

Numbers 22:1-35, 'Balaam - Telling the Truth'

By Ian Olliver

Of all the crazy bonkers stories in the Bible there are not many quite as bizarre as the tale of Balaam and the talking donkey. What? You mean to say that there actually is a talking donkey in the Bible?

The whole idea is so preposterous that it hardly ever comes up as a preaching topic...maybe as a fun Sunday school story for children... but not as a serious preach.....today, as we are in a season of an A-Z of Bible characters it is time to pay a visit to Numbers chapter 22 and have a look at what is going on here.

So we are with the Israelites wondering through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. Because of various bits of unbelief and disobedience (that we don't need to go into here) the journey which should have taken about 3 weeks has now ended up taking 40 years.

Already Israel is a lot of people...I mean a lot of people. It is called the book of numbers for a reason. Chapter 2 gives us the number of 603,500 people. More than 3 times the population of the whole of Herefordshire or 6 Wembley stadiums full of people. All on a journey headed for the promised land.

In the previous chapter- 21 The Israelites wanted to peacefully pass through the Negev desert towards the promised land . The local king of the area- King Arad didn't trust these strange foreign folks. He got nervous and launched an attack against Israel. In response Israel utterly destroyed him and his cities. Then Israel travelled north sent messengers to Sihon, King of the Amorites asking permission to pass peacefully through his country. Sihon said no.... and the Israelites then utterly destroyed him and his cities...And then much the same thing happened with King Og of Bashan. Israel was getting itself a fearsome reputation. So although the promised land was to the West of the Jordan river...Israel was unexpectedly maybe even inadvertently conquering all the lands to the East of the Jordan. Though there was one country – one tribe on the East side as yet unvisited by the Israelites.... The Land of Moab.

The people of Moab were understandably terrified at the thought of these 603,500 people suddenly turning up on their doorstep and their fate becoming the same as the Canaanites, the Ammonites and the Bashanites. Utterly terrified. Literally sick with fear. So scared that they felt like throwing up.

What can be done? The Israelites might see themselves as poor slaves escaping tyranny....but from the Moabite perspective all they could see was this unstoppable machine, this tidal wave of humanity which has roared out of Egypt and seems to be swallowing up everything and everyone in its path. What is Balak, the Moabite King to do? He has learned that going out and attacking the Israelites hasn't ended well for his neighbouring nations...a different strategy is required.

So Balak sends for Balaam. Balaam is the local celebrity witchdoctor. For whatever reason Balaam has gained a real reputation for being able to manipulate the spiritual realities on the ground. The people he blessed seem to end up getting blessed.....and the people he curses somehow seem to end up being cursed. So if Balaam can just issue a big and potent enough curse over these Israelites, then the problem would get solved with out all the pain and bloodiness and potential defeat that going to war would entail.

Balaam's cursing ability doesn't come cheap... The elders of Moab and neighbouring Midian club together to afford his divination fees..... And so Balaam goes to work.

Interestingly Balaam does pray to God...and he clearly does have a relationship with God, which might explain how his blessing and cursing in the past has been so successful.

So Balaam spends the night in prayer to God.

Balaam explains to God the plight of his people in the face of the Israelite threat, and therefore why a really big curse is now necessary. But God tells Balaam that it is not like that at all. God explains that Israelites are a blessed people and therefore cannot be cursed.

The next morning Balaam explains all of this to the officials. who in turn report back to Balak.

Balak is fuming. He sends a bigger and more illustrious delegation to see Balaam. Presumably with an enhanced divination fee.

Balaam spends another night in prayer... and again God makes it very clear that he cannot curse the Israelites. Again he explains to the delegation "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with gold and silver I cannot do anything to go beyond what God has told me".

This time Balaam agrees to travel to see the king. Although God has given him permission for this journey he is at the same time very angry with Balaam for going? Why? How does that make sense.

Well it is because God sees Balaams motive. Balaaam has one eye on remembering to be obedient to God...but his other eye is firmly placed on the big divination fee which Barak is offering.

Balaam doesn't see a problem with this. His servants don't see a problem with this... In fact it takes a donkey to point out to this great and wise astrologer that his obedient heart that is willing to listen and act upon the instructions of God is also in severe danger of being corrupted by the lure of big money.

Balaam admits as much. You got me angel. I have sinned, my motive for travelling is less than pure. And Balaam even offers to turn back and not visit King Balak after all.

But its fine.. With the warning of the angel and lesson of the donkey Balaam continues on the road.

The story continues beyond our reading. I mean I could stop here, but hopefully you are all dying to find out what happens next?. Yes is the right answer!

So Balak takes Balaam up a hillside to a place called Bamoth Baal. There, for the first time Balaam sees a small portion of the Israelite camp. I think that Balak hopes that when Balaam sees for himself the nature of the Israelite threat that he will change his mind and bring out his mega-curse

and neutralise the Israelite threat. Barak, at Balaam's request sets up alters and organises animals for sacrifice. Balaam looks out over the camp and God fills his heart with love and compassion for the Israelites. He tells Barak about the love that God has for these people and how he cannot curse that which God wants to bless.

Annoyed by this turn of events Barak takes Balaam to a better vantage point where he can see the whole Israelite camp. Does this have the desired effect?... No. At the sight of it Balaam bursts into song

“How beautiful are your tents, Jacob,
your dwelling places, Israel!

⁶ “Like valleys they spread out,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes planted by the Lord,
like cedars beside the waters.

⁷ Water will flow from their buckets;
their seed will have abundant water.

“Their king will be greater than Agag;
their kingdom will be exalted. And so on. And the same thing happens on a third occasion making Balak even more frustrated... I mean this is a funny story right!

Then -I quote *Balak's anger burned against Balaam. He struck his hands together and said to him, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times. 11 Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded."*

12 Balaam answered Balak, "Did I not tell the messengers you sent me, 13 'Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the Lord—and I must say only what the Lord says'?

As if to rile him further Balaam goes on to give more pronouncements, more oracles about how God was going to continue to bless Israel and

destroy her enemies. Eventually Barak got so fed up with Balaam that he sends him home – without his divination fee.

On the basis of all of this we might conclude that Balaam, though certainly not one of God's chosen people, was nevertheless a person who prayed and listened to God and acted with integrity..... But that is not the whole story.

To piece together what is the rest of the story we have to unearth snippets from elsewhere in the Bible. But here is what I think happens.

I think that Balaam returns to have a meeting with Balak and hatches a plan. I think that he says something along the lines of "Look, about this divination fee.... I know that it would be pointless cursing these Israelites because they are under God's blessing and protection..... but what if I can bring your people under that same blessing and protection that the Israelites enjoy?

Balak says -ok I'm listening

Balaam says we know we can't defeat them in battle, we know we can't curse them..... but what if we seduce them! We could send off our best looking women and girls and I could go and entice the Israelites into marrying them. They take on our DNA, they take on some of our customs, we assimilate them into an Israeli/Moabite/ Midianite coalition nation.

And Balak thinks to himself what a stroke of genius – sexual exploitation and trafficking to bring me political and economic power and security.... That's a small price to pay. If you can sort that out for me Balaam then the divination fee is yours my friend.

So how did I come to this conclusion. Lets look at the evidence.

Numbers 25 vs 1 While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods.

Of course God was not blind to what was going on. He had brought the Israelites out of Egypt to be a different kind of nation. He called them to be pure, obedient, law abiding, a people of love... and now they were

being seduced. The attractions of Moabite women became more powerful than the attraction of serving their Holy, rescuing God.

The culprit behind all this is named in Numbers 31 verse 15 when Moses exclaims “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord.

Yes Balaam’s shenanigans might be concealed and hidden away within the pages of the Old Testament, but are forcefully and roundly condemned in the New.

In his second letter Peter writes to the church warning of how convincing sounding but false teachers can infiltrate the church (2Peter 2) With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! 15 They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.

Similarly in the letter that Jesus’s brother Jude writes- again about false teachers 11 Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error.

And finally in the Bible- in The revelation given to St John Jesus has these words for the church in Pergamum

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

So what do we learn from all of this? What is the lesson that Balaam teaches us. Well first and foremost God is not stupid. He cannot be bribed or hoodwinked or circumvented.

God gave Balaam an amazing gift. He enabled Balaam to understand how and why he wanted to bless Israel. He knew that God wanted to create a people after his own heart. A people of integrity, a people of love and justice. A people who would take seriously the 10 commandments and

live by them. He wanted to create a people for whom killing and theft and lying and idolatry and adultery would have no part of their identity.

And in this knowledge Balaams desire for personal wealth overrode all that God was trying to show him. Instead by his words and actions and blatant lies Balaam lured the Israelites into compromise, idolatry, adultery and all the rest of it.

The next question, which I'm sure you have is... did he get away with it?. Did Balaam get to live out his days in comfort and luxury on his own little Greek Island?

No he did not. Numbers 31 vs 7 They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man. 8 Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba—the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword.

Not just Balaam but his benefactors also were killed in a battle which had only come about as a result of their attractive, rational sounding proposals given to the Moabites and the Israelites, but which were at their heart greedy, self-centred, exploitative and wedded to sin rather than to righteousness.

So how does Balaam's story land for us today in Ross? How do we work out -in our leaders, whether they be church leaders or business leaders or politicians. How do we discern whether they, and their advisors, speak words which come from God or words which come from satan? The answer is we take a look at their hearts, their true motives... what is it that they are really after? Our best interests or their best interests?

As Jesus himself said in Matthew 7 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

We can tell by looking at their fruit- their lifestyle what is important to them. Are they open to taking money or promotion as they share their visions and manifestos. And in all of this how do they treat their

opponents, their colleagues, their co-workers..... How do they treat their donkeys.

The tragedy and the warning is that Balaam knew God. He had encountered him and yet still chose the path of the material and self-interest.

We must continually examine our heart, examine our motives and be continually on our guard. Knowing God is not enough to be saved. Believing in Jesus is not enough to be saved. It is only when we make him **Lord** and give our hearts to him that we can be saved. We need this to be true of ourselves, and most especially we need it to be true of our leaders. If we read the Bible looking for loopholes to get our sinful heart's desire rather than the desire of God's heart then we are on a road to destruction. In giving our hearts fully to God we might not find wealth and power in this world. We may well find difficulty and persecution because we are not saying the kinds of things that selfish people like to hear...but we will find life....real life , real peace and real freedom in this world and for all eternity.

Amen