

THEOLOGY

One Bite at a Time



BALAAM – Enemy of GOD

Portrait of a False Teacher

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BALAAM

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Introduction

For many Christians, the story of Balaam and his donkey is on par with that of Jonah and the great fish. To often we tend to minimize these OT Bible stories and relegate them to the status of the “fun parts” of the Bible, suitable only for small children. But as we mature in our faith and begin to earnestly study Holy Scripture we find that Jesus, Peter, Jude and of course Moses, took the story quite literally and with deadly seriousness.

Balaam’s story is a prime exemplar of man’s rebellion against God and a glimpse into Yahweh’s Holy attributes. Balaam’s account traces the spiritual decent of false prophets, teachers and mankind himself. The story traces the spiritual decline of man begins with God-given knowledge which can then lead to pride and self aggrandizement. What follows is disobedience, then outright enmity to God and a twisted desire to destroy the work of God. In the case of Balaam, this disobedience gave rise to a premeditative plan which was implemented in an all out assault on God’s people and His creation. The final result was death and destruction.

As one studies Balaam, the pleasant Sunday school tale takes on a serious, sinister, and even demonic tone stretching from OT to NT. The comic figure of a doddering old man, corrected by his donkey, is stripped away and the real story unfolds to show a hideous face of evil and human depravity that threads it way through history, plaguing God’s people.

The story of Balaam is also a rich source of information about Yahweh – His character and love for His people. The providence of God is also portrayed. In Balaam’s story, God is “in control,” no other force, neither physical or supernatural will stand against His will.

This paper will study the OT account of Balaam and the NT citations concerning him. The paper will also review some of the theology of God revealed in the Balaam’s narrative. Finally, the study will investigate why Balaam and his methods were viewed as one of the greatest threats to Israel and the nascent Church of the first century.

Survey of Content and Traditions

Background

The Bible story so often taught in Sunday schools, says that Balaam was a prophet, the son of Beor and the brother of Bela. Balaam answered a call from Balak, the King of Moab, who wanted to curse Israel as they were passing through his land. Balak was in fearful dread of Israel, this in keeping with God's promise of Deuteronomy 2:25; *"This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who when they hear the report of you, shall tremble and be in anguish because of you."*¹

As the narrative continues, Balaam was at first reluctant to curse Israel because God warned him against this. God repeated His warning in many ways including direct commands, a donkey that spoke, and even a Theophony of God (The Angel of the Lord). But Balaam was a "greedy man." So much so that his desire and pride caused him to directly challenge God's permissive will. In the end Balaam devised a plan to defeat Israel without really "cursing them."

On one level the story sounds bad, but not really that bad. It does not sound as bad as the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Certainly it did not rise to the level of the crimes committed by the fallen angels in Genesis 6 or the evil of the entire world that resulted in the flood of Noah. Yet, Jesus, Peter and Jude all report that Balaam's crime was indeed of this same magnitude.²

Balaam's name means "not of the people", or foreigner. He was not Hebrew, he was an Edomite. There is some debate as to Balaam's actual status of "Prophet of God." Did he hold the same ordained office of "Prophet" as did Moses, Elijah or Jonah?

¹ This "dread" has been likened to a sickening, nauseating fear that totally debilitated the victim. It is ironic to note that Balak had really nothing to fear because God had told Israel that they were not to possess the land of Moab. *"Then the Lord said to me, do not harass Moab, nor provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession, because I have given it to Ar, to the sons of Lot as a possession."* (Deut 2:9).

² Rev 2:14, II Pet 2:1-17, Jude 5-11.

Differing views of Balaam's status as a true Prophet of God:

“Balak sent to Mesopotamia for Balaam, who was not a *navi* (prophet) but a hakkisim (soothsayer) whose activity was condemned (Deut 18). It appears most likely that Balaam belonged to a family in which magical arts were hereditary.”³

The Talmud and some Jewish Sages disagree with the above description:

“Just as He [God] set up kings, wise men and prophets for Israel, He set them up similarly for the other nations. As He raised up Moses for Israel, so He raised up Balaam for the heathens.”⁴

There can be little doubt that Balaam was a Gentile sorcerer, but he was also appointed by and used by God – and to whom God spoke. This said, there can also be no doubt that Balaam rebelled against what he knew to be God's will in a desire to satisfy his own self interest.

What's in a Name?

- Balaam's name means “*not of the people*” or “*foreigner*.”
- Balaam's father was Beor who's name means “*burning*” or “*consumption by fire*”. Beor was also the father of Bela who was the King of Edom.
- Bela, (Balaam's brother), his root name means the “*devourer*”, by swallowing or gulping.
- Balak's name means “*to annihilate*” or “*the waster*”.
- Moab came from the incestuous relation between Lot and his first daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19:30-38). Moab's name means “*from the father*.” Edom was the country that was named after Esau who had sold his inheritance and was deprived of his blessing by his brother Jacob, (Israel) (Gen 25: 29-34 & Gen. 27). Moab and Edom were blood enemies of Israel during this time.

Putting it all together, Balaam was the son of “*Burning-Consumption – Beor*.” Balaam's brother, “*The Devourer – Bela*,” was the King of Edom a sworn enemy of Israel. Balaam formed an alliance with “*The Annihilator – Balak*,” King of Moab.

³ M. Tenney, *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol 1, Zondervan, (Grand Rapids, MI, 1975) p.452

⁴ (*Num. R. xx. 1*) Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, (New York, NY., Schocken Books, 1949) p.121

Balaam's job was to find a way to destroy Israel by the use of sorcery because the fear or dread of Israel and her God had taken away any hope of military victory. Specifically his job was to get God to destroy His own people. Balaam could not use the direct approach of pleading with God to destroy Israel. In I Chronicles 16:22, God states "*Do not touch my Anointed*" Balaam knew that to harm God's children was to invite personal ruin.

In Numbers 23:19-24, it is evident that Balaam considered every sort of sorcery and divination to try and destroy Israel by appealing to other deities and powers. This shows that Balaam must not have considered Yahweh to be the only god to whom he could appeal. None of the usual methods that Balaam had at his command would work with Israel. Balaam also knew that if he cursed Israel the God of Israel would curse him. Num. 24: 9... "*blessed is he who blesses you, [Israel], and cursed is he who curses you.*" But Balaam's pride and lust would not let him give up. So Balaam needed a different approach to defeat Israel – one that would not involve personal risk, or so he thought.

It is from the text in Numbers 23:20-21 that Balaam may have devised his attack on Israel. It is in these verses that Balaam acknowledges he cannot curse Israel – he states that God "*...has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel...*"

So Balaam decided to "put" iniquity into Israel. His plan was to entice and deceive the Israelites into committing the same crimes that resulted in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rebellion at Korah. This would remove God's protection and Israel would destroy itself. Thus Balaam, to his way of thinking, would escape having to curse them.

Balaam's plan was nothing short of Satanic with the premeditated purpose of wiping out the people of Israel by abusing and twisting God's own laws. If Balaam could succeed, his scheme would disrupt and destroy the blood lines of Israel – the Hebrew God would destroy His own people, and Balaam would "be off the hook!"

Balaam instructed Balak to draw-in the Israelite men with the women of Moab as a lure and then assimilate Israel, by way of sensuality and idolatry into the body of Moab – thus destroying them as a “Holy people.” It is interesting that the name of Balaam and his brother “Bela” share a common root word which can be translated gulping or swallowing!

Balaam’s plan actually worked, up to a point (Numbers 31:16). The Israelites began to intermarry with the women of Moab and then started to worship the idols of Moab. A Jewish tradition states that the women were instructed to insist that the men of Israel pay homage to the woman’s god before she would submit to him. Hence, Israel was enticed to repeat the sins of immorality and idolatry of the wilderness journey with the consequences of God’s judgment.

God told the Jews that they were to be a Holy or separate people whom God would use to teach and bear witness to the rest of the world about Yahweh. If they were assimilated into other nations they would not be able to testify to the truth of the one true God. In the New Testament, Jesus also warns the Church about the issue of syncretism in Revelation; *“But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality.”* (Rev 2:17)

God ordained the Israelites and all their future generations would forever hold a special position and not become like other nations. Balaam knowingly tried to undo this. Deuteronomy 23: 2-4, states that as a result of the crimes of Balaam and Moab, God decreed that all resulting births would be considered illegitimate and would not be permitted to join the assembly of Holy Israel. 24,000 Israelites were “infected” before the plan of Balaam was halted.

By doing the math it can be seen that just one infected generation of inter-racial births would quickly spell the end of the “Generations of Abraham.”⁵ The Bible called it a “plague”, and it really was a physical plague because it had the potential to destroy the entire gene pool from which the Messiah would come. Balaam deliberately attempted to murder the entire nation of Israel and forever destroy the mercy of God and the salvation of the Messiah upon whom each and every one of us depends. The plague set in motion the inevitable judgment and destruction of Israel. Without immediate and severe action, Israel and all of her future blessings could be lost. It is at this point in the story that we are introduced to a man named Phinehas.

Phinehas was a priest, the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the high priest. Per God’s command Moses ordered the execution of the 24,000 infected people. But we also read that at the moment of the command being given, an Israelite man (Zimri) presented himself and his new Moabite wife (Cozbi) to the general assembly of Israel, this, in open defiance of God’s command. This was a crucial moment, because the people of Israel were openly weeping due to the harshness of God’s command. However if they showed mercy and did not carry out God’s instruction all would be lost. The idea of killing one’s own family would be devastating and may have caused them to consider rebelling against God.

It took one courageous, faithful and zealous priest who loved God, named Phinehas, to act without hesitation and carry out the command. Phinehas took a javelin and killed the man and his mate in order to restore God’s order. Phinehas was able to see the big picture – if he spared Zimri and Cozbi, not to mention the other 24,000, then all of Israel would be no more.

⁵ There is a very interesting exception to this decree in Scripture, the story of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth was a Moabitess and yet she was permitted into the assembly – Ruth was the “Mother of David.” A Jewish teaching, (which is too lengthy to be treated in this paper), seeks to explain this anomaly. This involves a study of Ruth’s lineage. This traced her ancestry as a princess of Moab – a daughter of Eglon, and through his father Moab to Lot and finally to his uncle Abraham. In effect Ruth was “returning home” to her people. According to the Sages, Ruth was not just in the physical line of Abraham but she possessed a Divine trait or “light” which was in Abraham but that was extinguished in Bethlehem during the times of the Judges. That Divine trait was *hesed* or “lovingkindness.”

One may think this was harsh and unnecessary unless and until the totality of the danger is realized. This threat involved the entire plan of God, including the New Testament and the present day Church. If Israel was destroyed the Messiah would not become manifest in her. It is not hyperbolic to insist that had Phinehas not acted, we would not be here. Certainly God is in control and did not allow Balaam's plan to succeed, however it begs the question that if the plan of God was not really in jeopardy then how seriously should we take Holy Writ?

It is at times like these that those of us who claim to believe in the accuracy of the Bible have to search our own hearts and see if we really do believe the Bible is true. It is one thing to know and hear the commands of God. It is another thing to zealously follow those commands.

Interestingly enough Phinehas' name means "the serpent's mouth". This is puzzling until we remember the painful punishment and cleansing of Israel when God used fiery serpents to purge many of the disobedient Israelites. That plague ended when Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness to heal the people. Jesus also reminds us of the serpent's role (Jn 3:14).

It is clear that the road to redemption and recovery is, at times, a painful and bitter path, especially after a disease has become terminal.. Phinehas received the highest praise from God. *"Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. Therefore say Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the children of Israel"* (Num. 25: 11-13).

Just as Phinehas, Christians must act with God's zeal to counter the work of the false teachers. They have done so much damage in the past 50 years here in America. Our actions really do affect how future generations will believe and behave.

So what was the fate of Balaam? Israel made war on Midian (Num 31:1-8) In addition to killing all of the five kings of Midian, Israel settled the score with Balaam by killing him as well. It is most providential and appropriate that it was none other than Phinehas who was chosen by Moses to lead this battle and to bear the Holy Articles and the Signal Trumpets (31: 6-8).

One point which may trouble us in reading the account of Balaam is that it seems as though Balaam was consistently refusing to curse Israel. He knew what God wanted him to say to Balak and he indeed did so at first. Over and over Balaam seemed to refuse to betray God. At times Balaam seemed almost heroic in defying King Balak. As we look closely though we see that Balaam was simply paying lip service to Yahweh while at the same time trying to appeal to other deities and scheme different ways around God's will. ⁶

Was it the pressure of the ungodly King that got Balaam to turn? Was he convinced by his family and fellow Gentiles that Israel was a threat to their nations? Or was it just a case of arrogance and greed? When he did turn it is clear that he was dedicated and effective with his plan to destroy Israel. Certainly God was patient and longsuffering with Balaam. He gave Balaam numerous opportunities to turn away from his path. God made it perfectly clear that Balaam was on the road to his own ruin, but Balaam would not repent.

⁶ It is interesting to note that another interpretation has Balaam wanting to curse Israel but at the moment of his uttering the curse, God changes the words to blessings. This is seen as God actually speaking the words through Balaam who is helpless to prevent it. In this interpretation, no allowance is given to Balaam whatsoever.

Extra-Biblical Writings and Traditions

The story of Balaam is directly cited or referenced in numerous extra-Biblical writings and traditions. These include writings from Qumran, the Bar Kochba history, Babylonian Talmud and numerous Jewish commentaries. In addition to the above, some of the early Church Fathers including Justin Martyr (166 AD), and Athanasius the Great (373 AD) also referred to the prophecy of Balaam. The following are some examples of these writings.

Qumran

The Qumran literature appears to contain the earliest use of the Balaam materials in extra-Biblical writings. Specifically, the documents identified as *4Q Testimonia (4QTest)*, *The Damascus Document (CD)*, and *The Order of Warfare (IQM)* which is not dealt with here.⁷ In these citations the primary interest is the Balaam prophecy of Numbers 24:17 concerning the Messiah. *“I see Him, but not now: I behold Him but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob: a Scepter shall rise out of Israel...”*

4QTest retrieved from Cave 4 of Qumran shows texts that combine the *“I have heard the voice of the words of this people,”* (Deut 5:28b); the promise of *“A Prophet like Moses”* (Deut 18:18-19); followed by the *“Star”* passage (Num 24:15-17) and the *“blessing of Levi”* (Deut 33:8-11). This appears to hold both Messianic as well as eschatological (end time) implications.

The Damascus Document (CD) was originally found in Cairo in 1897. Later, fragments of CD were retrieved from Cave 4 and 6 of Qumran.⁸ Numerous passages of the Damascus Document concern themselves with the identity of the Star and the Scepter. *“The ‘star’ is the Expounder of the Law...the ‘scepter’ is the prince of all the congregation...”*⁹

⁷ Ronald B. Allen Ph.D, *Doctrinal Dissertation*, (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973) p.27

⁸ LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) pp. 32-34

⁹ Ronald B. Allen Ph.D, *Doctrinal Dissertation*, p. 31-32. Allen makes good use of F.F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1959), p.37. Allen points out that numerous scholars debate the identity of the ‘Star’ and ‘Scepter’ and convincingly shows how many equate the two as one eschatological personage. P.32-33

Talmud

Talmudic literature contains some of the most vivid and insightful materials concerning the prophet Balaam. The following is an excerpt;

...“See the difference between the prophets of Israel and the prophets of the Gentiles. The Israel prophets warned their hearers against transgression: as it is said, “Son of Man, I have made thee a Watchman” (Ezek iii, 17); but the prophet (Balaam) who arose from the peoples, initiated licentiousness to destroy his fellow men from the world. Not only that, but the prophets of Israel were moved with compassion for their own people also for the Gentiles.... This cruel one on the other hand aimed at uprooting an entire nation, (i.e. Israel), without cause. For that reason the section about Balaam is included in the Scripture to inform us why the Holy One, blessed be He, removed the Holy Spirit from the heathen people, since this one, (Balaam), arose from among them and He (i.e. God), saw what he did.” (Num. R. xx.1).¹⁰

Balaam’s intent is to utterly destroy the entire nation of Israel. The author in the Talmud portrays Balaam’s story as the reason why the Holy Spirit was removed from the heathen nations. The nation of Israel is portrayed as compassionate while the pagan Gentiles are shown to be cruel. This contrasting of Israel to the Gentiles is repeated:

“The Holy One, blessed is He, did not leave the peoples of the world a plea for the Hereafter to the effect, ‘Thou didst keep us at a distance.’ What did He do? Just as He set up kings, wise men and prophets for Israel, he set them up similarly for the other nations. As He raised up Moses for Israel so He raised up Balaam for the heathens” (Num. R. xx.I)¹¹

Notice in this passage Balaam is paralleled to Moses. God raised up Moses for Israel and Balaam for the nations. However, Abraham Cohen states the prophets of Israel and the Gentiles never shared the same degree of inspiration. The prophets of Israel were spoken to by God directly where the prophets of the Gentiles were spoken to, as it were, through a veil.¹² While Holy Scripture does show the Hebrew prophets had a far greater degree of inspiration from God, Balaam seemed have had direct contact with God for a short period of time. However, this fact does not militate against Cohen’s assertion. Especially when one realizes that Balaam was only a temporary tool used by God to test Israel and inform the nations of Israel’s chosen status.

¹⁰ Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, (New York, NY., Schocken Books, 1949) p.121-123

¹¹ Ibid. p.122

¹² Ibid. p.122

Early Church Fathers

The Early Church Fathers cited Balaam, especially his Messianic prophecy of Numbers 24:17. The identity of the Star and the Scepter were of great interest to the nascent Church. This, in light of the fact, that the Messianic claims of Jesus were proved through the Hebrew Scriptures. Virtually every apostle in the New Testament is recorded as following Jesus' lead; "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (Jn 5:39). In keeping with the teachings of the Apostles, the Church leaders of the second, third and fourth centuries followed in this mindset.

Two examples are Justin Martyr (166 AD) and Athanasius the Great (373 AD).

Justin Martyr in one of his major works, *The First Apology*, eloquently writes;

"As the blood of the grape was not made by man, but by God, so it was testified, that blood should not come from human seed, but from divine power as we said before. Isaiah another prophet, prophesying the same things in other words, said; "A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a flower will come forth from the root of Jesse, and upon his arm will the nations hope." The shining star has risen and flower has grown from the root of Jesse – this is Christ."¹³

Martyr combines both Numbers 24:17 (Balaam's prophecy) and Isaiah's prophecy of Isaiah 11:1 and 51:5. In doing so, he identifies the Star as Christ by quoting the Old Testament.

Athanasius the Great of the Nicene age, like Justin, identified the Star and ascribed to Moses the blessings of Israel and the knowledge of the Savior becoming a man.

"But Moses, the truly great, and whom they believe to speak truth with reference to the Savior's becoming man, having estimated what was said as important and assured of its truth, set it down in these words: 'There shall rise a star out of Jacob, and a man out of Israel, and he shall break in pieces the captains of Moab.' And again: 'How lovely are thy habitations, O Jacob, thy tabernacles which the Lord hath fixed, as cedars by the water. A man shall come forth out of his seed, and shall be Lord over many peoples.'"¹⁴

¹³ Justin, the Martyr, "The First Apology," *The Library of Christian Classics, Vol I. Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. By Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p.262-63.

¹⁴ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," *The Library of Christian Classics, Vol III. Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward H. Hardy, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p.87.

Theology of God in the Balaam Account

The story of Balaam reveals a great deal about the character of Yahweh. As the story unfolds the reader is shown how God deals with individuals and nations alike. The following is a brief review of some of what we can learn about the character of God found in Balaam's story.

The Superiority of God's Providence over Sorcery:

A consistent theme showing God's superiority over other religions and the magical arts is taught in the Bible. God's abhorrence and His lack of respect for the occult is well documented. The devices of Satan and man will not thwart the plan of God regarding His people and creation. Indeed God uses these enemies for His own purpose to show His divine nature and power. The story of Balaam is a continuation of this Biblical theme.

Repeatedly Balaam and Balak attempted to bring the magical arts against Israel. This is evident in Balaam's choice of locations to perform his "offerings:" Bamoth-Baal,¹⁵ Pisgah,¹⁶ and Peor.¹⁷ These accounts of Balaam's offerings are reminiscent of Moses in his confrontation with the mystics of Pharaoh (Ex 7:8-12) and Elijah's competition with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:21). Balaam consistently made offerings at the places of false gods worshiped by Israel's enemies and he did so in the company of the King of the Moabites (23:1).

Balaam was an opportunist – a reader of which way the wind blew. On first reading it may not be readily apparent that Balaam was a worker of sorcery, but this is resolved in 24:1; *"Now when Balaam saw that it please the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek to use sorcery..."* Balaam should not be likened to the Israelite prophets as they did not practice sorcery because God had commanded them not to do so.

¹⁵ Bamoth-Baal – "High places for Baal"

¹⁶ Baal of Peor – A local god worshiped on Mt. Peor

¹⁷ Pisgah – Sometimes identified as Mt. Nebo, i.e. "pagan god."

The Long Suffering of God:

Yahweh is patient. This is shown when Balaam's obvious disobedience is tolerated by God in order to accomplish His purpose. Romans 9:22-23 summarizes this divine characteristic; *"What if God wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy which he had prepared beforehand."*

Balaam and other participants in the corruption of God's children can be likened to the *"vessels of wrath."* By contrast Moses, Phinehas and the righteous children of God are the *"vessels of mercy."* The idea of God enduring the sin and destructive power of evil is troubling, but this is a necessary component of how God teaches and reveals Himself to His creation. For without the temporary toleration of sin, there can be no time for repentance.

The Salvation of God:

God is merciful and gracious in that He provides the mechanism for the salvation of His people in the person of Phinehas despite their sin and rebellion. Phinehas shows typical elements of Christ as a kind of Kinsman Redeemer. In a time of extreme peril when the children of God are about to be destroyed, Phinehas does what is necessary to save God's people and is then honored by God for his selfless act. Phinehas' name means the *"Serpent's mouth."* This echoes the brazen serpent raised in the wilderness as a means of salvation (Num 21:5-9). The road to salvation is often painful. Those who had been bitten (about to die) looked to the serpent and lived. But those who rejected God's provision died. Like Jesus, Phinehas was greatly honored by God for his actions on behalf of his people. Later, Phinehas was chosen by God to lead Israel's army into battle against God's enemies. The priestly role of Phinehas as mediator between God and His people also suggests typical elements of Christ's priestly role as our mediator. The process of salvation, though painful, is a deliberate and merciful act of God.

God's Loyal Love for His Children

The loyalty and faithfulness of God towards His people is revealed in Balaam's story. Using Balaam as His spokesman, God declared Israel "*blessed*" (Num 22:12). Because of this God forbid Balaam to curse (i.e. destroy), His children (22:13). God's love and admiration for Israel is seen in Balaam's blessings; Israel was strong "*like an ox*" (22:22), and powerful as a lioness (23:22). The dwelling places (tents) of Jacob are "*lovely*" (24:4), like valleys, gardens and aloes all pleasing to the Lord (24:5-6). Because of His love for Israel, God promised that the kings of Israel would be exalted and consume their enemies (24:7).

The story of Balaam teaches us that the love of God is the purest kind of love. It is not a naïve love that can be surprised by disloyalty. God knew He would be offended deeply by His children, yet He remained loyal to them. Thankfully God's loyalty does not depend on how much we love Him, but upon His never failing love for us.

The Conventional Nature of God

God's enduring covenant with Israel is repeated and confirmed through the gentile prophet. "*Blessed is he who blesses you and cursed is he who curses you*" (24:9b). God's nature and desire to make and keep promises does not change, unlike humans, "*God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent*" (23:19). God will do what He has promised and will keep His covenant with His people. "*Has He said, and will do He not do? Or has He spoken, and He not make it good?*" (23:19b). John Feinberg writes of the faithfulness of God and the truthfulness of God coming from two basic word groups. The first group stems from the verb *ʾaman* "to confirm," "support," and "uphold." This word group also denotes "to be certain." Here God is the one who is certain and will confirm. The second Hebrew group is rooted in the word *qěšôt*, speaking of God as "true."¹⁸

¹⁸ John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, Cross Ways Books, Wheaton, IL 2001, p-370

The Providence of God

God provides for and directs His people. He brought them out of Egypt, “*drawing them along like a wild ox.*” (Num 24:8a NLT). He protected them by devouring all of the nations who opposed them (24:8b). God provided for Israel’s physical needs; with deliberate care He planted her like aloes and cedars beside waters (24:6b), supplying her children all of their needs (24:7).

Balaam’s story shows that Israel would be cared for regardless of her disobedience. God has made a unilateral covenant with them. He makes this covenant with respect to the past and the future. God provided for them when they came out of Egypt and He will do so in the future. His ultimate provision will be the Messiah a “*Star*” who will crush their enemies (24:17-19).

In every account of Balaam, God is in command and directing the events. The fact that God’s children were disobedient or that Balaam had his own agenda does not witness against God’s sovereignty, but testifies to the obvious fact that God permits mankind to have freedom of choice within the framework of God’s providential care.

The Revelatory Nature of God

God wants us to learn about Him. The openness or the unveiling of God’s heart in the story of Balaam is remarkable. This can be seen in several places in the text. God makes His desires about the welfare of His people perfectly clear. “*you shall not curse the people for they are blessed*” (22:12). The Angel of the Lord calls Balaam’s way “*perverse before Me... surely I would have killed you by now*” (32-33). God left no doubt as to His intentions on this matter. But it is also interesting that God revealed Himself not just to His chosen people. He also revealed Himself to Balaam and the people of the nations and their leaders. It is a theme repeated in the Bible wherein God uses His people Israel, to inform the nations of the world about His nature and His existence. “*Rise up Balak, and hear, God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent. Has He not said, and will He not do?*” (23:18-19a).

The Wrath – “Zeal” of God

The wrath of God is certainly evident in the story of Balaam, but this portrayal of God’s wrath should be framed within the greater context of God’s love for his people. This includes His Divine will, His covenant with Abraham and all of the nations of world. God’s anger was directed at the prophet because Balaam knew God’s heart, yet he played the role of a con-man using trickery to gain his own ends. God told Balaam not to go with the Moabites nor curse the Israelites (22:12a). God’s anger was kindled when Balaam in open defiance, placed his own desires over those of Yahweh whom he called “*Lord*,” “*my God*,” and “*The Most High*” (22:18).

The obsessive desires of Balaam were so intense that even the sight of the Angel of the Lord, sword in hand – ready to take his life, did not deter him. This was outright rebellion and opposition towards God. It also showed that Balaam’s respect for the power of God was less than his respect for the powers of pagan sorcery.

In a twist of irony, Balaam’s plan actually resulted in God’s renewal of His covenant with Israel. God punished Israel for their sins, but He also saved them and repeated His loyalty to them (25:11-13). Balaam’s deeds did not produce the results he hoped for. It sealed not only his doom but the doom of those who listened to him – bringing God’s wrath upon them.

God’s wrath should not to be confused with an uncontrollable rage that blindly lashes out; the wrath of God is a result of His “zealous” nature. Walter Kaiser states... “When used of God, it [God’s zeal] denoted; (1) that attribute which demanded exclusive devotion (Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15); (2) that attitude of anger directed against all who persisted in opposing Him (Num. 25:11; Deut. 29:20; Ps. 79:5; Ezk. 5:13; 16:38,42; 25:11; Zeph. 1:8); and (3) the energy He expended in vindicating His people (2 Kings 19:31; Is 9:7; 37:32; Joel 2:18; Zech. 1:14; 8:2).”¹⁹

Kaiser concludes by pointing out that God’s zeal is the forerunner of His vindication and salvation. It is not just an instrument of retribution. God applies His wrath with perfect control.

¹⁹ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1978) p-221

So it was that God's zeal was applied in order to implement the salvation of His people and to keep His covenants. What is true of God's zeal can also be said of His chosen instruments, such as seen in the person of Phinehas. *"Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal"*²⁰ (Num 25:11).

Phinehas indeed had a zeal for God, but it is also interesting that the zeal of Phinehas was instrumental in "turning back" the wrath or zeal of God. The zeal of Phinehas can be likened to that of scalpel in the hands of a master surgeon. Phinehas did not prevent the uncontrollable fury of an angry God; on the contrary, Phinehas was a chosen tool used by God to carefully and lovingly remove an infection from His beloved without killing the patient.

The Mercy of God

As witnessed in the story of Balaam, God's wrath is not devoid of God's mercy. Though God was justified in destroying Israel, He provided for the salvation of those who remained faithful for the preservation of those who would follow. Because Phinehas was faithful, the plague which might have consumed all of the people was halted.

For his actions, Phinehas received God's honor and he also received God's covenant of peace for himself and his descendants. Also God accepted the zeal of Phinehas as *"atonement for the children of Israel"* (25:12-13). This is mercy born out of love and justice. Though Israel was clearly guilty and broken, God provided the means for her restoration. It is critical to note that the mercy of God is founded in His love; *"But the Lord your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, rather the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you"* (Deut, 23:6).

²⁰ The NASB and ESV, translate the word zeal as "jealous." Kaiser states that the adjective *qannô* or its related noun *qin'âh* is better translated as "zeal," and when used of God, it does not denote a God who is jealous, i.e. suspicious, distrustful and fearful of rivalry. p-221

Selected Biblical Themes Regarding Balaam

“Eyes Wide Open”

A most perplexing question surrounds the prophet Balaam;

“The utterance of Balaam Son of Beor, the utterance of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down with eyes wide open.” (Num 24: 3a-4)

This astonishing confession and acknowledgement of the truth of God is made not once but twice, but with even more clarity:

“The utterance of Balaam Son of Beor, and the utterances of the man whose eyes are open, the utterance of him who hears the word of God and has knowledge of the most high, who sees the vision of the almighty, who falls down with eyes wide open.” (Num 24: 15a-16)

What is to be made of Balaam? Is he to be dismissed as a simple fool? Perhaps a doddering old man we can excuse as one who is simply boasting and given to hyperbole? Clearly this is not the teaching of the text. Balaam indeed spoke the truth. He heard the words of God (Num 22:12, 20, 32, 35) and he saw the Angel of God (22:31-32). Balaam had the knowledge of God’s desires and will (22:13, 32), and he knew that he had sinned (22:34). He was even shown that it was from the nation of Israel that God’s Messiah would come (24:17-18). And yet in spite of all this, Balaam attempted to destroy that which God had created!

So the question that needs to be asked: How can men who see so clearly with “eyes wide open” blatantly rebel against the God of the universe? It is one thing for a rebellious man to rationalize that his disobedience is excusable because of ignorance or childlike foolishness, but this rationalization does not hold true for many; “... if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.” To which Jesus retorted that these claims were no excuse (Matt 23:30-31).

The realization that mankind can be given knowledge of the Holy God and still openly rebel against Him lends fresh insight into some difficult passages of the Bible. Examples of this are the puzzling parables of Matthew 13:1-43. Within the context of the “Kingdom of Heaven” or the Millennial Kingdom we find the presence of the tares among the good wheat (Matt 13:25-30), the aberrant mustard tree with the nesting of birds (13:31-32) and the leaven hidden in the three measures of meal (13:33). Here in view are the rebels of the Millennial Kingdom spoken of in Revelation 20:7-10, who even though they have been ruled by the King of Kings for a thousand years, can still be willfully deceived and rebel against God.²¹ Other examples can be found in Scripture which tell of men who know the truth but deliberately suppress it and even seek to destroy the children of God. These are typified in Romans 1:18-21, 32.

Christians must face the reality that there exists individuals and nations, indeed many, who actually know God and His Messiah but act in willful and open defiance of His desires – Balaam was one of these. In fact, Balaam was in many ways the archetype of the man who knows the truth but still seeks to destroy God’s plan of salvation for every human. Here then is the heart of evil men and the essence of the spiritual and physical warfare so often referred to in Scripture.

²¹ Dr. Chuck Missler explores this concept of a rebellious Millennial Kingdom in his audio conversation with Albert Israel. *Thy Kingdom Come*. K-house. Missler and Israel point out that the Parables of Matthew 13 and Psalms 2:7-9, and other passages portray a picture of the Kingdom wherein Christ takes possession of and establishes His kingdom in the midst of evil and rebellion. The Kingdom, when established, will offer an idyllic and righteous life with God, however Jesus must still rule with a rod of iron and dispense judgment to the ungodly. Missler states that even when fallen man is offered the best, he still rebels.

Blessings and Curses

Did Balaam bless or curse Israel? Actually he did both, or so it appears. At first reading the story, as told in Numbers, appears to show that Balaam did not actually curse Israel. The specific text does not state that he did. Rather it appears that Balaam defended Israel and only spoke blessings of Israel. Balaam apparently refused Balak's demand that he curse Israel. (Num 22:13,18). So, should we not excuse Balaam on the grounds that he really did not curse Israel?

A closer examination of the text regarding the blessings however reveals that Balaam was speaking the words of God and not those of his own. It was God who was blessing Israel not Balaam (23:20). A confirmation of this fact is found in Deuteronomy 23:4-5. Here the text clearly shows that Balaam did indeed curse Israel: *"Nevertheless the Lord our God would not listen to Balaam, but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you."* Therefore, it was God and not Balaam who was the author of the blessings while Balaam was the one who cursed Israel and sought her destruction in open defiance to God.²² Why then did God choose Balaam to bless Israel? Rabbi Naftali Silberberg answers this way:

Some of the most beautiful blessings and praises ever showered upon the Jews were uttered by Balaam, the malicious anti-Semite who eagerly accepted Balak's invitation to curse the Jews ... The highlight of these blessings is the only clear prophecy written in the Torah concerning the coming of Moshiach: *"I see it, but not now, I look at him, but it isn't near. A star has issued from Jacob and a staff will come forth from Israel..."*

Why couldn't these prophecies have been transmitted through Moses, the champion of the Jews? Instead we find that many of Moses' prophecies are replete with rebukes and admonitions. It would seem that Moses and Balaam switched roles; Moses should have showered us with blessings and honor, and Balaam should have been the mouthpiece for G-d's reprimands!

The Midrash says, "It would have been proper for the rebukes to emanate from the mouth of Balaam, and the blessings from the mouth of Moses. However, if Balaam would have rebuked, the Jews would have disregarded the rebukes, saying, 'our foe is rebuking us.' And if Moses would have blessed, the nations of the world would disregard the blessings, saying, 'the one who loves them has blessed them.' Therefore, G-d said, 'Let Moses who loves them rebuke them, and let Balaam who detests them, bless them.'" ²³

²² "Behold these [women of Moab] caused the sons of Israel, through the council of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor..." (Num 30:16).

²³ Naftali Silberberg, *Why did G-d Choose Balaam to Bless the Jews?*

False Teachers

“The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are wide opened, The utterance of him who hears the words of God, and has the knowledge of the most High, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open.” Num 24:15-16

“For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error.” II Peter 2:18

The Apostle Peter did not mince words when he expressed his opinion of Balaam and the false teachers of his day. False teachers like Balaam have very distinct characteristics. They are presumptuous, self-willed (II Pet 2:10), they lure the faithful with deceptive words (2: 3,18b), bringing about their own destruction and those they entice (2:1-2).

One can imagine Balaam standing upon the mountain top in the presence of King Balak claiming that he, Balaam, had “*eyes wide open*” and that he heard the words of God. Balaam claimed he had the knowledge of the most High, and he saw visions of the Almighty – humility was not one of Balaam’s faults! Indeed Balaam was an arrogant man, but it did not end there. Peter goes on to explain that false teachers, like Balaam, follow a path of arrogance and pride. This leads to taking liberties with Scripture – misrepresenting the words of God to the degree they actually deny the Lord (2:1). False teachers place their own needs and desires above those to whom they have been sent to help. They exploit the brethren because of their lust (2:3). At last they become trapped in their own web of deceit, not understanding the danger they become “*like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed*” (2:12a).

“...although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools...” (Rom 1:21-22).

The false teacher like Balaam is unstable like shifting sand and speaking out of both sides of his mouth. By contrast he is the direct opposite of God. God is immutable, “*He changes not.*”

But Balaam like mankind in general is not to be trusted. Ronald Allen puts it this way:

“Balaam is used as a foil for God. Balaam is constantly shifting, prevaricating, equivocating, changing – and he is himself the prime example of the distinction between God and man....Balaam is the contrast to Yahweh, and Balaam is used by Yahweh to say this very truth.”²⁴

Jude calls them “*clouds without water, carried about by the winds*” (Jude 12b) He also refers to them as raging, foaming seas and “*wandering stars*” (Jude 13a).

The very nature of the false teacher is corruption and the spreading of corruption. It is in effect a descent into the worst mankind has to offer. Those who walk in the “way” of Balaam take many with them to their final and desolate destination “*for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever*” (Jude 13b).

²⁴ Ronald B. Allen PhD, Doctrinal Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, (1973) p 432. Allen builds upon the contrasting of Balaam with God and then expands it to include the contrast of man to God. This fault of mutability is not restricted to just false teachers – it is in every human. In a real sense, Balaam and the false teacher are more “manish” (i.e. toward the dark side of man) and less Christ like.

Conclusion:

Most Sunday school stories about Balaam focus on the donkey and the greed of Balaam. When we read about Balaam in II Peter 2:15-16, “*who loved the wages of unrighteousness,*” we may tend to think only in terms of money and gold. There is no question that Balaam wanted to profit from the knowledge God had given him. But remember what we have just explored tells of an underlying motivation and malevolent power behind the prophet. This is the same spirit which motivates the false teachers of today. This evil has an agenda that is much more insidious and deadly than simply the lust for money or self-serving pride.

The purpose of the false teachers in the Church is to assimilate the Christian into the culture of our day. Great emphasis is given to tolerance and adoption of values that are in direct conflict with God’s Word.

Unfortunately, too many Christians living in Western Society exhibit little or no difference between themselves and the rest of the people of this age. It only takes a quick review of statistics such as divorce, abortion, and the decline in morality to confirm this. We do not even need to check numbers. We have only to look in the mirror to see what we expose our children to every day. We have become like those we are trying to reach.

Just as Israel was called by God to be “Holy” or separated from the practices of an unbelieving world, we as Christians are also called to be Holy and separate. Like Israel we are given the task to educate ourselves and our children about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and especially about God’s Son. We cannot do this if we are consumed by and occupied with the world and its pagan way of life. We abdicate our position of holiness and disqualify ourselves when we try to live under the values and mores of the world.

The battle is not about “me” and “my life,” it is about how we as believers will respond to God’s commands and tell others about Him. The more we look and behave like the world the more we lose that which makes us God’s children.

By way of review, we see that the plan of Balaam was to entice the people and children of God into immorality followed by idolatry and to ultimately murder them as nation.

The most hideous part of Balaam’s plan attempted to use the Holy character of God and His justice as the manner by which Israel would be destroyed. That is to say by using God’s law and getting God to kill His own children! It did not work of course, but it did cause the death of thousands and perhaps millions today. Balaam’s error was his failure to recognize that the love and mercy of God toward His people would outweigh His Divine justice.

The goal of the false teachers of 2009 is exactly the same plan as Balaam’s and just as deliberate and deadly. The goal is to remove our anchor. To cut our connection with the true faith of the Scripture, to isolate, deny and discount our teachings and beliefs from the world and finally to assimilate our people and children. This until we as Bible believing Christians and Jews are no more. Unfortunately in the United States and Europe the plan of the false teachers has already succeeded for the most part.

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