The Prophecies Of Balaam (Part One)

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When thinking of prophecy, we usually call to mind God's prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the "minor" prophets. We may consider the great prophecies of the New Testament: Jesus' many prophecies, including the Olivet Prophecy; Paul's prophecies in I Corinthians 15, I Thessalonians 4-5, II Thessalonians 2, and II Timothy 3, among others; and of course, the entire book of Revelation. We may also recall that both Isaac and Jacob uttered prophecies, as did Moses, Samuel, David, and many others.

But do we ever consider that God allocates three chapters of the book of Numbers to the prophecies of Balaam, a Mesopotamian soothsayer?

Balaam son of Beor is definitely an oddball among the prophets. He is not an Israelite but apparently a Syrian who lived in Pethor, a town situated near the Euphrates just south of Carchemish (Numbers 22:5). His prophecies result from an attempt to curse Israel in exchange for the money and honor of a frightened king of Moab, Balak son of Zippor (verses 2-7). To make matters worse, unlike any other prophet, he leads the Israelites into sin and brings a curse upon them, succeeding in getting 24,000 of them killed.

Since that time, his name has been a watchword denoting evil and avaricious character. As early as Deuteronomy 23:4-5, he is shown as an enemy of God and Israel and degraded as a hired mercenary. Joshua positively notes his death at the hand of Israelites (Joshua 13:22), and he also repeats Balaam's overthrow by God in a list of His victories for Israel (Joshua 24:9-10). Nehemiah and Micah recall him to the people of their days as an evil man whom God defeated (Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5).

The New Testament mentions Balaam three times, all negatively. Both Peter and Jude describe him as the personification of greed in using religion for personal gain (II Peter 2:15; Jude 11). Revelation 2:14 credits him with "the doctrine of Balaam," which is inducing others to sin, specifically to idolatry and sexual immorality.

Certainly, Balaam was no paragon of virtue. Yet, as unrighteous as he was, his prophecies remain in God's Word—and they are true! Why?

**Background and Structure**

To understand Balaam's prophecies properly, we must delve into his background and the situation at the time. Balaam himself, biblical historians believe, descended from a line of diviners whose reputation for cursing had spread over the whole region. Balak's delegation to Balaam had to travel about 400 miles to petition the soothsayer at his home (Numbers 22:5).

Scholars surmise soothsaying to be Balaam's "family business" from his wide reputation as well as the meaning of his and his father's names. *Balaam* means "devourer of the people" or simply "devourer" or "destroyer," a fitting name for someone whose livelihood depends on cursing various people(s). His father's name, *Beor*, means "burning," another allusion to destruction.
Further, the Bible never calls him a "prophet" or "seer" as it does true prophets of God, but it names him a "soothsayer" (Joshua 13:22; see Isaiah 3:2, where "diviner" is antithetical to "prophet"). It is widely supposed that Balaam was a br?, a Mesopotamian priest-diviner, who used various dreams, omens, and auguries as part of his trade.

How do we reconcile this with his claim in Numbers 22:18 that the Lord was his God? We have two choices. The first is that Balaam, a confirmed polytheist, knew of the true God by reputation (whether by His works on Israel's behalf in Egypt—see Joshua 2:8-11—or from local folklore, as the cities of Haran and Nahor, associated with Abraham, were located nearby) and professed devotion to Him to enhance his chances of receiving an oracle. The second and more cynical option is that he was trying to convince Balak's emissaries that, as an intimate of Israel's God, he had the pull to change His mind about cursing His own people, no matter what restrictions He put on him. From what we know of Balaam's general character, the second seems more likely.

Another necessary piece of background information is that this scenario takes place in the months just before Israel's entrance into the Promised Land. Moses was about to die, and before he did, he wrote the book of Deuteronomy in preparation for Israel's taking possession of Canaan. In a similar vein, the content of Balaam's prophecies reiterate the main points of God's promises to Israel, reminding the people that God was fulfilling them before their eyes. In addition, the sequel of these events—Balaam's suggestion to the Midianites that they tempt Israel to dally with Moab's women and idols—provided one last test of the Israelites, to prove the faithful and purge the sinful.

Finally, the structure of these three chapters in Numbers is important. Numbers 22 consists of Balak's delegation, Balaam's response, the trip to Moab—during which the Angel of the Lord blocks his path three times and Balaam's donkey speaks—and Balak's reception of the diviner at the border. These events, of course, set up the prophecies in the next two chapters, but they also highlight the two main themes of the story.

First, the narrative often repeats the admonition, "The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak" (Numbers 22:38; see verses 18, 20, 35). This is the condition God puts on Balaam when He allows him to go to Balak, and it is reiterated throughout the oracles (Numbers 23:3, 12, 26; 24:13). This constraint of Balaam, supposedly the world's most powerful cursing diviner, directs the glory to God and certifies that His purpose through Israel could not be hindered.

Second, Balaam's encounter with the Angel brings out the other theme: The supposedly "spiritual" person is often blind to what the simple see plainly. Similarly, John the Baptist tells the Pharisees, "God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8), meaning that Abraham's real children are those who live as Abraham did (John 8:39; Romans 4:16; 9:7; Galatians 3:29). The Angel's explanation is telling:

> Behold, I have come out to stand [margin, as an adversary] 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. (Numbers 22:32-33)

Balaam replies, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me" (verse 34). Like the majority of people in the world, Balaam, a professing religious person, could not see God at work, not even when He was personally opposing him! Yet, the dumb donkey, a lowly beast of burden, saw God at work and deferred to Him, and by its submission, the donkey made it possible for

This latter theme is vital to understanding Balaam's prophecies. God gives them through blind Balaam to open the eyes of Balak, the Israelites, and Bible readers down the centuries to what His purpose is.

**First Prophecy**

Balak puts Balaam to work almost immediately upon arriving. The diviner has Balak build seven altars, on each of which he offers a bull and a ram (Numbers 23:1). The bull and ram are the prime animals to offer because of their value, and the number seven has a long history of being especially propitious. By these offerings, Balaam is trying to ensure his ability to bribe a curse out of God.

God, of course, will not be bribed (Deuteronomy 10:17), so He puts a blessing on Israel in Balaam's mouth:

> For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his! (Numbers 23:9-10)

Balaam was indeed standing in a high place of Baal at the time (Numbers 22:41), and evidently, from this height he could see the whole camp. What he saw was an immense mass of people that he could not begin to count, a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 13:16: "And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (see also Genesis 15:5). Balaam's oracle suggests that this growth would continue, something Balak did not want to hear (Numbers 23:11).

In saying that Israel was "a people dwelling alone," Balaam notes its separation by covenant from the rest of the world and to God. This recalls God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, in which He prophesies Abraham's offspring returning to Canaan as a people (verses 13-16), and certainly, it alludes to the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. This separation by covenant is ratified anew at Mount Sinai: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6; see Deuteronomy 7:6-11).

The soothsayer's final words are a wish that he, a Gentile having no part in the covenant, could be included under it. The "righteous" are those who keep the terms of the covenant, which is obedience to God. His words of blessing may allude to Genesis 12:3, where God promises Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you." If he cannot join them, Balaam at least desires the blessings that come from blessing them!

**Second Prophecy**

Balak tries again, taking Balaam to a field atop Mount Pisgah, where he could see only the outermost part of the camp (Numbers 23:13). His rationale for this is that Balaam could not curse Israel while
faced with the mystical power of the whole people. If he could see just a part of Israel, the odds would be more even and a curse more likely. So, the diviner again offers a bull and a ram on seven different altars (verse 14).

In both the first two prophecies is an interesting phrase: "God [or, the Lord] met Balaam" (verses 4, 16). This is a very personal and close form of communication. How God met him is unknown, but it is obvious that he knew God was present and giving him the words to speak to Balak (verses 5, 16). In the next chapter, the narrative says explicitly that "the Spirit of God came upon him" to inspire his next prophecy (Numbers 24:2).

We have a hard time understanding why God would work this closely with such an evil, unconverted man yet never appear to us or even seem to inspire us with fitting words, a skillful reply, or an instruction on what to do in a difficult circumstance. However, we must understand that God was in this man making a great witness of His power and glory. As hard as he tried, not even the most famous diviner of his day could curse God's people, and the word of Israel's blessings and their prophesied conquests gave notice that God's plan would go forward despite the efforts of the surrounding nations. Thus, for its impact, God deigns to speak through an unworthy vessel.

Balaam's second oracle declares:

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.

He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a King is among them. God brings them out of Egypt; he has strength like a wild ox.

For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' Look, a people rises like a lioness, and lifts itself up like a lion; it shall not lie down until it devours the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain. (Numbers 23:19-24)

In the first paragraph, the soothsayer admits his powerlessness before God. Since at least the days of Abraham, God had been foretelling what He would do for His people, and there was no way He would renge on it now that it was about to unfold! On such a pivotal part of His plan, God would not be forced or cajoled to change His mind.

The first half of verse 21 has had many wondering how it could be true, since the entire account of Israel in the wilderness is a sad commentary on how sinful Israel was! The idea here is not that God does not see their sin—the Pentateuch is full of God's observations about their iniquities—but that their wickedness has not reached the point that He would be persuaded to curse them.

Certainly, He would not be bribed into cursing His own people by their—and thus His—enemies! For, as the verse goes on to say, He is with Israel as their King! Why would He curse His own kingdom and people? And why, after going to the trouble of leading them out of Egypt with such a strong hand (verse 22), would He allow them to be defeated just before reaching their destination? This interpretation becomes clear in verse 23: There would be no sorcery or divination against Israel because of what God had done for them.
The final verse highlights Israel as a lion, a symbol of regal power and predatory mastery. This is an allusion to Jacob's prophecy concerning the tribes of Israel in Genesis 49:9: "Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him?" In this case, Judah stands for the whole nation (as it later came to rule all Israel in David). A nation often resembles its leadership—and vice versa—so it can be said that under God's inspiration Balaam saw Israel through the lens of the royal tribe of Judah. This is especially interesting in light of the description of God as Israel's King in Numbers 23:21 and the upcoming prophecy of a great King to come.