

# The Problem of Balaam

There is a great mystery surrounding the appearance of Balaam in the book of Numbers, and one that has not been satisfactorily solved by most commentators. The apparent contradictions in the story are explained in various ways by expositors, but none of which really answers all the questions. Some condemn him as a false prophet, while others even state that he was a true prophet and a worshipper of Yahweh who fell because of a besetting sin. But how could a false prophet, or even an unrighteous real prophet, utter some of the best prophetic blessings in the whole of Scripture? How could a true worshipper of Yahweh be induced to curse Israel? How can a man condemned in the New Testament be used to such great effect by God? And how did an occultist diviner living on the Euphrates get to know the real name of the God of Israel? These are just some of the questions we have to answer; though a daunting task, I will endeavour to do so in this paper.

## Key mentions of Balaam outside of Numbers

Balaam occupies a large portion of Numbers from chapter 22 to 24. We learn of his end from Numbers 31:8. We also learn that he instigated the idolatry at Peor described in Numbers 25, though it doesn't mention Balaam by name there, in Numbers 31; 'Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD' (Num 31:16). What else can we learn from other Scriptures?

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his *descendants* shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever, because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Nevertheless the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you. Deut 23:3-5

The children of Israel also killed with the sword Balaam the son of Beor, the soothsayer, among those who were killed by them. Jos 13:22

Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose to make war against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he continued to bless you. So I delivered you out of his hand. Jos 24:9-10

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God, because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. Neh 13:1-2

They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet. 2 Pt 2:15-16

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. Jude 1:11

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Rev 2:14

Before we look at anything else we need to understand the meaning of his name and family background. 'Balaam', according to some, means 'not of the people' but according to others means 'destroyer of the people', 'consumer of the people' or 'lord of the people'. His father's name, Beor, means 'burning' or 'destruction'. This may imply that his father was a magician also with the power to curse and bring destruction. Balaam was from Pethor in Mesopotamia, and 'Pethor' means 'interpretation of dreams', a town on the west bank of the Euphrates near Carchemish, the home of Arameans who were servants of the god Ammo or Ammu. The Moabites sought Balaam out, from a considerable distance, to curse Israel since he had such a powerful reputation as a clairvoyant and sorcerer.

The first thing we learn from the above texts is that he was a soothsayer (Jos 13:22). 'Soothsayer' is the Hebrew word *qacam* (Strong's 7080) meaning a diviner and it is used of false prophets and prohibited occultism. Combining his name and background it is clear that Balaam must not only be a false prophet in the service of demonic gods, but also a practitioner of forbidden occult arts to divine the future, typical of ancient Mesopotamia, the kingdom of Nimrod and foundation of later Babylonia. Any idea that he was a true prophet of the Lord must be discounted. This wipes out 50% of historical exposition. Sadly even Calvin gets confused on this, affirming that he had the prophetic gift and was sometimes used as a true prophet, despite his art of divination having, *'some affinity to magical exorcisms, and was infected with many errors and deceptions. Still this did not prevent him from being sometimes a true prophet by the inspiration of God's Spirit ... he borrowed devices in various directions, which savoured of nothing but the illusions of the devil'* (*Harmony of the Law*, Vol 4, p143.). This confusion demonstrates the difficulties in this text.

It is confirmed by Peter's statement that he was unrighteous, who adds that he loved money. He was not only a occultist, but a servant of Mammon too. Jude confirms this telling us that he was in error who was greedy for profit. He also associates Balaam with Cain the murderer and Korah the rebel.

We also know that he enticed Israel to sin in terms of idolatry and fornication. Having failed to curse the Israelites by the intervention of God, Balaam served the purpose of the Moabites and Midianites by providing temptation to idolatry and lust.

#### *The association of Balaam with the Nicolaitans*

We can conclude thus far that Balaam was a wicked man in the service of demons and opposed to the true God. This is confirmed in the correlation of Balaam with the Nicolaitans in God's condemnation.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas *was* My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.' Rev 2:12-

16

The word 'Nicolaitans' ('followers of Nicolaus') means 'destruction of people', which equates to the prime meaning of the name 'Balaam'. The Greek of 'Nicolaitans' equals the traditional Jewish rendering of 'Balaam'. The Nicolaitans were guilty of the same sin as Balaam; this is confirmed by the context which refers to Balaam's sin in enticing Israel to

idolatry and immorality: 'you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam ... Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans'.

Now God is said to hate the Nicolaitans' doctrine and deeds (Rev 2:6, 15). By no stretch of the imagination can anyone consider that God loved the Nicolaitans or that they could serve him. In the same way this also applies to Balaam; who was hated by God and did not serve the Lord in any capacity. Indeed Joshua and Moses tell us that God would not listen to Balaam.

#### *Interim conclusion*

Balaam was a false prophet, an occultist in the service of heathen gods and was hated by the true God. He did not only practice divination, but was greedy for money and used occultism to get rich. He was a precursor of the hated Nicolaitans who were severely condemned by God in Revelation 2 for following Balaam in enticing the Lord's people into idolatry and fornication.

## **Grappling with the story of Balak, Balaam and Israel**

It is not feasible to document all the contents of Numbers 22-24 here; we can only make an exposition of the key points and seek to deal with exegetical problems. It is also a curious piece of history since Israel takes no active part and is only indirectly involved, while a false prophet occupies centre stage for three chapters.

Israel's wilderness journeyings were coming to an end and the people pitched camp in the plains of Moab. They had recently destroyed the Amorites, a nation that had previously taken the whole area between the Arnon and the Jabbok from Moab (Num 21:26). Balak, king of the Moabites was terrified, along with his people, who are said to be 'sick with dread' facing Israel encamped just north of their territory. Desperate for deliverance from presumed conflagration, Balak allied with Midian (who were potentially threatened along with Moab) and sent messengers to Balaam in Mesopotamia with a deal guaranteed to make him rich. The irony is that Israel was commanded to avoid battle with Moab (Deut 2:9) since Moab was eldest son of Lot and thus a distant relative. The elders of Moab and Midian lodged with Balaam, and here the difficulties begin.

We must state at the outset that the key thing going on in this narrative is a battle between the true God and the false gods of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian nations. [In the same way the background to the Exodus is the battle between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt; each plague was a judgment on specific Egyptian gods - 'on their gods the LORD had executed judgments' Num 33:4.] The deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage and bringing her into the land of Canaan promised to Abraham was not only to secure the elect but also was condemnation and judgment upon Near Eastern demonic deities.

Balak sought a god to curse Israel and ruin her progress while the true God had promised blessing to his covenant people. It was common in those times for one party to seek the debility of an opponent by means of magic. Armies sought to prevail on the god of an enemy to withhold his support for the people by means of incantations if the enemy was a superior military force. The story of Balaam concerns the battle between Yahweh and demonic deities, emphasising the absolute power and sovereignty of the God of Israel.

#### **The first delegation** Num 22:7-14

The first problem is that Balaam appears to know the covenant name of Yahweh and his attributes. However, the Moabites would have heard of this name and may simply have

told him. Furthermore the events in Egypt, and more recently in other victories, had brought the God of Israel into sharp focus in the Near East and whole nations were terrified of the power of this God (Ex 18:1,11; Jos 2:9-11). In order to gain power over a person, Balaam needs to know what god he serves and then influence that god by sacrifices or gain power over him by alliance with a greater god. Typical of his profession, he gives the impression that he can commune with Yahweh at any time, but this is hubris and professional bluster. Despite the international terror of Israel's god, Balaam proudly presumes that he can influence him.

Deuteronomy reveals that God did not listen to Balaam (Deut 23:5) and Numbers, is also at pains to show that Balaam does not know Yahweh. Balaam says that he will speak with Yahweh (printed as 'LORD' in small caps in most versions, v8) but Numbers says that Balaam spoke to *elohim*. It must be remembered that *elohim* can also refer to judges, rulers, gods, angels and works/possessions of God; like *El* it is a title more than a proper name. It is the ordinary Hebrew word for God and is also used of heathen gods. Yahweh is the covenant name of God's self-revelation to his chosen people alone, which is why he told them 'you shall have no other *elohim* before me' (Ex 20:3).

The delegates had told Balaam the name of Israel's God seeking his influence to prevail over Yahweh to remove his blessing from Israel. To them Yahweh is just another *elohim* as Chemosh was Moab's *elohim* (Num 21:29) and Milkom was the *elohim* of the Ammonites (descendants of Lot's son Ammon, closely connected to the Moabites). However, Balaam does not commune with Yahweh, but rather *elohim*, or a god (v9-12); the text continually juxtaposes Yahweh and *elohim* and there is good reason for translating 'god' with a small 'g' here. There is a definite sense of mockery in the text regarding the hubris of Balaam's claim to be able commune with Yahweh when he wants.

The *elohim* denies permission for Balaam to go with the delegation because Israel is under the blessing of Yahweh and cannot be cursed. Pagan gods are smokescreens for demons (1 Cor 10:20; Lev 17:7; Deut 32:17; 2 Chron 11:15; Rev 9:20) and demons have limitations on their activity established by God's sovereignty (cf. Job 1:12, 2:6; Lk 8:32). Balaam had power to curse others (Num 22:6) but cannot curse Israel and has no influence with Yahweh. The elders return to Balak and tell him the news that Balaam refuses to curse Israel; so Balak sends a new delegation of more important people and promises of great riches.

### **The second delegation** Num 22:15-21

Seeking to impress the delegation, Balaam claims that Israel's Lord is his God, 'Yahweh my *elohim*' (Num 22:18) – this is the first time this phrase is found in the Bible. But we know from the Biblical background that this is not true; indeed Yahweh is his adversary (22:32). What Balaam is doing is claiming that the God of Israel is known to him to boost his prowess as a soothsayer. The men lodge with Balaam as he seeks to hear from his god. An *elohim* tells him in the night (a dream?) to go with the princes to Balak, which he did. Balaam claimed to have met with Yahweh, but he had merely heard from a god.

### **The anger of the Lord**

The biggest problem in the text is what happens next. Though given permission to leave with the princes by *elohim*, when Balaam went *elohim* was angry with him (Num 22:22). The reading of *elohim* here is not correct, even though it appears in the Masoretic text. The Samaritan Pentateuch and several important manuscripts of the Septuagint read, 'the LORD [Yahweh] became very angry'. It is impossible to consider that Numbers carefully distinguishes between Yahweh and *elohim* in this context to make a clear point, and then demolishes this with a contradiction.

If we do not accept that the normal reading is wrong, we have serious problems in the text that are unanswerable. Despite Scripture overwhelmingly showing us that Balaam is an occultist and false prophet, if we do not change this reading then the text supports the idea that Balaam was a true prophet and awful exegetical problems result, not least that Numbers contradicts the New Testament. The distinction between Yahweh and *elohim* in this passage must be maintained.

Most commentators struggle to explain this as a result of not adopting the better reading. The usual method of dispelling the contradiction is to say that Balaam sinned in desiring riches, or more usually, that he sinned in not waiting. The permission to go was conditionally based on Balaam being called by the princes, but verse 21 mentions no calling. This is clutching at straws. Very many eminent commentators ignore the problem altogether. The best that commentators can come up with is that God's apparent permission to go in verse 20 is actually a punishment since Balaam had already been told not to go in verse 12 (this is Calvin's approach); but this is not indicated in the text and it still poses mutability in God's will.

The anger of Yahweh is manifested in the Angel of the Lord resisting Balaam's way. This long passage repeatedly uses Yahweh as the opponent of Balaam, emphasising that it was the God of Israel who condemned him. The signal miracle of speaking through the mouth of a donkey highlights the importance of this passage. The kings of the area had sought power from the gods to curse Israel but instead God revealed himself through a donkey, as if to mock the best that the enemy could muster. The true God can use even a donkey to do his will, but all the gods of Canaan cannot achieve anything at all. The best soothsayer that occult religion could then provide was helpless in the face of his own donkey that had more revelation than he did. This is powerful sarcasm to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Canaanite gods.

Verse 32 confirms that Balaam is a false prophet engaged on a fool's errand; the Angel of the Lord, the messenger of Yahweh, states that Balaam's way is perverse before God and verse 22 affirms that Balaam is God's enemy. Then this Angel (Christ in his pre-incarnate form) gives permission for Balaam to speak the words Yahweh will give him (v35). If the true God had earlier given permission for him to speak (in v20) there would be no need for the Lord to repeat it. Having condemned his behaviour, Yahweh now overrules what Balaam will say.

#### **Balaam meets Balak** Num 22:36-40

Balak is panicking at the time Balaam has taken to arrive, fearing an attack. But Balaam, having been confronted by Yahweh, states that he can only prophesy what his deity (*elohim*) tells him. The awkwardness of the meeting need not detain us; gradually Balak changes his reproachful attitude (23:25) to one of request (23:27). Meanwhile Balaam is treated to a feast of honour.

#### **Balaam is unable to curse Israel but blesses her**

We have seen the progress of Yahweh bringing Balaam from a point of arrogant overconfidence in his soothsaying abilities with foreign gods, to absolute capitulation to Yahweh's will. Balaam has been made to look foolish, of less understanding than a donkey, and has finally come to Balak only by the permission given by Yahweh for a special purpose.

Balaam then gives four categorical oracles of surpassing clarity, richness and wisdom regarding Israel. Clearly this is the opening of Balaam's mouth to utter the truth of God's

purposes in just the same way as God opened the mouth of Balaam's donkey. These oracles are so amazing that they deserve exposition on their own and will not be entered into here.

'Oracle' (NKJV) is the Hebrew word *masal*, which is a pronouncement or proverb in poetic form with a deep meaning. This word is never applied to the proclamations of Israel's prophets, or to the Psalms, in order to distance Balaam from true prophecy. He is merely acting as a channel or mouthpiece of God under divine power, but without covenant relationship.

After these, Balaam gives three more oracles that appear to have been inserted at a later time when the book was compiled since they have no bearing on Israel or Moab.

What Yahweh has done through this episode is to bring an arrogant occultist soothsayer, whose claim was to be able to influence Near Eastern deities to bring about blessing or cursing, into total conformity to his sovereign will and establish his chosen people. Balaam's confidence in manipulating his deity, his god with a small 'g', is brought into direct capitulation to the true God, Yahweh, the God of Israel. The most powerful Chaldean prophet is forced to act against his will and bless Israel. Along the way this chief occultist is mocked and shown to possess less spiritual sense than his own donkey. While Israel defeated human kings in possessing the land, the Lord shows us that demonic forces are also defeated when they seek to destroy Israel. Having failed in his mission and having been ridiculed, in anger Balaam goes on to entice Israel to sin by idolatry and fornication – his end is fully justified when it comes some time later at the hands of Israel's army.

## Conclusion

By any standard the Balaam narrative is exceptional and mysterious. It requires reading with wisdom and care. However, it must also be read within the context of what Scripture as a whole tells us about the man, and this confirms that he is a false prophet and an unrighteous, greedy man who caused Israel to sin by idolatry. It is thus a great folly to presume that he could be a true prophet, or a prophet of Yahweh who falls into apostasy. This course leads to grave textual problems and confusion. I have yet to find a Bible student that is not confused by this passage.

Only by carefully discerning the difference between *elohim*, here meaning foreign deities, and Yahweh, the God of Israel, can we hope to unravel the text. By doing so the difficulties are removed and the passage stands as a clear revelation of the sovereignty of God over heathen gods, and his upholding of the covenant security of the elect. As the Exodus was the triumph of God over the false gods of Egypt, so the Balaam story is a triumph of Yahweh over the gods of the Canaanites. The gods of Israel's enemy and oppressor, Egypt, were chastised but the gods of Israel's relatives, the Moabites, were also condemned. Yahweh is supreme over all; there are no gods before him and his covenant people are secure.

[Note: I consulted several commentaries regarding this passage, and even much valued ones were disappointing; many commentaries do not even comment of the crucial verses. However, I must commend the commentary by A Noordtzij in the Dutch *Korte Verklaring* (reprinted in English by Zondervan as the *Bible Students Commentary*) as being especially useful and to which I am indebted.]

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