh. 13:22; 24:10; Micah 6:5). To the Christian of the first age he was only interesting as the Scriptural type of the subtlest and most dangerous kind of enemy whom the Church of God had to dread—the enemy who united spiritual pretensions with persuasions to vice (Rev. 2:14). To the more critical intellects of later ages, such even as Augustine and Jerome, he was altogether a puzzle; the one regarding him as prophetam diaboli, whose religion was a mere cloak for covetousness; the other as prophetam Dei, whose fall was like unto the fall of the old prophet of Bethel. The two parallel allusions to his character in 2 Pet. 2:15, 16; Jude 11*

*do not take us any further, merely turning upon the covetousness which was his most obvious fault. Unquestionably, however, Balaam is most interesting to us, not from any of these points of view, but as a study drawn by an inspired hand of a strangely but most naturally mixed character, the broad features of which are constantly being reproduced, in the same unhallowed union, in men of all lands and ages. This is undeniably one of the instances (not perhaps very numerous) in which the more trained and educated intelligence of modern days has a distinct advantage over the simpler faith and intense piety of the first ages. The conflict, or rather the compromise, in Balaam between true religion and superstitious imposture, between an actual Divine inspiration and the practice of heathen sorceries, between devotion to God and devotion to money, was an unintelligible puzzle to men of old. To those who have grasped the character of a Louis XI, of a Luther, or of an Oliver Cromwell, or have gauged the mixture of highest and lowest in the religious movements of modern history, the wonder is, not that such an one should have been, but that such an one should have been so simply and yet so skillfully depicted. Two questions arise pre-eminently out of the story of Balaam which our want of knowledge forbids us to answer otherwise than doubtfully.*

- I. Whence did Balaam derive his knowledge of the true God, and how far did it extend? Was he, as some have argued, a heathen sorcerer who took to invoking Jehovah because circumstances led him to believe that the cause of Jehovah was likely to be the winning cause? And did the God whom he invoked in this mercenary spirit (after the fashion of the sons of Sceva) take advantage of the fact to obtain an ascendancy over his mind, and to compel his unwilling obedience? Such an assumption seems at once unnatural and unnecessary. It is hardly conceivable that God should have bestowed a true prophetic gift upon one who stood in such a relation to him. Moreover, the kind of ascendancy which the word of God had over the mind of Balaam is not one which springs from calculation, or from a mere intellectual persuasion. The man who lives before us in these chapters has not only a considerable knowledge of, but a very large amount of faith in, the one true God; he walks with God; he sees him that is invisible; the presence of God, and God's direct concern about his doings are as familiar and unquestioned elements of his every-day life as they were of Abraham's. In a word (whatever difficulties a shallow theology may find in the fact), he has religious faith in God, a faith which is naturally strong, and has been further intensified by special revelations of the unseen; and this faith is the basis and condition of his prophetic gift. Balaam's religion, therefore, on this side was neither a hypocrisy nor an assumption; it was a real conviction which had grown up with him and formed part of his inner self. It is true that in Josh. 13:22 he is called a soothsayer (kosem), a name of reproach and infamy among the Jews (cf. 1 Sam. 15:23, "witchcraft;" Jer. 14:14, "divination"); but no one doubts that he played for gain the part of a soothsayer, employing with more or less of inward unbelief and contempt the arts of heathen sorcery; and it was quite natural that Joshua should recognize only the lower and more obvious side of his enemy's character.*

*It remains then to consider how Balaam, living in Mesopotamia, could have had so considerable a knowledge of the true God; and the only satisfactory answer is this, that such knowledge had never disappeared from that region. Every glimpse which is afforded us of the descendants of Nahor in their Mesopotamian home confirms the*

---



*belief that they were substantially at one with the chosen family in religious feeling and religious speech. Bethuel and Laban acknowledged the same God, and called him by the same name as Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 24:50; 31:49). No doubt idolatrous practices prevailed in their household (Gen. 31:19; 35:2; Josh. 24:2), but that, however dangerous, was not fatal to the existence of the true faith amongst them, any more than is the existence of a similar cults amongst Christians. Centuries had indeed passed away since the days of Laban, and during those centuries we may well conclude that the common people had developed the idolatrous practices of their fathers, until they wholly obscured the worship of the one true God. But the lapse of years and the change of popular belief make little difference to the secret and higher teaching of countries like the Mesopotamia of that age, which is intensely conservative both for good and evil. Men like Balaam, who probably had a hereditary claim to his position as a seer, remained purely monotheistic in creed, and in their hearts called only upon the God of all the earth, the God of Abraham and of Nahor, of Melchizedec and of Job, of Laban and of Jacob. If we knew enough of the religious history of that land, it is possible that we might be able to point to a tolerably complete succession of gifted (in many cases Divinely-gifted) men, servants and worshippers of the one true God, down to the Magi who first hailed the rising of the bright and morning Star.*

*There is connected with this question another of much narrower interest which causes great perplexity. Balaam (and indeed Balak too) freely uses the sacred name by which God had revealed himself as the God of Israel (see on Exod. 6:2, 3). There are two views of this matter, one or other of which is tolerably certain, and for both of which much may be said: either the sacred name was widely known and used beyond the limits of Israel, or else the sacred historian must have freely put it into the mouths of people who actually used some other name. There are also two views both of which may be summarily rejected, because their own advocates have reduced them to absolute absurdity: the one is, that the use of the two names Elohim and Jehovah shows a difference of authorship; the other, that they are employed by the same author with variety of sense—Elohim (God) being the God of nature, Jehovah (the Lord) the God of grace. It is no doubt true that there are passages where the sole use, or the pointed use, of one or other of these names does really point to a diversity either of authorship or of meaning; but it is abundantly clear that in the general narrative of Scripture, including these chapters, not the least distinction whatever can be drawn between the use of Elohim and Jehovah which will stand the simplest test of common sense; the same ingenuity which explains the occurrence of Elohim instead of Jehovah in any particular sentence would find an explanation quite as satisfactory if it were Jehovah instead of Elohim.*

- II. *Whence did Moses obtain his knowledge of the incidents here recorded, many of which must have been known to Balaam alone? Was it directly, by revelation or from some memorials left by Balaam himself?*

*The former supposition, once generally held, is as generally abandoned now, because it is perceived that inspiration over-ruled and utilized for Divine purposes, but did not*

---

*supersede, natural sources of information. The latter supposition is rendered more probable by these considerations:—*

- 1. That a man of Balaam's character and training would be very likely to put on record the remarkable things which had happened to himself. Such men who habitually lead a double life are often keenly alive to their own errors, and are singularly frank in writing themselves down for the benefit of posterity.*
- 2. That Balaam was slain among the Midianites, and that his effects must have fallen into the hands of the victors. On the other hand, it is inconceivable that Balaam, being what he was, should have written these chapters at all as they stand; the moral and religious intent of the story is too evident in itself, and is too evidently governed by Jewish faith and feeling. It may be allowable to put it before the reader as an opinion which may or may not be true, but which is quite compatible with profound belief in the inspired truth of this part of God's word, that Moses, having obtained the facts in the way above indicated, was moved to work them up into the dramatic form in which they now appear—a form which undoubtedly brings out the character of the actors, the struggle between light and darkness, and the final triumph of light, with much more force (and therefore much more truth) than anything else could. If it be objected that this gives a fictitious character to the narrative, it may be replied that when the imagination is called into exercise to present actual facts, existing characters, and prophecies really uttered in a striking light,—and that under the over-ruling guidance of the Divine Spirit,—the result cannot be called fictitious in any bad or unworthy sense. If it be added that such a theory attributes to this section a character different from the rest of the Book, it may be allowed at once. The episode of Balaam and Balak is obviously, as to literary form, distinct from and strongly contrasted with the narrative which precedes and follows.*

*It has been made a question as to the language in which Balaam and his companions spoke and wrote. The discovery of the Moabite stone has made it certain that the language of the Moabites, and in all probability of the other races descended from Abraham and Lot, was practically the same as the language of the Jews. Balaam's own tongue may have been Aramaic, but amongst his western friends and patrons he would no doubt be perfectly ready to speak as they spoke.<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, W. (1910). Introductory Essay on the Authenticity and Authorship of the Book of Numbers. In H. D. M. Spence, Exell Joseph S. (Eds.), *Numbers* (pp. 287–290). London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

---