

Balaam: Church News, Unger, Smith

Prophet succumbed to king's bribery

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Balaam's story is tragic **turning from godliness**. Articles on this page may be used in conjunction with the Sunday School gospel doctrine course of study on the Old Testament and Pearl of Great Price, lesson No. 16. (Num. 22-24; 31) Information compiled by Gerry Avant.

Sources: Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* 1:103; 3:363-363, 451, also "The Story of a Prophet's Madness," *New Era*, April 2, 1977, 4-7; and James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 99.

The Bible Dictionary of the LDS edition of the King James Bible describes Balaam as "a prophet from Pethor by the Euphrates." (1983 edition, 618.) Part of the story of Balaam unfolds in chapters 22 and 23 of the Book of Numbers.

In this account, Balak, king of Moab, took Balaam to the top of a mountain, below which were the children of Israel, so numerous that they covered "the face of the earth." (Num. 22:5.) Since the children of Israel had already destroyed the Amorites, Balak feared they would overcome the Moabites, also.

Merrill F. Unger, THD., PHD., *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 134-135.

CHAPTER 22. BALAAM THE MERCENARY PROPHET

Balak Calls Balaam, 1-20. Balak, king of Moab, fearful of Israel passing by on the way to Canaan, sent for Balaam, originally a pagan diviner from Pethor, a city of Mesopotamia (Dt 23:4). Balaam was asked to curse Israel with his demonic magical powers as the Israelites were encamped in the Plain of Moab (c. 1401 B.C.) Balaam, "people's devourer," was doubtless attracted to the Lord, as Jethro (Ex 18) and Rahab (Josh 2), by the fame of Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex 15:14; Josh 5:1), and he determined to practice his oracular gifts in the name of Israel's God.

Balaam Goes to Balak, 21-35. The directive will of God had been known to Balaam, 12, which he did not follow. This left him to follow his own selfish inclination, as he preferred the permissive will of God, 20. The case of the speaking ass is an instance of the omnipotence of God, and is not to be explained away by unbelief (cf. the confirmation of the miracle, 2 Pet 2:15-16). That the dumb animal saw the Angel of the Lord first is in line with the frequently keener instinctive presentiments of impending danger possessed by animals over man.

Balaam with Balak, 36-41. Balaam is the type of a mercenary prophet, ambitious to exploit his gift financially. This is "the way of Balaam" (2 Pet 2:15). The "error of Balaam" (Jude 11) is the diviner-prophet's blunder in reasoning that God of necessity must curse the nation Israel because of its sin. He was ignorant of God's election of Israel as a nation, and the immutability of God's choice (Rom 11:29) and the nation's preservation. He failed to see how God can be "just and the justifier" of the believing sinner through the cross, to which all Israel's tabernacle ritual pointed. The "doctrine of Balaam" (Rev 2:14) was the teaching of the money-mad seer to abandon a separated pilgrimage for worldly conformity (Num 31:15-16; Jas 4:4).

CHAPTER 23. BALAAM'S FIRST TWO PROPHETIC PARABLES.

The Fist Parable and Sequel, 1-12. Presented first is the sacrificial preparation, 1-6, for the prophecy itself, 7-10. It was impossible for Balaam to curse or denounce Israel whom God had blessed, 8-9. The reason is that Israel's *standing* as a redeemed people was immutable in the light of the serpent "lifted up" (21:5-9) and the water out of the struck rock (20:11). Israel's *state* was morally reprehensible, but this called for the Lord's disciplinary action against the people, not His judgment or curse upon them (Rom 11:29). Balaam saw them "from the top of the mountains," that is, from God's lofty vantage point of electing grace, 9. As such they were a *chosen nation*, different from the other nations, 9, destined for ultimate unforfeitable blessing, 10, a people set apart for a particular destiny.

The Second Parable and Sequel, 13-30. The sacrificial preparation and conversation with Balak, 13-17, are introductory to the second oracle itself, 18-24. God's immutable national election of Israel and fidelity to His Word are stressed, 18-19. God's decreed blessing could not be revoked by Balaam, 20, or indeed by all the sinister power of heathen occultism, 23. The oracles are to be construed as literal to Israel and illustrative to Christians. Israel's

standing because redeemed, 22, was secure and perfect, 21, though her actual *state* required the divine discipline. Likewise the believer is saved and secure through Christ lifted up on Calvary (Jn 3:14), but he may need the Father's disciplinary dealing (1 Cor 11:30–32; 2 Cor 1:4–9). All the while, however, God was *for* Israel and *against* Balak and all enemies, 23, as well as “*for us*” (Rom 8:31). Eventually, when the kingdom is restored to Israel and she is saved, the universal testimony will be, “What has God done!” 23 (cf. Rom 11:26–36). Because Messiah-King will one day rule over the restored nation, Balaam said, “The shout of a *king* is among them,” 21.

CHAPTER 24. BALAAM'S LAST TWO PROPHETIC PARABLES.

The Third Parable and Sequel, 1–14. Introductory to the third parable, 2–9, was the account of Balaam's forsaking omens and the Spirit of God coming upon him, 1, in vision, 4, to prophesy in beautiful figures concerning Israel's future kingdom glory, 5–7. “His king,” ultimately realized in the Messiah, “shall be higher than Agag,” 7, the traditional name for the king of Amalek (1 Sam 15:8), Israel's inveterate enemy, and suggestive of the Antichrist and all anti-Semitic forces. King-Messiah's kingdom will be exalted and victorious as a lion over his prey, 8–9. Balaam's allusion to blessing upon those who bless Israel and cursing upon those who curse her recalls the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3), the fulfillment of which is certain. Balak's angry reaction, 10, and Balaam's reply are given, 10–14.

The Last Parable and Sequel, 18–25. This is the most remarkable of the four parables, containing a magnificent messianic prophecy of “the Star out of Jacob” and a “Sceptre out of Israel,” which “shall smite the corners [of the head] of Moab” and destroy “all the sons of Sheth.” Although the royal symbols “star” and “sceptre” include David, whose empire encompassed the Promised Land (Gen 49:10), yet they find their fulfillment only in the greater David when at the second advent the kingdom is restored to Israel (Acts 1:6). Then Israel's foes Moab, Edom, Amalek, Asshur, Eber and Kittim, that portray the latter-day Gentile world powers, will be judged (Mt 25:31–46), before Israel's kingdom is set up.

CHAPTER 25. ISRAEL'S SIN WITH BAAL-PEOR

The Sin, 1–3. This grievous sin of fornication and idolatry was the result of Balaam teaching (Num 31:16; Rev 2:14; Jas 4:4). Although Balaam as an instrument of Satan could not turn the Lord against Israel, he could turn Israel from the Lord. Baal-peor (“lord of the opening”), worshiped near Mt. Pisgah, 3 (cf. Dt 4:3; Psa 106:28; 2 Sam 5:20), was a farm and fertility god responsible for fecundity of family, flock and field. This god was worshiped in high places or hilltops with licentious rites and ritualistic feasting.

William Smith, LL.D., *Smith's Bible Dictionary*.

Ba'laam, the son of Beor, a man endowed with the gift of prophecy (Num 22:5). He belonged to the Midianites, and perhaps as the prophet of his people possessed the same authority that Moses did among the Israelites. At any rate he is mentioned in conjunction with the five kings of Midian, apparently as a person of the same rank (Num 31:8; cf. 31:16). He seems to have lived at Pethor, which is said at Dt 23:4 to have been a city of Mesopotamia. He himself speaks of being “brought from Aram out of the mountains of the East” (Num 23:7). Balaam is one of those instances which meet us in Scripture of persons dwelling among the heathens but possessing a certain knowledge of the one true God. When the Israelites were encamped in the plains of Moab, Balak, the king of Moab, sent for Balaam to curse them. Balaam was prohibited by God from going. The king of Moab, however, sent again to him. The prophet again refused, **but was at length allowed to go**. Balaam therefore proceeded on his journey with the messengers of Balak. **But God's anger was kindled at this manifestation of determined self-will**, and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him. “The dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbade the madness of the prophet” (2 Pet 2:16). Balaam predicted a magnificent career for the people whom he was called to curse, but he nevertheless **suggested to the Moabites the expedient of seducing them to commit fornication**. The effect of this is recorded in ch. 25. A battle was afterwards fought against the Midianites, in which Balaam sided with them and was slain by the sword of the people whom he had endeavored to curse (Num 31:8). He had heard much of the strength and fierceness of the armies of the children of Israel. Balak sent messengers to Balaam, asking, “Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot [know] that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.” (Num. 22:6.) Balaam, heeding God's instruction, told the messengers, “Get you into your land: for the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you.” (Num. 22:13.) Again, Balak sent messengers, offering to reward Balaam if he would curse the children of Israel. Balaam answered: “If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or

more.” (Num. 22:18.) After Balak implored Balaam the third time, the prophet answered: “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? Or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied?” (Num. 23:8.) Balaam instructed the king to build altars for sacrifices and Balaam himself made offerings which, it is understood, were pleadings with the Lord for permission to curse Israel. (Num. 23:1-3.) Apparently, Balaam’s actions were prompted by his desire to receive the riches and honors offered by Balak. The story of Balaam is one of a tragic turning from righteousness. Deut. 23:4 indicates that Balaam was “hired” by Balak to curse the children of Israel. In today’s vernacular, Balaam was bribed. Deut. 23:5 states: “Nevertheless the Lord . . . would not hearken unto Balaam; but the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee.” Balaam’s name is associated in the Old and New Testaments with **one who has knowledge of the truth yet leads others astray from the right way of the Lord.** (See Deut. 23:4-5; 2 Pet. 2:10-22; Jude 1:11 and Rev. 2:14.)