
BALAAM, THE DONKEY AND THE ANGEL

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

One of the more fantastic stories in the Bible surrounds an episode when a sorcerer/seer named Balaam, was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel.

After leaving his home near the Euphrates River (400 miles from Moab), Balaam unknowingly encounters an angel of the Lord who blocks his passage. Only the donkey, upon which he is riding, sees the angel and three times the donkey tries to carry Balaam away from danger. Three times Balaam hits his donkey with a stick, trying to get it to keep going straight ahead. Balaam doesn't see the angel, so he is oblivious of the danger he is in.

“And 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?’” ~Numbers 22:28

And God opened Balaam's eyes to see into the spiritual realm. The angel told him of God's opposition to what he was intending to do.

Now, Balaam was a hireling prophet who trafficked in a perverse mixture of occultism, pagan spirituality, and true beliefs. Though he believed in the only true God, he had not surrendered himself to His will and way in complete obedience. To Balaam, all gods and spirits could be used to further his personal profit. His spiritual understandings and familiarity with occult powers enabled him to establish quite a reputation for casting spells and working curses that really worked on people.

That's why the king, Balak, hired him to curse Israel spiritually so that Israel would go away in defeat. Though Balaam at first refused to be hired, he relents (for a higher fee) and comes to curse Israel. But he finds that he cannot curse a people whom the Lord has blessed. Balak is furious when Balaam blesses the people of God three times instead of cursing them.

So, is Balaam a good guy and an unwitting hero? Quite the contrary, he serves as a good example of the way the New Testament elaborates on principles from the Old Testament. Balaam is mentioned

three times in the New Testament: “the way of Balaam” (2 Peter 2:15-16); “the error of Balaam” (Jude 1:11); and, “the teaching of Balaam” (Revelation 2:14). From these verses, and the rest of Balaam’s story in Numbers, we can piece together the sinister nature of what he did.

Balaam was a champion of mixing truth with error. The spiritual dimension was all the same to him; he understood nothing of the difference between God’s way and that of every other god and power. He picked and chose whatever spiritual powers or truths suited his needs. That is “the way of Balaam,” rejecting God-established authorities, disregarding His plans and purposes, and not submitting to God’s sovereignty.

Balaam’s Error

His “error” was to seek personal advantage and profit through his spiritual insight. He intermingled the ways of God with the ways of Mammon. He has an undeniable power to tap into the unseen world, but he used it to make money. Any means was acceptable to achieving his end. That’s where “the teaching of Balaam” comes in. Though he could not satisfy his employer, Balak, by cursing the people of God, Balaam offered another way to destroy them. His plan? Get the people of God to intermingle socially and sexually with the peoples around them. Mix the clean with the unclean, the holy with the profane; get Israel to violate its separateness, and they would lose God’s support.

It almost worked on Israel. Balaam’s teaching keeps trying to work on us today. Though no occultic curses can turn God’s favor away from us, our own foolish choices to love the world and its pleasures, certainly, can cause us to miss out on the full inheritance God has in mind for us.