

The Character & Prophecies of Balaam

By Mark Mayberry
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Numbers Chapter 22

22:1) The Moabites lived east of the Dead Sea, and the Amorites lived further to the NE.

22:4) After hearing of Israel's overwhelming victory against the Amorites, the king of Moab was greatly alarmed. Balak, whose name means "devastator," felt powerless before the advancing Israelite horde. Attempting to check their advance, Balak entered into a military alliance with the Midianites. Furthermore, he also sent to Mesopotamia and requested that Balaam, a well known prophet, come and curse Israel.

22:5) Pethor. Balaam lived in Aram in the town of Pethor. Aram was the ancient home of Bethuel, from which place Jacob took his two wives, Rachel and Leah (Genesis 25:20). The city of Pethor, also known as Pitru, was located on the west bank of the Euphrates River in northern Mesopotamia, 12 miles south of Carchemish (Deuteronomy 23:4).

22:6-7) "Balaam as a prophet offers the strange spectacle of a prophet-diviner -- a mixture of paganistic ritual with a true, though blurred, knowledge of God."¹ Although Balaam possessed some knowledge of the Lord God, he was not a true prophet any more than was his mule through whom God also spoke. Balaam acknowledged the supremacy of Jehovah and evidenced at least some desire to please him. Yet, he enjoyed great fame as a diviner. Balaam used omens, enchantments and soothsaying (Num. 24:1; Josh. 13:22), practices clearly condemned in the Law of Moses (Deut. 18:10-14).

In spite of all this, God spoke through Balaam (Num. 23:5, 16). His prophecies were given under the constraint and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Num. 24:2). His head was full of light but his heart was full of darkness -- and how great was that darkness! Some would ask, "How could God use such a man in his service?" The Scriptures reveal that God often uses evil men to further his own divine purposes!

22:7) The rewards of divination. These messengers came with payments for Balaam's service.

22:8) In sending the men away, Balaam initially appears to respect the will of God. Yet, as the story continues, it becomes obvious that his acquiescence to God's will is somewhat less than wholehearted. He obeyed because he had to, not because he wanted to.

22:17-18) This should have ended the matter, if Balaam was really interested in obeying God.

King Balak offers great prosperity, and appeals to Balaam's greed. Unlike Daniel, who said to King Belshazzar, "Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another," Balaam loved the wages of unrighteousness. His covetous heart longed after the riches that Balak offered. In the

New Testament, his name came to symbolize avarice and greed. He typifies false teachers who willingly pervert truth in the interests of personal gain (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 1:11).

22:19) It now becomes obvious that Balaam did not really respect God. The Lord had already told Balaam not to go. His duty was perfectly clear. There was no need to consult God a second time on the matter. Yet, Balaam was obviously hoping that God would change his mind. What a typical attitude: If you want to justify something, look long enough and you will.

22:22) God grants him freedom to choose, but He becomes angry when Balaam goes. Why? The prophet's attitude is wrong. He went for the wrong reason. The Lord sent Balaam to bless the people of Israel, but Balaam was motivated by purely selfish inclinations. He was hoping somehow to be able to curse Israel and collect his fee for divination. Sometimes God punishes us by allowing us to have our own way. Balaam's involvement with the King of Moab ultimately cost him his life.

The following incident with the donkey is designed to express God's displeasure with Balaam.

22:23) Animals often have keener instincts of impending danger than does mankind.

22:29) God performed a miracle that enabled the donkey to speak. However, the greater marvel seems to be Balaam's conduct. He is so angry that he forgets that animals don't normally talk. It seems he speaks to the donkey as if there is nothing strange about it. This was the original Mr. Ed.

22:34-35) His statement "If it is displeasing to you, I will turn back," shows that his repentance is feigned. Balaam's actions were obviously displeasing to God. If he were seeking to do God's will, he first would not have come, nor he would not have asked such a question.

God realized that Balaam had not truly repented. He was thus told to continue, because God could use him to accomplish His purposes even if Balaam did not have the right attitude. God allowed him to go to teach both he and Balak a lesson. If he had truly been sorry, he would have proceeded with a different attitude and motivation. He should have apologized to the mule also.

22:37-38) King Balak assumed that Balaam's presence meant he would curse Israel, but Balaam is skillfully ambiguous and cunningly vague. It seems that he yet hoped God would allow him to curse Israel and so obtain the promised rewards. He does not come out and tell Balak that God had said, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse my people." In the course of the next few days Balaam uttered four oracles. The Hebrew in these, which are poetic in form, is of a very ancient kind, indicating that in their present form they are as old as the 10th century B.C. This argues against late dating the book.

Numbers Chapter 23

After Balaam arrived in Moab, king Balak led the prophet up to the heights above the Dead Sea where he could see Israel encamped below. Neither elaborate ritual sacrifices or changing position from one mountain peak to another produced the desired result. Balaam, gripped by the

Spirit of God, was powerless to do anything other than pronounce repeated blessings upon Israel. This text contains some of the most glorious words ever spoken concerning the people of Israel.

23:7-10) Balaam stated that Israel could not be cursed.

23:9) Israel was physically and spiritually separated from other nations, dwelling their own land, with their own customs and unique religious institutions.

23:10) Israel was to be a great people, numberless as the dust of the earth, as the sand on the seashore, as the stars of heaven (cf. Gen 13:16; 28:14).

Genesis 13:16 (NASB95) — 16 “I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.

Genesis 28:14 (NASB95) — 14 “Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Balaam wished he might die sharing Israel’s blessings. However, when Israel defeated the Midianites, Balaam also was killed (Num. 31:8; Josh. 13:22). Because we have no record of his repentance, it is reasonable to conclude that Balaam died in his sins.

Numbers 31:8 (NASB95) — 8 They killed the kings of Midian along with the rest of their slain: Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian; they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.

Joshua 13:22 (NASB95) — 22 The sons of Israel also killed Balaam the son of Beor, the diviner, with the sword among the rest of their slain.

Let my last end be like his. To die the death of the righteous, one must live a life pleasing unto God (Psa. 116:15; Rev. 14:13).

Psalms 116:15 (NASB95) — 15 Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His godly ones.

Revelation 14:13 (NASB95) — 13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, “Write, ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!’ ” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.”

23:14) Pisgah, which means “cleft,” was a mountain range in Moab which is also identified with Mt. Nebo. Here it likely refers to the entire range of rugged mountaintops that extend toward the northeast corner of the Dead Sea, of which Nebo is the highest peak. From this vantage point, Balaam saw another part of the camp of Israel. Soon hereafter, Moses will ascend Mt. Nebo, and from atop Pisgah, view the Promised Land before he died (Deut. 3:27; 34:1-6).

Deuteronomy 3:27 (NASB95) — 27 ‘Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan.

Deuteronomy 34:1–6 (NASB95) — 1 Now Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, 2 and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, 3 and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. 4 Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.” 5 So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. 6 And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.

23:18-24) Once again Balaam predicted blessing, not cursing.

23:21) “The shout of a king” was the royal shout of triumph.

23:28) In the northern part of the range, Balaam could see the camp of Israel.

Numbers Chapter 24

24:1-2) Balaam no longer sought to prophesy. But as he sat looking down on the Israelites, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him anyway.

24:4) “Having his eyes uncovered” means that he had an uncluttered spiritual vision.

24:6) Balaam predicts prosperity for Israel. “Aloes” were very valuable trees which grew over 100 ft. high whose resinous wood was used in perfume.

24:7) Balaam predicts Israel’s dominance over her enemies. This prophecy is ultimately realized in the Messiah. Israel’s king would be greater than Agag, the traditional name of the king of Amalek (1 Sam. 15:32-33).

1 Samuel 15:32–33 (NASB95) — 32 Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.” 33 But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal.

24:11) This “honor” refers to the promised gold. True honor would be to obey God.

One of the strongest arguments for the inspiration of the Bible is the fulfilled prophecies of the Old and New Testaments. Men cannot know the future; only God can foretell history or events in minute detail. The Bible foretold the destiny of Israel and the nations, and the coming of Christ.

Therefore the Bible is the word of God, and not from man. These prophecies, spoken hundreds of years before their fulfillment, are reflect the inspiration of the Bible.

Israel was to dwell alone, separate from other nations (Num. 23:9).

Numbers 23:9 (NASB95) — 9 “As I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people who dwells apart, And will not be reckoned among the nations.

Israel was to become a numerous people (Num. 23:10; Gen. 22:17).

Numbers 23:10 (NASB95) — 10 “Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, And let my end be like his!”

Genesis 22:17 (NASB95) — 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

Israel was to become powerful as “a lion” (Num. 23:24; 24:8-9).

Numbers 23:24 (NASB95) — 24 “Behold, a people rises like a lioness, And as a lion it lifts itself; It will not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain.”

Numbers 24:8–9 (NASB95) — 8 “God brings him out of Egypt, He is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He will devour the nations who are his adversaries, And will crush their bones in pieces, And shatter them with his arrows. 9 “He couches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, And cursed is everyone who curses you.”

24:17) An eminent and powerful king should appear. The star was a symbol of splendor and power; the scepter was a symbol of dominance and royalty (Gen. 49:10). Notice that the king was not to arise soon. Although these royal icons point to the dynasty of David, their ultimate fulfillment is found in Jesus Christ.

Genesis 49:10 (NASB95) — 10 “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

24:17b-20) This ruler should conquer Moab, Edom, and Amalek. David initially fulfilled this prophecy in the 10th century (2 Sam. 8:13-17; 1 Kings 11:15-16). Yet, it ultimately looks forward to the subjection of all nations under Christ (Amos 9:11-12; Obad. 17-21). The Herods of the New Testament were Idumaeans, and some of their descendants became Christians (Acts 13:1).

2 Samuel 8:13–17 (NASB95) — 13 So David made a name for himself when he returned from killing 18,000 Arameans in the Valley of Salt. 14 He put garrisons in Edom. In all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became servants to David. And the Lord helped David wherever he went. 15 So David reigned over all Israel; and David

administered justice and righteousness for all his people. 16 Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder. 17 Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was secretary.

1 Kings 11:15–16 (NASB95) — 15 For it came about, when David was in Edom, and Joab the commander of the army had gone up to bury the slain, and had struck down every male in Edom 16 (for Joab and all Israel stayed there six months, until he had cut off every male in Edom),

Amos 9:11–12 (NASB95) — 11 “In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, And wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins And rebuild it as in the days of old; 12 That they may possess the remnant of Edom And all the nations who are called by My name,” Declares the Lord who does this.

Obadiah 17–21 (NASB95) — 17 “But on Mount Zion there will be those who escape, And it will be holy. And the house of Jacob will possess their possessions. 18 “Then the house of Jacob will be a fire And the house of Joseph a flame; But the house of Esau will be as stubble. And they will set them on fire and consume them, So that there will be no survivor of the house of Esau,” For the Lord has spoken. 19 Then those of the Negev will possess the mountain of Esau, And those of the Shephelah the Philistine plain; Also, possess the territory of Ephraim and the territory of Samaria, And Benjamin will possess Gilead. 20 And the exiles of this host of the sons of Israel, Who are among the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, And the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad Will possess the cities of the Negev. 21 The deliverers will ascend Mount Zion To judge the mountain of Esau, And the kingdom will be the Lord’s.

24:21-22) The Kenites (*metalsmiths*) were a wandering tribe, associated with the Midianites (Judg. 1:16) and the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:6) who lived in the desert regions of Sinai, Midian, Edom, Amalek, and the Negev. Although the Kenites had a strong dwelling place, yet they would be consumed. Although some Kenites maintained a close relationship with the Jewish people, yet the tribe as a whole would lose its separate identity.

24:22) Asshur (Assyria). The northern 10 tribes were taken into Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C.

Kain. The New Bible Dictionary says that Kain is “a town to the S of Hebron (Josh. 15:57). Khirbet Yaqin has been suggested, but its antiquity is uncertain. LXX takes as one name with Zanoah, altering the count.”

Eber. Lit. “region beyond,” This refers to a descendent of Shem (Gen. 10:21), and also the name of several Israelites.”

24:24) Affliction of Eber (the Hebrews) and Assyrians by people from the Mediterranean area (the Greeks). The ships from Kittim would afflict Asshur in that they would bring to an end the great eastern empires (Assyria, Babylon, Persia). 1 Maccabees 1:1 opens with an account of Alexander the Great coming from Kittim to defeat the eastern nations. Eber, the ancient Ancestor of Israel (Genesis 10:21), includes the Israelites, Ishmaelites, Midianites, and Edomites.

ⁱ *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill F. Unger & R.K. Harrison, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).
s.v. "Balaam."