

THE LESSON OF BALAAM

The children of Israel had camped east of the Jordan River in the region of Moab, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. The Moabites were terrified by their large number and by the record of military victories God had granted them. Then Balak, king of Moab, sent emissaries with money to Balaam — who practiced divination in Aram-naharaim, further in the east — to request he come to Moab:

Numbers 22:6 *"Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."* [ESV]

Balaam responded graciously.

Numbers 22:8 *He said to them, "Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the Lord speaks to me"; so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam.* [NRSV]

Overnight God inquired of Balaam — turning to him as to a friend or a peer (not a servant):

Numbers 22:9 *That night God came to Balaam and asked him, "Who are these men visiting you?"* [NLT]

Balaam relayed king Balak's message and

Numbers 22:12–13 *..... God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, "Go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you."* [NRSV]

The emissaries went home and king Balak sent functionaries of higher rank and with larger rewards to repeat the request.

Numbers 22:18–21 *But Balaam responded to Balak's messengers, "Even if Balak were to give me his palace filled with silver and gold, I would be powerless to do anything against the will of the Lord my God."¹⁹ But stay here one more night, and I will see if the Lord has anything else to say to me."²⁰ That night God came to Balaam and told him, "Since these men have come for you, get up and go with them. But do only what I tell you to do."²¹ So the next morning Balaam got up, saddled his donkey, and started off with the Moabite officials.* [NLT]

One may be surprised by what happened next:

Numbers 22:22a *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.* [NASB]

Was God unfair, or even unjust? Didn't Balaam do precisely as instructed? Why then was God angry against Balaam?

Even if I have learned not to indulge in arrogant, ignorant and unwise questioning of God's authority to do as He wills, I may ask what lesson am I to learn from this.

It seems an upsetting and confusing event indeed, but we can receive help from the New Testament writers, who — as they often do — show deep spiritual insight in the Lord and in His ways.

When warning against false teachers, the Apostle Peter wrote:

2 Peter 2:15–16 *They have wandered off the right road and followed the footsteps of Balaam son of Beor, who loved to earn money by doing wrong. **16** But Balaam was stopped from his mad course when his donkey rebuked him with a human voice.* [NLT]

And the epistle of Jude warns against wrong doers, who:

Jude 11b *..... have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit,* [NKJV]

What was then Balaam error and how did he show that he "loved to earn money by doing wrong"?

We may now remember that indeed, when Balak's higher functionaries — with larger rewards — came, Balaam, who had already learned that God had declared Israel blessed, did not simply send them away again; rather he invited them to stay.

Balaam's heart was dulled into not heeding what the Apostle Paul stated very clearly with regard to the calling of God for Israel:

Romans 11:29 *[for] the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.* [NRSV]

Thus, the second request from king Balak was a test from the Lord: would Balaam, after he learned of God's truth, be one with the Lord and promptly send the Moabites away or would he ask they stay overnight, in the hope of a com-

promise between God and Balak. Perhaps God's position could be modified to accommodate the wishes of Balak and the concomitant profit for Balaam, who had, in the meanwhile, upped his reward: "Even if Balak were to give me his palace filled with silver and gold" (**Numbers 22:18b** [NLT]).

Balaam's choice to seek a compromise resulted in God no longer addressing Balaam as a peer, as He had done when He inquired about the first visit; rather — being angry — He issued direct programming instructions that Balaam do only as directed.

There was no longer any trusting of Balaam's judgment by the Lord; there was only God using Balaam, as a passive instrument of His will that Israel continue to be blessed — even three times, formally, in the presence of the Moabites and their king.

Numbers 24:10 *Then Balak became furious with Balaam, struck his hands together, and said to him, "I summoned you to put a curse on my enemies, but instead, you have blessed them these three times. [HCSB]*

That the New Testament writers understood truthfully can be verified by noting that Balaam himself, when rebuked by his donkey, did not protest to the angel of God, saying: "What's the problem, Sir? I did precisely what the Lord told me to do." Rather Balaam recognized his sin:

Numbers 22:34 *Then Balaam confessed to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned. I didn't realize you were standing in the road to block my way. I will return home if you are against my going." [NLT]*

God's response confirmed Balaam's role as a passive instrument, with precise directives and no room for collaborative discretion:

Numbers 22:35 *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. [NASB]*

Later, confirming his role as a passive instrument, Balaam admitted his inability to reverse Israel's blessings and did comply with God's instructions:

Numbers 23:20 *I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. [NIV]*

Hence, it is clear that the God had become angry, because Balaam's words were devised to feign compliance with God's instructions, but Balaam's actions revealed a heart and an effort seeking a compromise.

Numbers 22:19 *But stay here one more night, and I will see if the Lord has anything else to say to me." [NLT]*

Thus, Balaam's formal compliance with the directives received showed not Balaam's willing obedience of the one who embraces in love the will of the Lord, rather demonstrated God's almighty power over Balaam's interest and proclivities.

At last, even Balaam had to realize that no compromise was possible and the Spirit of God took full control of Balaam's mouth:

Numbers 24:1–2, 9 *By now Balaam realized that the Lord was determined to bless Israel, so he did not resort to divination as before. Instead, he turned and looked out toward the wilderness, ²where he saw the people of Israel camped, tribe by tribe. Then the Spirit of God came upon him, ⁹"Like a lion, Israel crouches and lies down; like a lioness, who dares to arouse her? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, O Israel, and cursed is everyone who curses you." [NLT]*

One lesson I may learn from this episode is that, once God has made His will crystal clear to me (as He did to Balaam "you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." **Numbers 22:12b** [NRSV]), I am not to seek underhanded compromises: rather, I am to express my love for the Lord by embracing the will of God and doing it.

In the words of Christ:

John 14:15 *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." [NRSV]*

It is not slavish compliance by rote that the Lord seeks in me; rather oneness of purpose with Him.

John 15:15 *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. [NRSV]*