

The Bible's Most Amazing Stories:  
Balaam and the Donkey

**Numbers 21**

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road.

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her again.

Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her."

Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."

The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

**The Person of Balaam**

Who and what was Balaam? His name in the biblical text literally means "he who destroys the people," possibly a distortion of his original name, meaning a "divine brings forth." Balaam was from Pethor, located in northern Mesopotamia about twelve miles south of Carchemish, four hundred miles from Moab. While his identity has been debated, it appears that Balaam was a *baru* prophet, that is, a kind of diviner who looks at animals, birds, ants, and the livers of sacrificed animals to predict the future. He was hired by Balak to curse Israel. Apparently, he thought that the Lord God of Israel was like any other deity whom he imagined he might

manipulate by his ritual acts. But from the early part of the narrative, when he first encounters the true God in visions, and in the humorous narrative of the journey on the donkey, Balaam begins to learn what for him was a strange, bizarre, even incomprehensible lesson: An encounter with the God of reality was fundamentally different than anything he had ever known (J. Carl Laney and Robert B. Hughes, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale House Publishers, 64-64; Ronald Allen, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers*, Zondervan, 887).

The Balaam narratives have long puzzled readers of the Bible. The primary enigma centers on Balaam himself. While Balaam is portrayed in a fashion that is similar to other ancient Near Eastern religious figures, as a biblical character he is very tough to figure out. He was not an Israelite (22:5), yet he appeared to know God (22:8), and God spoke through him (24:2-4; 15-16). He practiced magic arts and incantations (24:1) and eventually led Israel into apostasy (31:16). In the end he was killed by the Israelites in their destruction of the Midianites (31:8). This has caused much confusion for interpreters of the Bible.

However, when we look at the whole sweep of the Balaam story, we see it plays a strategic role in the overall message of the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy), reaffirming the central thesis of the books. The central teaching of the Pentateuch is that God created creation in general, and humanity in particular, to bless it. Yet, humans distorted that blessing through sin. However, God will undo the curse that was brought to the world by humanity's sin through his promised seed (Genesis 3:15). This seed is later revealed to us to be the person of Jesus. This seed comes through the line of Israel who God chose in order to bless them and through them the whole world.

With this background in mind, we can now appreciate the plan of the writer of the Pentateuch and his concentration on the prophecies of Balaam. Underlying the narratives which tell the story of Balaam is the author's interest in the promise God had made to Abraham. According to that promise, those who bless his seed will be blessed and those who curse his seed will be cursed. Balak, the king of Moab, had hired Balaam to curse the seed of Abraham, but as the story unfolds, God permitted him only to bless them. In spite of the nations' attempts to curse God's people (and Balaam's attempts to control God), all that could ultimately happen is their blessing. Through Balaam the seed of Abraham is blessed and the seed of Moab is cursed (Num. 24:17) (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, Zondervan, 405-406).

The name "Balaam" is an example of a deliberate corruption of names by the Hebrew scribes. As in the case of the name Jezebel in Kings, the scribes want us not to know the (presumably) honorable name by which this character was first known but only the dishonorable name they give him as his nickname: Balaam, the "devourer of the people." In this way, they mock the false prophet even after his death (Allen, 887).

### **The Prophecies of Balaam**

Balaam had seven prophecies in all in this section of Numbers, each introduced with some variation of, "And then Balaam uttered his oracle...". The movement from one hill to another (23:27) shows the then-prevalent pagan view regarding local gods. Balak thought that perhaps Balaam could move to a place where Israel's God, whom he considered to be a local god who

was only powerful in a specific locality, would not have the power to stop him from cursing Israel. But although Balaam was a wicked diviner, God spoke truth through him (22:35; 24:13) (Laney and Hughes, 64).

### **Balaam and Archeology**

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that Balaam was indeed a historical person, who was a famous diviner, even known centuries after his death. Ancient texts found at Deir Alla, Jordan, in 1967 tells about the activities of a prophet named Balaam. These texts date sometime



between the seventh and ninth centuries B.C. They had been written on walls indicating that they were important historical examples of the oracles of this diviner that might be preserved for posterity. The texts refer to Balaam as the “son of Beor” three times in the first four lines, just like in the Bible. The texts begin with the title “Warnings from the Book of Balaam the son of Beor. He was a seer of the gods.”

Balaam goes on to relate a vision concerning impending judgment from the gods (Allen, 887; image and other information found at [http://www.truthnet.org/biblicalarcheology/5/](http://www.truthnet.org/biblicalarcheology/5/Exodusarcheology.htm)

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### **Balaam and the Donkey**

The scene with Balaam and the donkey is meant to be a story that ridicules Balaam, the famous prophet. In this scene, Balaam is shown to be the blind seer, seeing less than the dumb animal. This scene reveals Balaam as the pagan counterpart to Moses the man of God. Moses spoke face to face with God, but Balaam does not even know that God is near- but his donkey does. The scene shows the utter worthlessness of paganism and pagan seers. From earliest times the donkey was depicted as a subject of stupidity and stubbornness. But in this story the donkey sees God before the prophet does. Before Balaam was able to learn from God he had to learn from a donkey (Ronald Allen, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers*, Zondervan, 839-840).

### **Home Group Questions**

1. What evidence is there in this story that Balaam was not a true follower of God?

2. Why should we believe that a donkey actually talked to Balaam in this story?

3. Read Balaam's second oracle in Num. 23:18-26. What important things do we learn about God in this passage?

4. What promises did God fulfill for Israel in the Old Testament?

5. What kinds of promises does God give to his followers today?

6. How do we know that God will follow through on his promises for us? How does this knowledge help us to trust him?

### **Questions for the Family**

7. Why do you think God was displeased with Balaam?

8. Why did God use a donkey to talk to Balaam?

### **Questions for Personal Application**

9. Do you try and manipulate God like Balaam did? According to this story, why are all attempts to manipulate God ultimately foolish?