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With Whom was Balaam Talking?

By Joanne Johnson

In the Word of God we find an unusual story about a peculiar man, who foretold the future and “blessed” and “cursed” various people(s) during the time when Israel was wandering in the wilderness for 40 years (Num. 22:1-24:25). He is also the only person recorded in Scripture to have been queried by a donkey. But, was the donkey really talking? Or, was it God communicating through the donkey? Or, was God making a point by talking through the donkey to him? What does Scripture say?

This peculiar man was Balaam, the son of Beor at Pethor. He was called “a soothsayer” in Joshua 13:22 (Heb.-*qacum*, divine[r]). He was not an Israelite, as the Israelites had been forbidden by God to practice soothsaying, divination or witchcraft by “mediums” of any kind—God’s punishment specified being stoned to death (Lev. 20:27). (In Lev. 19:26, the Hebrew word “divination” is *nachash*, whisper a spell; in Lev. 19:31, *NASB*, the Hebrew word “spiritists” is *yidd’onyi*, wizard; also the Hebrew word “mediums” is *owb*, mumble from a jar.)

In Numbers 24:1, we find that “he did not go . . . to seek to use sorcery . . .,” proving that Balaam might also have been a sorcerer or wizard. In E.W. Bullinger’s *The Companion Bible*, the marginal note on this verse says: “*To seek for enchantments* [KJV] equals ‘to meet with familiar spirits.’”) And, he was requested to “curse” Israel by Balak, who was the son of Zippor, king of the Moabites. Balak, fearing the Israelites’ large numbers, had sent elders from Moab and Midian “with a diviner’s fee in their hand” to convince him to “curse” Israel (Num. 22:6-7). While the men were staying with him, Balaam had a Word from God, Who told him, “You shall *not go* with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed” (Num. 22:12), which he outrightly disobeyed. (In *The Companion Bible*, the marginal note on verse 12 says: “*Not go*. This is absolute. Compare verse 20 where the permission is conditional.”) Balaam’s disobedience was identified by not strongly insisting on having any further communication with that king. However, after further communication with the king’s princes and even warning them that he “could not go beyond the Word of the LORD my God, to do less or more” (Num. 22:18), God visited Balaam at night. The LORD said to him, “*If the men come to call you*, rise and go with them; but only the Word which I speak to you—that you shall do” (Num. 22:20). God *really did not* want Balaam to follow the men and use his sorcery to “curse” Israel, even though King Balak had promised to honor him greatly (Num. 22:17).

Now, after God had talked to him, during the journey to see the king, something really unusual occurred. Balaam's donkey talked!

As the story continues, the LORD's anger was aroused when Balaam went, after much urging from various-ranked princes, to see King Balak: "Then God's anger was aroused because he went, and the Angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him" (Num. 22:22). During his journey, Balaam was riding his donkey, which saw an angel of the LORD with His sword drawn. The donkey tried to divert itself three times from being killed (Num. 22:23-27; first, off the road to a field; next, it pushed itself against a wall and crushed Balaam's foot; and the third time, being blocked by the angel, it finally laid down beneath him. And Balaam had struck the poor donkey each time.). Finally, the LORD *opened the donkey's mouth*, which asked Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" (Num. 22:28). Then God "*opened Balaam's eyes*, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with his sword drawn in his hand" (Num. 22:31). Again, Balaam is informed by God, ". . . Only the Word that I speak to you, that you shall speak" (Num. 22:35).

Here is an important point. Balaam *cannot go against the Word of the Lord*, except to *do as he is bidden to speak*. The Old and New Testaments show us many examples of those who disobeyed God and those who obeyed God or took God seriously. The rest of the story informs us how Balaam, who originally was requested by King Balak to "curse" Israel, ended up blessing Israel (Num. 23 and 24) *instead* of cursing them.

Notes on Balaam, from *Young's Analytical Concordance*, explain that he was the "Son of Beor, a Midianite prophet. He resided at Pethor, a city of Mesopotamia, as he himself tells us, he was 'brought from Aram (Syria) out of the mountains of the East.'" Similarly, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a priest of Midian (Exod. 3:1), indicating that the Midianites may have had some sort of contact with God.

Other Scripture references, shown as partial quotations and briefly summarized, are recorded and expound more about Balaam, including these following ones found below:

❖ **Deut. 23:3-5**—God, through Moses, commanded Israel: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD . . . because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Nevertheless the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam, but *the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you*, because the LORD your God loves you."

❖ **Joshua 13:22**—Joshua reminded the Israelites that they had "killed with the sword Balaam the son of Beor, the soothsayer."

❖ **Joshua 24:9-10**—Joshua reminded Israel what God had done: "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose to make war against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of

Beor to curse you. *But I [God] did not listen to Balaam; therefore he continued to bless you. So I [God] delivered you out of his hand.*”

❖ **Nehemiah 13:1-2**—The priests or Levites “read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the [Israelite] people,” reminding them what God had done by expelling the Ammonite or Moabite from the assembly of God “because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, *our God turned the curse into a blessing.*”

❖ **Micah 6:5**—Micah tells Israel what God did for them: “. . . Remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, from Acacia Grove to Gilgal, *that you may know the righteousness of the LORD.*”

❖ **2 Peter 2:15-16**—Balaam is likened to a false prophet by Peter (see full quote).

❖ **Jude 1:11**—Jude reminds believers in Christ about ungodly men who “have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit.”

❖ **Rev. 2:14**—Christ tells John about those “holding” the doctrine of Balaam (personal gain through rendering Godly blessing—no glory for God; see full quote).

Probably, the most intriguing part is the rest of the events that actually transpired after the story recorded in Numbers 22:1-24:25. In Revelation 2:14, Jesus Christ tells/reveals to the Apostle John about “those who hold *the doctrine of Balaam* (a satanic doctrine), who taught Balak *to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.*” In other words, we have it on the finest authority as to what actually transpired with Israel, *after* Balaam “blessed” them.

Some people wonder what caused the donkey to talk. Scripture tells us quite plainly that the “LORD *opened* the mouth of the donkey.” Why did the LORD open the donkey’s mouth? *Because the Angel of the LORD had told Balaam,* “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because *your way is perverse before Me*” (Num. 22:32). Aforementioned Scriptures verify that *Balaam had repeatedly disobeyed God.*

The significant truth concerning Balaam is discovered in 2 Peter 2:15-16: “They [the false prophets] have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, *who loved the wages of unrighteousness*; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man’s voice restrained the madness of the prophet.”

Now, reiterating our original questions: “Was the donkey really talking? Or, was it God communicating through the donkey? Or, was God making a point by talking through the donkey to him?” It appears that God was *talking directly* to Balaam AND *talking through* his donkey *to make His point*, which was *obeying Him* instead of King Balak.

Perhaps there is another vital message here. Balaam’s disobedience to God is used here as an “example” that we all would be wise to avoid imitating. The late Otis Q. Sellers used to say that once God gave a command to anybody (as found repeatedly in Scriptural examples), it was up to him/her “to take God at His Word and act upon it or respond

accordingly.” Therefore, as opposed to Balaam’s disobedience, let us continue *believing in our Great God, even our Savior Jesus Christ and obeying His righteous order by doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God* (Micah 6:8).

(All quotations are from the *New King James Version* unless otherwise noted. All Hebrew words are found in *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, from the section titled, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in The Hebrew Bible.*)

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