

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Balaam the Son of Beor

One of the more interesting and often overlooked characters in the writings of Moses is the character of Balaam. Most people know that he was the man whose donkey talked, but what is the real lesson behind this story? And who was Balaam the son of Beor? He appears on the Biblical scene suddenly and dramatically in Numbers 22. His story is an interesting one, and one that stands out in that book. But who was he exactly, and what can we learn from his story?

Who and what he was can be answered for us, not from the Old Testament, but from the New. For in II Peter 2:15-16 we read of Balaam. Peter is speaking of unfaithful people, and says, "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."

Notice those last three words, "of the prophet." That is what Balaam was, a prophet. Moreover, he was not a false prophet, as some have accused him of being, but a prophet of the Lord. It is clearly the Lord he serves, and that fact is attested to many times in the story about him. (For example, in Numbers 22:8, it is the LORD that Balaam goes to consult and none other.)

Now the meaning of the word prophet must be considered. In English we use the word "prophet" for those who foretell the future. This was not its meaning in Hebrew. A prophet was simply one who spoke forth the word of God. That word of God may have had to do with the past. That word of God may have had to do with the present. And, sometimes, that word of God may have had to do with the future. But the important point was that the message was the word of God, not the word of a man.

Now it seems Balaam had come by the reputation of being able to bless or curse people, and his blessing or curse would always come true. We cannot be sure how he came to have this reputation, but it is likely that some time during his career as a prophet he had spoken a message from God that someone would be cursed and that curse had come true. At another time, perhaps, he had spoken a message from God that someone else would be blessed and that blessing had come true. From events such as these, perhaps several such events, the reputation that he could bless or curse had arisen. This was a false reputation, but it was his reputation nonetheless. Such a reputation would have brought him great fame, and no doubt caused others to view him with awe and respect. Balaam seems to have enjoyed the benefits of such a reputation, and we have no indication that he ever sought to correct this incorrect impression people had of him.

Now Balak, the king of Moab, comes on the scene. He has heard this reputation of Balaam, and, fearing the people of Israel, sends his messengers, the elders of Moab and Midian, to Balaam to ask him to come and curse this people for him, as we read in Numbers 22:2-7. Upon receiving the king's message, Balaam surely knew what he should do. He knew very well that he had no power in and of himself to bless or curse, and he should have stated this boldly and plainly to these men. Only when the Lord told him to bless or curse was he able to do so. Yet it seems that he thought of the honor, prestige, and power that he knew would be his if he were able to do so great a favor for the king of Moab. Visions of wealth and fame must have filled his head, and he must have felt that it was worth the chance to try for such pleasures. Thus, rather than dismissing the messengers, he invites them into his home, excusing his actions by saying, "I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me."

The Lord surely did not have to respond to Balaam's request for an audience. Balaam knew very well that he only blessed or cursed on the Lord's command, and no such command had been given. Balaam had no right to request a blessing or curse and he knew it. Yet it seems God was gracious to Balaam and came to him in answer to his prayer. Indeed, our Lord is ever so, for as He declared while He was on earth, "Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick." (Mark 2:17) Balaam was sick, and the Great Physician would attempt to heal him if he would let Him.

Thus God comes to Balaam and, as He often does in trying to correct His wayward children, asks of him a question: "Who are these men with you?" Balaam explains, and God replies plainly to their request, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

A more plain and unmistakable statement could not be made, and Balaam should have given up the idea right then and there. However, it seems he could not bring himself to totally cut himself off from the possibility of the reward he hoped for, so in the morning he told the messengers only that: "The Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you." These words, a wishy-washy watering down of the Lord's plain and powerful statement, had the result of leaving the issue open to question. The Lord had not allowed Balaam to go, but that did not cut off the possibility that he still might. And the message was watered down even more when the messengers returned to Balak and reported the situation to him as it seemed to them, that "Balaam refuses to come with us."

Balak's response is to assume that Balaam is playing hard to get. Instead of realizing that Balaam can never grant his request, he instead believes that Balaam simply desires more incentive. Thus, he sends to Balaam a second contingency of messengers, this time made up of more numerous and more honorable princes than he had sent at first. They promise Balaam great honor and power, and beseech him to come up with them.

Balaam's response to this cannot help but earn our admiration. He says in Numbers 22:18, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more." These words are powerful and impressive, and are exactly what Balaam should have said on this occasion. If this were all Balaam had said, we would be inclined to admire him. Yet it seems that these words did not truly reflect Balaam's heart. Perhaps they were spoken for the benefit of Balaam's friends and neighbors, who no doubt had gathered to see what had caused all these rich and powerful princes to gather in their town. Or maybe Balaam just wanted to impress these important visitors with his resolve. At any rate, the next words out of his mouth reveal that his heart is not in this refusal, for he tells them, "Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me."

God is once again gracious and comes to Balaam that night. He does not mince words with Balaam, but gives him most certain instructions as to what he should do. He tells 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."

We can well imagine that Balaam spent a sleepless night. Visions of the wealth and power that could be his from King Balak must have filled his thoughts, and his ears must have been tuned to the slightest noise. He waited hoping against hope to hear the bleating of the animals of the mighty princes approaching his door, or the step of the princes' feet as they stepped on his threshold, or the knock on the door that would signify their arrival. Yet his hopes were in vain, and the morning came without a summons from these men. Thus Balaam knew what the LORD wanted him to do. The princes had not called him, thus he could not go with them. That was the LORD's will, and Balaam knew it. Yet, in deliberate disobedience to God's command, he got up, saddled his donkey, and rode to where the men were to go with them back to Balak. Perhaps he deceived himself into thinking that the LORD would overlook a little detail like who summoned whom. Perhaps he decided to believe their summons the day before was good enough. But the fact was that God's message to him was clear, and had not changed from the last message he had

received. He was not to go with these men. He had been tested, and had failed, deliberately disobeying God.

Thus God is greatly angry with him, and the angel of the LORD waits along the way to kill him. Yet even now God is willing to see Balaam repent, and so he gives power to Balaam's donkey to see the avenging angel waiting alongside the road. Thus the donkey turns from the path, avoiding the angel. Balaam sees nothing, and, displeased with the donkey, beats her. Twice more this occurs. Once the LORD is waiting in a narrow place and the donkey turns aside into the wall, again receiving a beating from Balaam. The final time the LORD waits where there is no place for the donkey to turn, and so she simply lies down under Balaam. Balaam is so furious that he beats the donkey all the more. At this point, the LORD works a miracle, speaking to Balaam through the donkey. The donkey chides Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

Balaam surely should have recognized the voice of the LORD in this message. Yet he was so full of anger and so set in his rebellion against the LORD that he does not even marvel at the miracle of a donkey talking. Instead he argues with the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" Balaam was so filled with rage that he would have killed the LORD's messenger right there if he could! And at that moment the LORD opens Balaam's eyes and he sees the Angel. All chance for faith is past. Balaam has failed to heed the LORD's words, and now faith gives way to sight as Balaam realizes how close his rebellion had taken him to death.

Now Balaam contritely offers to return home, but he has gone too far to back out now. Now he must go through with the mad course he had chosen out for himself. Thus the LORD tells him, "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak."

Thus he continues on his way and arrives at the home of Balak. Balak reproves him, asking him why he had not come when first summoned. Balaam had not delivered the LORD's message correctly, and thus he has nothing to say in response to Balak now. He must weakly respond that, "Look, I have come to you! Now, have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak."

Then Balak attempts to get Balaam to curse the children of Israel. First he takes him up to the high places of Baal. Then in Numbers 23:1 Balaam orders that seven altars be built and seven bulls and seven rams be offered. This was a great show of religiosity. Yet this great pomp and circumstance was totally unnecessary, and only served to mask the unfaithfulness in Balaam's walk with the LORD. Often men thus attempt to disguise their spiritual shortcomings with shows of religious dedication such as this.

Finally, Balaam goes to meet the LORD, and God meets him. Balaam is quick to try to impress God just as he had impressed Balak by pointing out to Him, "I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram." The LORD is not impressed by Balaam's actions, however, and responds by putting His words in his mouth. Balaam apparently did not even know what the word of the LORD was going to be this time before he spoke it. Balaam had changed the word of the LORD so many times before that now God will not trust him with the word, but he will speak it whether he wants to or not.

Balaam returns to Balak and speaks the words that God put in his mouth. They are a blessing on Israel, not a curse. Balak is, of course, angry, and claims that Balaam has wronged him in that he hired him to curse Israel and he has blessed them. Balaam replies that he must take heed to speak what the LORD has put in his mouth.

Balak, hoping perhaps that seeing a smaller portion of the Israelites might entice Balaam to curse them rather than bless them, moves Balaam to a place called the field of Zophim at the top of Pisgah. Here Balaam again puts on a great religious show before going forward to meet the LORD. Again the LORD comes to him and puts a word in his mouth, and again it turns out to be a word

of blessing, also containing a rebuke against Balak for thinking that God would change His mind. Balak is getting angrier now, but decides to try one more time. This time he takes Balaam to the top of Peor that overlooks the wasteland, thinking perhaps that Balaam might be able to curse Israel from this vantage point.

This time, Balaam, after performing his trademark religious show, seems to realize that his display had not worked to change God's mind, and so he does not go forward to meet the LORD. Instead he merely turns toward the wilderness and, seeing the orderly camp of the Israelites, speaks his parable, declaring in the clearest and most unmistakable way possible the blessed place Israel has in the sight of God. Balak is furious, and complains to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times!" Then, he warns Balaam to flee to his place (or his home,) saying, "I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor." He does not order Balaam killed, but his intimation in telling him to flee seems to be that if he doesn't run quickly he might be! Balaam, all hope of reward seemingly gone, speaks boldly the words of truth to Balak, telling him that, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; but what the LORD says, that I must speak." Then, he flees back to his hometown. The honor, glory, and fame he had hoped for did not materialize, and instead he returns home in disgrace and fear for his life. This was his reward for his disobedience to the Word of God and his lack of faith.

This had been a hard lesson for Balaam, and we could wish that he would have taken it to heart. Yet it seems, alas, that he did not. For, having returned home in disgrace, his thoughts continued to turn back to that reward he had so hoped for, and his mind continued to scheme for ways he might yet earn it. At last, it seems that an idea came to him. For Balaam knew the LORD, although he seems to have loved the rewards of this world more than his Master, and therefore he knew what pleased the LORD and what displeased him. And so it occurred to him that if he could not get the LORD to curse the Israelites for Balak, that he might instead get the LORD to curse them for their own sin. Thus it seems that, with a new plan in mind, Balaam returned to Balak, still hopeful of receiving his reward. Although we have no record of this visit or what went on during it, it seems that Balaam explained to Balak the great jealousy God has for His great Name and how He will not share His glory with idols. He might also have explained to him the laws of marriage that the LORD has and His aversion to prostitution. Then, it seems, he urged Balak to send not his army against the children of Israel, but rather an army of women, prostitutes, to defeat them. If these women could entice the Israelites to lie with them and, in doing so, proclaim the price for their services to be service to their idols, then Balaam was certain that God would be furious with the Israelites and, he believed, would curse them for Balak at last. (Numbers 31:16)

It seems that Balak listened to this advice of Balaam's, for this was the strategy he used against the Israelites, and, alas, it seemed at first to work. A large number of Israelite men were led astray by these prostitutes and ended up offering worship to their gods. God became angry with Israel, and a great plague began in the camp. His anger was allayed, however, by one heroic man, Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest. He saw an Israelite man, a member of the qahal itself, leading a prostitute into the camp to take to his family even as the Israelite leaders wept before the LORD. Taking up a javelin, he followed this man into the tent and stuck the spear through both him and the woman, killing them both together. This action pleased the LORD, and he stopped the plague that was consuming the people. (Numbers 25)

God was not ignorant of the cause of Israel's troubles, however. He knew exactly what Balaam had done. Thus, when they went out and obeyed the LORD's command to attack the Midianites, Balaam too was killed and died for his error, as we read in Numbers 31:8.

Thus Balaam came to an end, put to death as an enemy of the LORD. How did this come to be, that a prophet of the LORD would come to such an ignominious end? The answer is simple. Balaam loved the pleasures of this world! His mind was full of the rewards he would receive as the favored one of Balak king of Moab, and he forgot the reward he should have been seeking: the favor

of the LORD. Thus the enticement of worldly gain and advancement drew him away from the LORD to the place where he actually became the LORD's enemy and ended up losing his life.

What a sad story this is. Yet this spirit of Balaam is, unfortunately, not unusual. How many Balaam spirits are there even today among the clergy of Christendom? How many who, though they may truly know the LORD, yet are more concerned with their own glory and gain than with serving him faithfully? The tragic tale of Balaam is a warning to all of us of the dangers of loving the things of this world more than the LORD we claim to love and serve!

Nathan C. Johnson