

## Stories From The Stable

### *Christmas Series*

Numbers 22-24

Written By

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**W**e all know Jesus was born outside a nice, cozy, warm hotel in a noisy, smelly, and cold stable. Imagine the magnitude of this birth. The Lord of glory, the God who created all things by the word of His mouth (Colossians 1:16ff), the One who sat on a majestic throne ruling the entire seen and unseen worlds, He chose to come into our world in an impoverished, less the optimal setting. As Isaiah rightly prophesied, He, the Messiah, would be a servant of all servants, and His humble, out-of-the-way birthplace set the providential pace for His redemptive role (Isaiah 41:8-9; 42:1, 3, 19; 53:11).

Granted, the place of the Lord's birth is permeated with prophetic and theological fulfillment, but what about the animals? Did they just happen to be there when their Creator arrived in the middle of the night? Knowing how God tends to work in and through all sorts of intricate details to carry out His purposes and to drive home His timeless truths, I tend to believe those animals have theological and spiritual messages if we just give it some much needed thought and analysis.

The question is, however, which animals? We do not know for sure because Scripture is silent. Luke's birth account mentions Mary and Joseph, shepherds, the Babe (Jesus), and a manger (Luke 2:7, 15-19) . . . but no animals. Zip. Nada. But animals had to be there, right, after all, who ate out of the manger? Animals had to be there also just because that little child was the second Adam, the greater Adam (Romans 5:12-21), and as the first Adam was surrounded with animals, I'm sure the second Adam enjoyed the same company at his birth. All of this, of course, takes us back to our initial question: since animals lived in ancient stables, which animals probably rested around the manger of Christ in the soft, warm straw? I'll take four educated

guesses: A donkey (Mary and Joseph probably road one into town), a goat, a camel (people with funds rode them), and, yes, a lamb.

If these four animals dwelt in the stable that night, I think each one of them had a definite theological and spiritual purpose for being there. Why do I say this? Because of what I know about them from both Old and New Testaments. Yes, with a little reflection and digging I think we can quickly learn there are **STORIES FROM THE STABLE**. This Christmas let's start cognitively digging into these stories by looking first at the donkey. We'll begin in our customary fashion by posing a question.

## What Do We Learn From The Donkey? (Numbers 22-24).

We learn plenty if we turn our attention to a so-called “prophet” in the Old Testament named Balaam. His story and his relationship to a famous donkey is written on the yellowed parchment of Numbers chapters 22 through 24. Since it is impossible to cover every episode of this story in the time allotted, we will focus our sights on some select verses from chapters 22 and 24. But before we do this, we must give you some much needed background.



In Genesis 3:15, God prophetically promised to one day send the Messiah to definitively deal with the Devil. In Genesis 4:25, God worked to bring that promised Seed through the line of Seth. In Genesis 12, God created the nation of Israel from which the Messiah would come. When God created them through their patriarch, Abraham, He promised to not only bless the world through them, but to give them actual land parameters in Palestine. In Genesis 49:8-12, God prophetically promised the future Messiah would come through the line of Judah, the kingly line of Israel. In Exodus

chapters 1 through 11, we encounter the twelve tribes of Israel in captivity in Egypt, and we watch as God miraculously deliver them through the leadership of Moses. In Exodus 12-40, Moses writes how God formed them into a nation with special laws around the base of Mount Sinai. He also told them they should worship Him in the Tabernacle, which they constructed. In Leviticus, God told them how to properly approach Him with various forms of sacrifice. In Numbers 1 through 20, the inspired writer reminds us how the original group of former slaves died as they wandered in the wilderness for daring to question God's ability to give them the land He had promised to them. Starting in Numbers 20 we learn how the new generation of God-fearing young people successfully defeated their enemies as they swept northeastward from the Sinai toward the mountains of Moab from which they would move into the Holy Land. One by one, their enemies fell like dominos: the Canaanites in Hormah (Numbers 21:1-3), the Amorites (Numbers 21:21-31), and the mighty and “invincible” Bashanites north near Galilee (Numbers 21:33-35).

Realizing his land was next and fearing the worst because Israel's God had decimated armies greater than his, Balak, king of Moab, hired the best soothsayer in the land to bring spiritual curses on the unsuspecting Israelites (Numbers 22:7). His name? Balaam. His name said it all in Hebrew. It meant "Devourer." He'd live to fulfill the spiritual meaning his name. His nationality? A Gentile. His city? Beor. His country? Mesopotamia, or the same region Daniel would lead the soothsayer school some eight hundred years later (605 B.C.), and the same region of Eden where mankind slipped into sin, thus moving God to promise to send a worthy and perfect Deliverer. This was also the same region God had called Abraham from roughly eight hundred years prior. Interesting. His impact? He's historically known as a money-grubbing man who rejected revelatory light, opposed God, and caused God's people to compromise their faith (Numbers 25:1-16; 31:8, 16). He was also a man who learned a whole lot from a donkey as God used him to give mankind some of the most profound prophecies of the Messiah recorded in the Torah.

With this foundation information in mind, we can now turn our attention to Balaam's encounter with a donkey to beat all donkeys. Chapters 22 through 24 contain four episodes where Balaam attempted to use the non-conventional weapon of Satanic curse (Numbers 24:1 tells us he employed the skills of sorcery in the first two oracles), only to find he could do nothing more than bless Israel, the people of God four times in a row. The first oracle is set up with the money hungry pagan prophet heading to Balak with his princes. God had initially commanded him not to go with them to curse Israel (Numbers 22:12), but, then seeing the prophet's love affair with tinsel over truth God released him to travel with them with one proviso: he would only speak what God commanded (Numbers 22:20). The next morning, Balaam saddled his donkey and took off to rendezvous with Balak for the cursing event. This is where we'll jump into the story by first considering . . .

## The Literal Structure Of The Story

*The Road (Numbers 22:22-27).* Yes, the pagan prophet set out on a road to hook up with the pagan king in order to do a spiritual number on Israel so he could, in turn, make some good money using his soothsayer skills on a national level. Verse 22 introduces us to our first plot twist in the narrative:

<sup>22</sup> But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. <sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, *with* a wall on this side and a wall on that side. <sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again. <sup>26</sup> The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right

hand or the left. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick.

Why was God angry when He had told him to go? Because He saw into the heart of Balaam and He didn't like what He saw: godless greed masquerading behind a false spirituality. How did God respond to the donkey riding soothsayer? He sent "the angel of the LORD" to get his attention and stop him. Who is this?

The phrase "the angel of the LORD" is the pre-incarnate form of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, this "angel" is clearly identified as God. His title is one reserved specifically for God, He speaks as God to Hagar (Genesis 16:7-10), to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:2-7), to Manoah the father of Samson (Judges 13:21-22), He intercedes for God in Zechariah (Zechariah 1:9-12), He, who is called Jehovah in Zechariah also speaks to Jehovah (Zechariah 3:1-2), He has the same role of Christ as the revealer of God (Exodus 3:2, 4, 6, 14; John 1:14; Colossians 2:9), commissioner of God's people like Moses (Exodus 3:7-8; Matthew 28:19-20), He brings deliverance (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 2:14-15), He offers protection to His people (2 Kings 19:35; Hebrews 13:5), He intercedes (Zechariah 1:12-13; Hebrews 7:25), and He brings judgment (1 Chronicles 21:1-15; Matthew 24:44-51). As Christ is the physical representation of the Trinity in the New Testament, the Angel of the Lord is the Trinity's representative on earth in Old Testament times, and when Christ is born the term is no longer used because He became the God-man. Ah, this is most interesting. The babe of Bethlehem attempted to stop Balaam from collecting money for cursing Israel, His chosen people.

As we see from the first part of the narrative, when the mighty Angel of God appeared, the donkey upon which Balaam rode did three things. First, he, the donkey, saw the ominous angel and turned off the main road and wandered out to the safety of a field (v. 23). Balaam responded by hitting the poor beast, as if were stupid or something. Second, as Balaam reconnoitered to head back in his intended direction, the Angel blocked his way again. This time the donkey, who saw the Angel, slammed the prophet's foot into a nearby wall in her attempt to stop the madness (v. 24-25). Balaam's anger management classes went out the window again and he beat the beast again for her stupidity (v. 25). Third, Balaam continued on and this time he attempted to pass through a tight space. Again, the donkey responded to the Angel's presence by simply just laying down and calling it quits (vv. 26-27). You can guess how bad ol' Balaam responded. Yes, he put his switch to use again.

Funny, isn't it? The man who should have seen the angel couldn't see, and the donkey who should not have seen the angel saw quite well. Sounds like some so-called spiritual men the Angel of the LORD would meet one day when He became the God-man: "Woe to you, blind guides," formed Christ's verbal castigation of the money-grubbing, power-hungry Pharisees (Matthew 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 16). Interesting. They, like Balaam, would live to see Him, the true prophet riding on a donkey as Israel's king (Matthew 21:2, 5), but they, like spiritually blind men, would not recognize Him. You know, you are pretty lost when a donkey can see the things of God and you cannot because you probably will not. I can't but get ahead of myself and ask you a personal question: Are you one who thinks you see spiritually when in reality you are blind? Christmas is all about God giving people new eyes, new evidence(s) to help them move toward Him in faith. We see this starting in verse 28.

*The Revelation (Numbers 22:28-35).* Sometimes God does something off the charts to arrest your spiritual attention. This would definitely qualify as one of those times. Read on and you'll see what I mean.

<sup>28</sup> And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" <sup>29</sup> Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." <sup>30</sup> The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Please, you shouldn't have a problem with a talking donkey. I don't. Why? Because the text explicitly says ". . . the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey." If God can talk out of burning bush which wasn't consumed, if He can part water on two occasions He made when He formed the cosmos, if He caused a cloud to follow His chosen people across a trackless desert for forty years along with a pulsating pillar of fire at night to illumine the dark desert, if He kept their sandals from wearing out for forty years, if He can instantaneously create all the multitudinous species along with all of their variety, beauty, and complexity, I think causing a donkey for have an intelligent conversation with a man took little to no effort for Him. What is interesting is ol' Balaam didn't even break his stubborn stride in this conversation. As a soothsayer, perhaps he had previous encounters with animals talking via demonic empowerment. This case, however, was quite different. In a few short exchanges he realized his faithful friend, the donkey, had been trying desperately to save his lurid life. Again, I can't help but ask you, What amazing evidence has God placed before you this Christmas to arrest your spiritual attention? Additionally, what will you do with the evidence?

In addition, God took the revelatory moment one step further, as He so often does as He attempts to reach out to God rejecters.

<sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground.

I'm sure he bowed. Who wouldn't have? He just realized his entire paradigm for seeing the world through soothsayer eyes had just been vaporized.

God proceeded to give Balaam some much needed insight into the evasive actions of the donkey, actions the supposed wise man failed to pay attention to because he was so focused on making a buck.

<sup>32</sup> The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. <sup>33</sup> But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live."

The irony of the statement is readily apparent for a world class so-called wizard. He thought he could see but he was blind as a bat. And instead of thumping on the donkey, he should have been thanking his lucky stars for that particular perceptive four-legged beast who had served him well over the years. Talk about a divine reprimand.

Unfortunately, Balaam did not waste any time saying all the right things.

<sup>34</sup> Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."

If he was really confessional, if he really meant what he just said, he wouldn't have gone on to seek to work with Barak to bring some kind of bad word against Israel . . . but he did. He also would not have said something as indefensible as, to paraphrase, "if I did anything to displease you." Yes, he did. He acted contrary to what God had said for God saw into his greedy heart and He knew his menacing, twisted motivations. All of this makes you want to stop and ask yourself: How has God been attempting to grab my spiritual attention? Am I responding while saying all the right things (perhaps to get a wife or husband off your back) all while I continue on my selfish, godless path? If the donkey got the picture about God, when will you? Also, if God has given me ample revelatory information to know and follow Him, is it possible I am guilty of knowing these spiritual truths while really rejecting them in my heart-life? Jesus warns about this tragic lifestyle in Matthew 7:15-23.

Having said what needed saying, "the angel of the LORD" gives the pagan prophet another revelatory insight he had heard before (22:20).

<sup>35</sup> But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

You didn't have to tell the donkey twice to properly respond to God's actions, but obviously the pagan prophet was a little more hard headed. He thought he could play both ends against the middle and somehow walk away with a wad of cash. He thought wrong.

Balaam eventually made it to Barak, the king of Moab, on the next day (Numbers 22:41). What occurred in this episode is what I call . . .

*The Reality (Numbers 23:1-12; 24:15-19).* After having the king's men build seven altars, Balaam had seven rams and seven bulls offered on each altar as a sacrifice. Since there is no biblical mandate for this, we must assume this was a pagan ritual located on the high place designed to arouse the gods (viz., demons; Numbers 23:1-2). While off on a private lofty viewpoint, Balaam didn't encounter the gods, but God, the true One (v. 3). His response to God's arrival suggests Balaam might have thought the multiple sacrifices would have pleased God, and perhaps made Him a little more pliable toward Balaam's ultimate wishes so he could get handsomely paid. Verse 5 tells us that instead of Balaam getting to use his words in his oracle over Israel, God gave Him the exact wording He wanted to hear.

The words God gave Balaam were prophetic, powerful, and POSITIVE.

<sup>7</sup> He took up his discourse and said, "From Aram Balak has brought me, Moab's king from the mountains of the East, 'Come curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!'" <sup>8</sup> "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?" <sup>9</sup> "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. <sup>10</sup> "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!"

The whole oracle dripped with God fulfilling His covenant to Israel and Abraham, a covenant which promised them a land and a coming Seed, the Messiah. The phrase "the dust of Jacob" comes right from the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 13:16; 28:14). God promised to make them a great people, and, indeed, He had even in the day of Balaam. They stood ready to take the Land of Promise and nothing would thwart this. Not even a world class wizard with wickedness on his mind.

How intriguing. In this first oracle, God basically said He would fulfill the covenant He made with Abraham, and that no one or nothing would stop it. The power of that covenant is still in effect today as God continues to work out His redemptive, kingdom plan of the Messiah.

Skipping the second and third positive oracles of blessing, we have to send a few instructive moments in the last one.

<sup>15</sup> He took up his discourse and said, "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, <sup>16</sup> The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered. <sup>17</sup> I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth. <sup>18</sup> Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, while Israel performs valiantly. <sup>19</sup> One from Jacob shall have dominion, and will destroy the remnant from the city."

Four times in a row Barak called Balaam to curse Israel, and four times he blessed Israel because God would let him not do otherwise. In this forth prophetic oracle, we have a prophecy of "the latter days," or at the end of time (Numbers 24:14).

Who is the star? What is the scepter all about? Keil and Delitzsch give us the insight:

In the "star out of Jacob," Balaam beholds not David as the one king of Israel, but the Messiah, in whom the royalty of Israel promised to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11) attains its fullest realization. The star and sceptre are symbols not of "Israel's royalty personified" (*Hengstenberg*), but of the real King in a concrete form, as He was to arise out of Israel at a future day. It is true that Israel received the promised King in David, who conquered and subjugated the Moabites, Edomites, and other neighbouring nations that were hostile to Israel. But in the person of David and his rule the kingly government of Israel was only realized in its first

and imperfect beginnings. Its completion was not attained till the coming of the second David (Hos. 3:5; Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:24; 37:24, 25), the Messiah Himself, who breaks in pieces all the enemies of Israel, and finds an everlasting kingdom, to which all the kingdoms and powers of this world are to be brought into subjection (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 2, 72, and 110).<sup>1</sup>

And who is this? This is Jesus, the Christ. He is the Star and the King who holds the scepter of the future Davidic empire for which He born to ultimately rule over. You will recall the Magi, from the same region Balaam would have brought these oracles back to, followed a what? A star to the long-awaited Messiah (Matthew 2:7-10). At the close of the New Testament, we learn in the book of Revelation that He is, in fact, the bright and morning star (Revelation 22:16), as prophesied by a pagan prophet of all people. We also learn from Matthew chapter one that this babe in the manger was from the royal lineage of King David, making Him perfectly qualified to rule and reign after He subdues His ancient enemies inspired by the Devil. Once more, Revelation shows the messianic king in action, as prophesied, when He returns on a mighty white horse with the sword called His Word (Revelation 19).

And to think, all of this wonderful prophecy of God blessing the world through Israel, who would, in turn, bring us the Messiah, all started with a donkey who hauled a world class pagan wizard around who sought remuneration instead of revelation. How amusing, intricate, and providential are the ways of our unstoppable God.

Our analysis of this historical narrative moves us now to briefly analyze . . .

## The Spiritual Stature Of The Story

As you might expect, I have more to say here than I have time, so I will limit my practical analysis to short, salient thoughts as we draw a one to one correlation to this donkey story and the reason why a donkey probably stood silently in Christ's stable.

One, a donkey carried a false prophet who uttered true prophesies against his better wishes. In 5 B.C., another donkey, which was probably used to transport Mary to Bethlehem, carried THE true prophet who would utter true prophesies in line with his perfect character (Matthew 12:40; 24-25; 27:63; Mark 13:2). He was THE prophet (Matthew 21:11; Acts 3:22; 7:37). No wonder the donkey was probably in the stable.

Two, a donkey saw Christ in the Old Testament so it is fitting for a donkey to get to see Christ in the New Testament. Isn't God good, merciful, and kind? No wonder the donkey was probably in the stable. He even thinks of the animals.

Three, a donkey who carried around a prophet who held a low view of Israel would also be found in the presence of THE prophet who held a high view of Israel (John 6:14). The former would have been content to curse, if given half the chance for the sake of money. The latter would be content only to bless Israel solely based on love.

Four, the false prophet was angry for all the wrong reasons. He beat the donkey for he wanted to get to his destination so he could hit pay dirt. The true prophet, Jesus, only evidenced anger toward those who'd dare turn God's temple of prayer into a place or financial gain. The

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 787.

two men couldn't have been more different (John 2:13ff; Matthew 21:13) One lived for himself, while the other lived for the Father's will and for others.

Five, the presence of the donkey in both historical episodes illustrates how God will go to great lengths to guide non-believers to reasons they should believe in Him as their Savior. In Balaam's day, God used the donkey to attempt to wake up the soothsayer. In Christ's day, the Father used the miraculous birth of His Son to wake up those who spiritually asleep. No wonder, then, a donkey was probably located near the manger.

Six, as a donkey was probably around to hear about the Star and Scepter story, it is only fitting for a donkey to be around for the birth of the Star who would hold the Davidic scepter (Revelation 1:6). How perfectly planned are the ways of God.

Seven, a false prophet rode a donkey to do his wicked will, while the true prophet was probably born within eyesight of a donkey who lived to see the birth of One who came to do the perfect will of the Father (John 2:17; 4:32; 5:30; 6:38) . . . even when that will called for his substitutionary death for our sin.

Eight, the donkey shows how God came to reveal Himself, especially to those of the lowest estate. Let's look at this from a different angle. Since He made Himself known to a lowly beast like a donkey, don't you think he will consider people like you and me? Of course He will.

This Christmas there's a little donkey smiling down the halls of time at you as if he knows something. What does he know? He knows that since God spoke to him, He will most certainly speak to you for you are made in His image. What's He telling you? The King has come, so worship and follow Him.