

Numbers 22: Balaam's Donkey

By
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"Then the children of Israel moved, and camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho. Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because they were many, and Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel. So Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.' And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time. Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying: 'Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, and are settling next to me! 'Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.' 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. And he said to them, 'Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me.' So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. Then God came to Balaam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' So Balaam said to God, 'Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, '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.' " And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you." And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us." Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. 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; 'for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.' " 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 my God, to do less or more. "Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me." And God 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." So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab. Then God's anger was aroused because

he went, and the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way as an adversary against him. And he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. Now the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand, and the donkey turned aside out of the way and went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. Then the Angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. Then the Angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" So the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?" And he said, "No." Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face. And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me. "The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live." And Balaam said to the Angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." Then the Angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak. Now when Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the border at the Arnon, the boundary of the territory. Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not earnestly send to you, calling for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?" And Balaam said to Balak, "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." So Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kirjath Huzoth. Then Balak offered oxen and sheep, and he sent some to Balaam and to the princes who were with him."

-Numbers 22:1-40

Before we dive into this really amazing, albeit strange passage, I did want to mention that I am on vacation while writing this and so I won't be doing a full essay like usual, but instead I will write out my general thoughts in a "bullet point" type fashion. Numbers 22 is actually one of my favorite stories in the Bible, mainly because of how odd it is. For

the ancient person, it would be stories like this, the more mythic and symbolic, that would be the most edifying for them. Whereas the modern person is mainly put off from the strangeness of this story and gets hung up on the literal nature of this story, IE, did Balaam's donkey literally speak to him or not.

For our ancestors, it was the *idea* that the donkey spoke that would captivate their attention. This action, in and of itself, would have been filled with deep and profound meaning. The other modern tendency would be to simply derive a simple moral from the story and move on. IE, Balaam was motivated by greed and corruption, therefore he is a bad person and we should learn to not be led by greed. While this is not a bad interpretation, it is one dimensional and therefore almost useless.

In order to better understand this story we will take a look at two fairy tales, one German and one Russian. The reason is that these medieval stories, though they aren't very removed from us chronologically, the medieval person had far more in common with Moses and the ancient Israelites than they have with us. As such they can act as a sort of bridge to help us wrestle through the deeper and more profound implications of this story.

The Practical

"Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because they were many, and Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel. So Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.' And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time. Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying: 'Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, and are settling next to me! 'Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.'"

-Numbers 22:2-6

Before I do this I wanted to get some practical points out of the way.

First, the people described in this story are not pure pagans from Canaan, they are near kin with the Israelites. The Moabites are descended from Abraham's nephew Lot and Lot's oldest daughter, from the very disturbing story in Genesis 19. The Midianites are descended from Abraham and one of his concubines, Keturah. Also, Midian is the wilderness that Moses fled to in Exodus 2, his wife is descended from this tribe and his

father-in-law Jethro was a priest from this tribe. It was also in the wilderness of Midian that Moses encountered God at the burning bush, and where Israel encountered God at Mount Sinai.

These facts should give us two main insights. The first is that it shouldn't shock us that Balaam, although he isn't an Israelite, he is a prophet of the true and living God. Although it seems that Midian and Moab have become largely pagan, it seems as though they have maintained their connection to the true and living God. Also, Israel has been wandering in this wilderness for a generation. These two facts should be sufficient for us to understand how Balaam could have been a genuine prophet for God.

Also, this story is reflective of the previous encounter that Israel had with Edom. This generation is being exposed to generational trauma in order to grow. Also, this story is set up as an analogue for a return to Eden. So they have to pass through various older conflicts to move closer and closer to the original conflict of mankind and Satan himself. This is why they had to confront Edom, the descendents of Esau, and repeat the pattern of conflict set up by Jacob and Esau all those years ago. But now they are reliving an older conflict, the conflict between Isaac and the other sons of Abraham, and Abraham and his own Nephew Lot.

Next, an interesting fact about Balaam's name:

"Unto Balaam the son of Beer. בַּלְעָם is derived either from בָּלַע, to destroy or devour, and אָם, the people; or simply from בָּלַע, with the terminal syllable ׀, "the destroyer." The former derivation receives some support from Rev. 2:14, Rev. 2:15, where "Nicolaitans" are thought by many to be only a Greek form of "Balaamites" Νικόλαος, from νικάω and λαός). Beor (בְּעוֹר) has a similar signification, from בָּעַר, to burn, or consume. Both names have probable reference to the supposed effect of their maledictions, for successful cursing was an hereditary profession in many lands, as it still is in some." The error of antiquity lay in ignorance or forgetfulness that, as water cannot rise higher than its source, so neither blessing nor cursing can possibly take any effect beyond the will and purpose of the Father of our souls. Balaam knew this, but it was perhaps his misfortune to have been trained from childhood to maintain his position and his wealth by trading upon the superstitions of his neighbours."

-The Pulpit Commentary

Notice that Balaam's name is related to the words for "burn" and "consume". This continues the theme of "fire" that has been present throughout this book. It also foreshadows the way in which Balaam succeeds in cursing the people of Israel. In the next chapters, Balaam actually functions as a good prophet to God and only speaks

blessing over the people of God. However, later on in this book we learn that Balaam concocts a plan to tempt the men of Israel away from God by having them intermarry with the women from Midian. In other words, a man who was burned up by his own lust caused the downfall of Israel by introducing them to sensual lust.

Donkey's in Scripture

It is also important to understand the role of donkeys in the ancient world as well as in Scripture before some of the symbolism of this passage will make sense to us:

“In the biblical context, she-asses, or female donkeys, hold significant practical and symbolic importance. They are frequently mentioned throughout the Scriptures, serving as essential assets in the agrarian and pastoral lifestyle of ancient Israel. The she-ass is often depicted as a valuable possession, indicative of wealth and status, and is used for transportation, labor, and breeding... She-asses were highly valued for their endurance, strength, and ability to navigate the rugged terrain of the Near East. They were used for carrying loads, plowing fields, and as a means of transportation. The ownership of she-asses is often mentioned alongside other livestock, such as oxen and sheep, to denote prosperity and divine blessing.”

-Bible Hub Topical Encyclopedia - “She-asses”

Further information about donkeys: we see female donkeys as a symbol of wealth in the list of Abram's assets in Genesis, as well as Job's. This is also shown to be a sign of Judah's eventual prosperity and reign over the other tribes of Israel in Jacob's prophecy over Judah in Genesis 49. Since donkeys are lower to the ground, they don't have as much use in battle, so riding a donkey, especially for a general or a leader is a sign of peace and humility, hence Zechariah 9 which Jesus fulfills when He entered into Jerusalem the week of His crucifixion:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.”

-Zechariah 9:9

We will talk more about the above passage later. Oddly enough, donkeys are also associated with hearing from God. This story makes it obvious, but in the book of Genesis, the sons of Jacob ride donkeys to get grain from Egypt and it is here that they encounter Joseph. In probably the most strange example of this, a judge for God, Samson, seizes the jawbone of a donkey to slay a thousand men. In 1 Samuel 9, the first king of Israel, Saul, first hears his call to be king from the prophet Samuel when he

is out looking for lost donkeys. It is also a female donkey that carries a widow to speak to another prophet, Elisha, in 2 Kings 4 when her son dies.

The Voice of Ambition

“Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. 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; ‘for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.’” 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 my God, to do less or more. “Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.”

-Numbers 22:15-19

With the foundation set, we can now approach this passage in a more discernable way. Once again, what I am about to say doesn't discount the literal reading of this passage, IE, that Balaam's donkey *literally* spoke to him. Only that the symbolic meaning is far more important and relevant for our lives. So, as I stated before, we will talk about two different fairy tales to understand the significance of the talking donkey.

The first is an old Russian fairy tale entitled “The Fire Bird, the Horse of Power, and the Princess Vasilissa”. For our purposes here, the significance of horses in ancient texts is fairly similar to the significance of donkeys. Here's a brief summary. A poor hunter is out riding on his faithful horse one day, when he encounters the feather of the rare, mythic, fire bird lying across his path. He immediately dismounts his horse to retrieve the feather for himself but is warned by his horse that to take the feather was to encounter grief and peril.

The young hunter, not knowing if he had the restraint to leave the feather on the ground decides that a good compromise would be to give the feather to the king as a gift. The king is happy with the gift, but demands that the hunter get the actual fire bird as a gift, otherwise he will kill the young hunter. The hunter approaches his faithful steed while he weeps and asks for advice. The horse tells the hunter not to weep yet, for the true grief lies in front of him. He gives the hunter advice that allows him to capture the mythic bird and the wicked king turns the fire bird into a caged pet.

The king then commands the weary hunter to seek out the princess Vasilissa, rumored to be immortal and more beautiful than any other woman, to be his wife, or he will kill him. With the aid of his horse, the young hunter meets Vasilissa near the ocean and

after spending a night talking with her, captures her and brings her to the king. The angered princess orders that the hunter be thrown into a pot of boiling water as a wedding present.

The horse gives the hunter one last piece of advice, he tells the hunter that now is the time to mourn for he faces his death. But he tells the hunter to not wait to be thrown into the cauldron, but instead to run and leap into the waters. The hunter follows the horse's advice and leaps into the cauldron, but instead of dying in the waters, he is transformed into a glowing figure, immortal figure. The wicked king, believing that the waters could regenerate him the same as the hunter leaps into the same waters, but is killed in the boiling water and the hunter and Vasilisa are wed, after freeing the fire bird, and they live happily ever after.

Even though these stories are very different in many ways, they contain the same basic message. The feather of the fire bird represents restlessness and ambition. The young and inexperienced hunter's first instinct is to "imprison" the beauty of the feather for his own glory. This foolish ambition is then mirrored by a higher power, the king, who wishes to imprison both the fire bird and the princess Vasilissa. This sets up a parallel between the hunter's ambition and the king's.

Before we move on to the next point, I want to reiterate something found in this story, as well as Balaam's. As you can see, the "moral" of this story is not clear. The hunter is not really a "good man" until the end, and the ending is incredibly strange. It is only the modern mind that desires clear cut lessons, the ancient mind was far more content with ambiguity and nuance. This doesn't mean they were moral relativists, but instead it means that their capacity to understand the world of the spirit was far deeper than ours is today. If we look at this story as a simple matter of a greedy prophet, we will miss the richness this story has to offer.

Like the hunter in this story who is brought on this adventure by the feather of the firebird, Balaam is drawn into the story in Numbers by the ambition of the king. This is why it is not a coincidence that the names of Balaam and Balaak are so similar, the Bible is setting up a parallel between them. Both men are led by their ambition and don't know how to be grounded. The voice of humility and grounding, which we will talk about in a second, is the voice of the donkey.

This is also why it isn't a mistake that only two animals are recorded talking in Scripture, Balaam's donkey, and the voice of the serpent in Genesis:

“Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. “For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

-Genesis 3:4-5

The voice of ambition is not necessarily bad, but when it isn't tempered by the voice of humility it leads us to ruin. Even though the young boy is led by the allure of the fire bird, he is also attentive to the voice of his horse which turns the danger of the story into a boon for him. The end of the story then becomes a type of baptism. The same waters that are purifying to the humble hunter are deadly for the ambitious king.

In the same way, the ambitious king wants Balaam to curse the people of Israel, but instead his will is undone by the voice of the prophet. Because Balaam heeded the voice of his donkey, he is preserved from God's judgement.

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

-1 Timothy 6:6-10

The Temptation of the Prophet

“And the Angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me.”

-Numbers 22:32

But, we know from a future passage, that Balaam eventually succumbs to his temptation and tempts Israel to sin. This is one of the significant aspects of Balaam striking his donkey three times. We have spoken before about the significance of three for the ancient person. It doesn't mean that this literally only happened three times, this number is there to show us that in all the opportunities that God gave to Balaam, he ignored the guidance of his donkey, and instead beat his faithful donkey.

Even though he eventually listened to the donkey, it was only after he was shown the danger in his path. Balaam's heart was hardened against God and that is why, while he succeeded for a time, he eventually fell to his temptation. This is the heavy calling of the

person who follows after God. When someone is given the ability to speak “on behalf” of God, there is an incredible temptation to use that ability to meet with our ambition.

Even as a pastor, which is a lower form of power than a prophet, the knowledge that I could fairly easily use my gifts to further my own ambitions and turn the words of God into fuel for my own desires is strong, and if we don’t fight it, our end will be doom for ourselves and others. This fact helps us understand the heavy penalty on Moses, but even a similar heavy penalty on a prophet in the book of 1 Kings who is tricked into eating in someone’s house and is killed by a lion:

“So it was, after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk, that he saddled the donkey for him, the prophet whom he had brought back. When he was gone, a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his corpse was thrown on the road, and the donkey stood by it. The lion also stood by the corpse.”

-1 Kings 13:23-24

Once again, we have the lion, which can be a picture of power and majesty, that devours the prophet. He fell to his lust and was consumed by the very glory that made him stray from his path. Using spiritual gifts is an abomination to God. A similar thing happens in the book of Acts:

“And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! “You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. “For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.” Then Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me.”

-Acts 8:18-24

Once again, this is an ambiguous figure. He is saved, but is a magician. His ambition makes him want the power to “bestow” the Holy Spirit on whom he would choose, but he is rebuked by Peter for being short sighted and wicked. Peter warns about this spirit in his second letter:

“...having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. 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 Peter 2:14-16

When we are led by our ambition, our vision is clouded. This is why he couldn't see danger standing in his path, much as the hunter couldn't see the danger lying beyond the fire bird's feather. Once again, ambition can be good, but without humility it will always lead us to ruin.

The Humble Voice

"Then the Angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" So the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?" And he said, "No." Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face."

-Numbers 22:26-31

This sets us up to understand the voice of humility given to us by the donkey. The donkey is a lowly creature who is content to serve as a beast of burden. Its voice is not lovely or glorious, but the braying of a donkey is obnoxious and loud. And yet, the humble voice of this creature contains great wisdom. The donkey sees the danger and tries to deviate from the false path of Balaam, even hurting Balaam to do it. But finally the donkey sees the correct option, he bows before the will of God before Balaam does the same. The donkey teaches the ambitious to bow.

This is similar to Jiminy Cricket in Pinocchio. The obnoxious chirping of the lowly cricket is the voice of conscience that leads him to wisdom and humility. This leads us to the next story, "The Donkey", recorded for us by the Grimm brothers from Germany, though the story is much older than the brothers Grimm.

In this story a king and queen are barren and pray for an heir. Unfortunately instead of a son, a donkey is born to them. The wife wants to drown the donkey, but the king restrains her and has his son raised in the court. The donkey grows and is refined in the

court and eventually falls in love with a princess from a neighboring kingdom. The donkey's manners and musical skills charms, but the donkey is too humble to ask for her hand and is instead grieved and sullen. The king however, sensing the donkey's sorrow asks if he would like the princesses hand in marriage, the donkey agrees and a wedding is set.

After the wedding the king has a servant follow the donkey and the bride to their room to make sure the donkey treats his daughter well, and they see the donkey remove his skin and reveal that he is actually a handsome prince. After hearing this from his servant, the king has the servant burn the donkey's skin so the prince can't put it back on. This distresses the prince who tries to leave the kingdom, but the king convinces the prince to stay. He then becomes king of the land of his bride, and then also receives the kingdom of his parents, and he and his bride live happily ever after.

As you can see, this story is essentially an inversion of the previous one. The voice of the donkey, the voice of humility is so native to the prince, that it covers him like a skin. Because of this, he needs the voice of the king to call him to ambition. For though he is humble, he doesn't have the will to become what he needs. This helps us understand how God can both command Balaam to go, and yet be mad at him for going.

The amazing prophecies of Balaam are only possible if Balaam heeds the king's summons. However, without the voice of humility, he would have immediately fallen to the lure of ambition. Like with Moses, it is ultimately our humility that will help us hear from God. There was a story relayed by the psychologist Carl Jung of a Rabbi who was asked why people don't hear from God anymore. And the Rabbi wisely replied that we don't hear from God because there is no longer anyone who can bow low enough.

But humility without ambition is a life of passivity. We need to be humble enough to hear the voice of God calling to us in our conscience, but ambitious enough to take that calling out and share it with the world.

Christ and Balaam

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey."

-Zechariah 9:9

The final thing that I want to point out is the strange relationship between Christ and Balaam. Just as Christ is related to Jonah, this parallel shouldn't shock us. Christ is also

carried by a donkey to speak before the powerful and rich of his day. And like Balaam, this would lead to the proclamation of God's kingdom and the death of the prophet, namely Christ. The difference is that Balaam, like Jonah, was not punished for being faithful, but for being faithless. Christ is the faithful prophet who humbled Himself to the point of the cross. He allowed the voice of conscience and humility to guide Him to the full and complete knowledge of God's will in His life, but He also had the ambition to live into that call, even though it cost Him His life.

So in this story we see two things. First, we need to follow Christ's example. To see our lives and learn to walk humbly and obedient before the Lord, but also be bold before the powerful around us. But more importantly it is to remember that Christ takes the place of the faithless not the faithful. The reason why Christ received the reward of the faithless prophet is because none of us has lived properly in relationship to our calling. We have all been either too passive or too ambitious. Therefore we need the forgiveness of God and the redemption of His Son. So, like in all these stories, we learn their lessons but we also seek to see the grace of Christ present within them.