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Balaam and the Donkey

22: 21-40

Balaam and the donkey DIG: Since Ha'Shem had given his permission for Balaam to go with the rulers, why was He so angry with Balaam for going? What impresses you about the donkey? Why wasn't Balaam shocked when this donkey spoke to him? Judging from your prayer life, are you doing God's bidding? Or is He doing yours? What does that say about your relationship? What was the biggest lesson Balaam had to learn? Do you identify with Balaam at all? How so? Why not?

REFLECT: Why didn't Balaam's words, "I have sinned" (22:34) count as true repentance? How is this relevant today? How aware are you of the realm of the supernatural? Have you ever ignored what the Spirit wanted you to do? How so? How did that turn out? Do you think it is possible to always know God's will every step of the way? Why or why not? Judging from your prayer life, are you doing God's bidding? Ask the Lord to help you open your eyes to any blind spots you may have.

The donkey had more spiritual insight, and a better vision of God than Balaam did.

In the days of **the apostles**, **Simon Peter** compared **Balaam** to those who **loved the wages of unrighteousness (Second Peter 2:15)**. To the apostolic community, **Balaam** was the example of a man who exploits religious authority for **his** own profit. Regarding such a person, **Jude**, the brother of **the Master**, says: **for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam** (see **Jude, to see link click [Ag - They Have Taken the Way of Cain, Rushed into Balaam's Error](#)**). **The error of Balaam** was that **he** obeyed **his** greed rather than **the LORD**. Though **God** strictly warned **Balaam** to speak only when **he** was told (**22:12** and **22:20**), **the sorcerer** intended to **curse Isra'el** and earn that house full of **gold and silver** which **Balak** had offered **him (22:16)**.

The Master railed against those who exploited the sacred as a means of dishonest gain. We remember well **His anger** toward **the money-changers in the Temple** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Bs - Jesus' First Cleansing of the Temple at the Passover**). **He** overturned **their** tables and drove **them** out of the courtyard. **Interestingly, the Midrash Rabbah refers to Balaam as a money changer because**

the kings of the nations rushed to him for counsel in the same way that people rush to a money-changer to change their money (Numbers Rabbah 20:7).⁴⁷⁹

Up to this point, **Balaam**, the internationally known **sorcerer**, had been portrayed as a man of great spiritual stature, who could meet with **God** when **he** wanted and whose words had tremendous effects on the fate of nations. Here, however, **his** spiritual blindness and weakness are exposed. **He** was so spiritually dead that he could not see **the Angel of ADONAI standing in his path**, though **his donkey** could. Furthermore, **he** saw no significance in **her** behavior, though strange actions by animals were often regarded as omens in Mesopotamia. As a specialist in **black magic**, **he** should have realized **the Deity** had a message for **him**. Instead, **he beat his donkey** three times, an ungodly act in itself (**Proverbs 12:10**).⁴⁸⁰

The error of Balaam (22:21-22): During the previous **night**, **God** came to **Balaam** and said to him, “Since the rulers of Mo’ab have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you (22:20).” So, the next morning, **Balaam** didn’t wait for **them** to come to **him**; **he got up, saddled his donkey and** along with **his two servants**, and **went** to the place where the delegation was camped. **But God was very angry because he went. Angry!** Why was **He** angry? Didn’t **God** already give **Balaam** permission to go? Why, then, would **He** be angry? It was because **YHVH** knew **Balaam’s** heart. **The LORD** knew full well that despite all **his** superficial piety, **Balaam** fully intended to **curse Isra’el** and get **his** reward from **Balak**. **God** was angry at **Balaam** for defying **His** will and allowing the love of money to control **him**.⁴⁸¹

But the Angel of ADONAI stationed Himself on the path to block his way (22:21 and 22:22b). This is a unique **Person**. **He** is called **the Angel of the ADONAI** 58 times and **He** is called **the Angel of God** 11 times in the Bible. This is never a common angel, but **the second Person of the Trinity, Yeshua**. This is always a reference to the pre-incarnate **Messiah**. Significantly, **the rabbis teach that the phrase the Angel of the ADONAI is sometimes used to refer to God Himself**. The Angel of ADONAI blocked **Balaam’s path three times**. Each time, **Balaam** did not see **the Angel**, but **the donkey** did. This is more than just good story telling. **The three interventions** are meant to correspond to **Balaam’s three attempts to curse Isra’el in Chapters 23 and 24**. **Three times Balaam** will attempt to utter **a curse** against **the people of Isra’el**, but each time **God** will stand in **his** way, so to speak, and change **Balaam’s curse** into **a blessing**.

There is a considerable amount of irony in the story of **Balaam** and **his donkey**. For example, **Balaam** referred to **himself** as **a man with his eyes wide open (24:4)**, as **the**

man who hears the words of God, who knows what 'Elyon knows, and who sees what Shaddai sees (24:16). Basically, he was full of himself! He is the model of spiritual pride. He sees himself as the man who sees with his eyes wide open, but his donkey disagreed with that self-assessment. Balaam, the man who knows what 'Elyon knows, and who sees what Shaddai sees, did not see as clearly as his donkey. The donkey had a better vision of God than Balaam did and had more spiritual insight than Balaam did.⁴⁸²

The first intervention (22:23): When the donkey saw the Angel of ADONAI standing on the road with a drawn sword in hand, a position of judgment; this terrified the donkey and she was forced to turn off the road into an open field. Balaam, not knowing the problem, had to beat the donkey to get her back on the road (22:23).

The second intervention (22:24-25): Then, again, the Angel of ADONAI stood on the road where it became narrow as it passed among the vineyards and had stone walls on both sides. The donkey saw the Angel of ADONAI, and trying to get around Him, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot. So he beat the donkey again (22:24-25).



The third intervention (22:26-30): Simon Peter tells us that Balaam received a rebuke for his own lawlessness, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the "prophet" (2 Peter 2:16). Balaam's madness was his greed for reward. Though he had been sternly warned, he was determined in his heart to curse Isra'el. In the climactic scene, the Angel of ADONAI moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where it was impossible to turn, either right or left. Again, when the donkey saw the Angel of ADONAI, it lay down under Balaam, which made him so angry that he beat the donkey with his stick again. But ADONAI enabled the donkey to speak, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat

me these three times.” Balaam answered the donkey, saying: **It’s because you’ve been making a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand; I would kill you on the spot! The donkey said to Balaam, “I’m your donkey, right? You’ve ridden me all your life, right? Have I ever treated you like this before?” “No,” he admitted.** Why wasn’t **Balaam** shocked when **his donkey spoke to him**? It certainly wasn’t an everyday occurrence, even for a professional **sorcerer**. **Satan** spoke through a **snake** when he deceived **Eve (Gen 3:1-6; 2 Cor 11:3)**, and it’s possible that in the past, **Satan’s** demons had spoken to **Balaam** through animals.⁴⁸³

The rebuke (22:31-35): Then ADONAI opened Balaam’s eyes, so that he could see the Angel of ADONAI standing in the way, only a few paces ahead of him, with His drawn sword in his hand. Then Balaam bowed his head and fell on his face (22:31). The sages of the midrash noticed the absolute irony of such a statement from a man who allegedly could defeat an entire nation simply by the power of his words, but he needed to beat his donkey with a stick and wished for a sword to kill her. “This villain was going to curse an entire nation which had not sinned against him [by the power of his words], yet he had to beat his donkey [by the power of his hand] to prevent her from going into a field! The donkey spoke to Balaam saying, ‘You need a sword in your hand to kill me? How then do you intend to uproot an entire nation with only your words?’ Balaam could not think of an answer, so he kept silent” (Numbers Rabbah 20:14).⁴⁸⁴

The Angel of ADONAI said to him, “Why did you hit your donkey three times like that? I have come out as an adversary (Hebrew: *satan*, used here as an adjective) to bar your way, because you are rushing to oppose me. Balaam had hoped to employ the power of the Adversary (Hebrew: *satan*), in other words **sorcery, against Isra’el. Now Ha’Shem opposes him as an adversary, turning the tables completely. If not for the quick thinking of Balaam’s donkey, he would have died on the spot. The donkey saw me and turned aside these three times; and indeed, if she hadn’t turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and saved your donkey” (22:32-33). Then, Balaam had a temporary moment of regret and confessed to the Angel of ADONAI, “I have sinned.” These words might lead us to think that he was truly repentant. Only later in the story do we find out that this confession was false (see [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)). While it appeared to be a confession of sorts, it was a confession that fell short of the repentance of saving faith. Doubtless, **Balaam** confessed with one eye on the **Angel’s sword** held menacingly above his head.**⁴⁸⁵

Balaam declared: I didn’t know that You were standing on the road to block me.

Now, therefore, if what I am doing displeases You, I will go back home.” He mistakenly assumed that the reason **the Angel of ADONAI** was blocking **his path** was to prevent **him** from going to **Balak**. **But the Angel of ADONAI said to him, “No, go on with the men. However, ADONAI reminded him of the original terms, saying: “You are to say only what I tell you to say.”⁴⁸⁶ So, Balaam went along with the rulers of Mo’ab (22:34-35).**

The lesson here is profound. Here was **a man** bent on doing evil. **He** came into direct contact with the realm of the supernatural – and did not even notice it. Instead, **his own donkey** did! In like manner, how many of us do not see what **God** is doing or hear what **He** is saying because we are set on acting according to our flesh, ignoring what **the Spirit** wants to do?⁴⁸⁷

Balaam meets with Balak (22:36-38): When King Balak heard that Balaam had come, he was so anxious to have **him** start **his** work of **cursing Isra’el** that **he** traveled some distance **to meet him in the Moabite town of Ar on the northern border** between **Mo’ab** and **Ammon, in the farthest reaches of the territory**. The fact that **the king** went out to meet **Balaam**, showed **his** high regard **he** had for **the sorcerer**. Nevertheless, **the king** berated **Balaam** for **his** delay, saying: **I sent more than once to summon you! Why didn’t you come to me? Did you think I couldn’t pay you enough.” He** mistakenly believed that money was at the heart of the issue, but in fact **Balaam’s** real concern was that **he** would only be able to say what had been revealed to **him** by **YHVH**. **Balaam** repeated what **he** had surely learned even more emphatically along **his** journey. Then **he** confessed: **I have no power of my own to say anything. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth (22:38)**. Apparently, **the sorcerer** had come to the full realization that **he** would simply be **God’s** mouthpiece of revelation. **He** did not, however, inform **Balak** of **his** earlier revelation, that **God** had said **he could not curse Isra’el** because **she** was to be the recipient of **His blessing**.



Preparation for the first oracle (22:39-40): Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath-Huzoth, where they prepared for the next divine encounter by which the Moabite king still expected the sorcerer to fulfill his commissioned duty of cursing Isra'el. When they arrived, Balak had cattle and sheep sacrificed to Chemosh (21:29), which would have been the normal hospitable practice for visiting dignitaries. Then Balak sent some of the sacrifices to Balaam and the rulers who were with him (see [Dq - Balaam's Second Encounter with God](#)). All this was in preparation for the black magic that was supposed to take place the next morning.⁴⁸⁸

Dear Heavenly Father, Praise You that though Satan does have some power, His power is limited by You and is nothing compared to Your awesome Almighty power. For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37). I can always rest in the comfort of knowing that Your power is so much greater than any evil power. Even when all the armies of the world come against you, you only need to speak and the enemy is completely defeated. From His mouth comes a sharp sword - so that with it He may strike down the nations - and He shall rule them with an iron rod, and He treads the winepress of the furious wrath of Elohei-Tzva'ot. On His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "King of kings, and Lord of lords." . . . Then the beast was captured, and along with him the false prophet who had performed the signs before him by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast, as well as those who had worshiped his image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the One riding on the horse (Revelation 19:15-16, 20-21b). In Messiah Yeshua's holy Name and power of His resurrection. Amen