

Numbers 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 22 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the feast for divination in their hand and they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message and he said to them

Lodge here tonight and I will bring back word to you as the Lord speaks to me So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam and God came to Balaam and said Who are these men with you?

And Balaam said to God Balak the son of Zippor king of Moab has sent to me saying Behold a people has come out of Egypt and it covers the face of the earth Now come curse them for me perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out God said to Balaam You shall not go with them You shall not curse the people for they are blessed So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak Go to your own land for the Lord has refused to let me go with you So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balaam and said Balaam refuses to come with us Once again Balaam sent princes more in number and more honourable than these And they came to Balaam and said to him Thus says Balak the son of Zippor Let nothing hinder you from coming to me for I will surely do you great honour and whatever you say to me I will do Come curse this people for me But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more

So you too please stay here tonight that I may know what more the Lord will say to me And God came to Balaam at night and said to him If the men have come to call you Rise go with them But only do what I tell you So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab But God's anger was kindled because he went And the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary Now he was riding on the donkey and his two servants were with him And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field And Balaam struck the donkey to turn her into the road Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards with a wall on either side And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall So he struck her again Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord she lay down under Balaam And Balaam's anger was kindled and he struck the donkey with his staff Then 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?

[3 : 4 1] And Balaam said to the donkey Because you have made a fool of me I wish I had a sword in my hand for then I would kill you And the donkey said to Balaam Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life long to this day?

Is it my habit to treat you this way? And he said, No 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 down and fell on his face And the angel of the Lord said to him Why have you struck your donkey these three times?

Behold I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times If she had not turned aside from me surely just now I would have killed you and let her live Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord I have sinned for I did not know that you stood in the road against me Now therefore if it is evil in your sight I will turn back And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam Go with the men but speak only the word that I tell you So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak When Balak heard that Balaam had come he went out to meet him at the city of Moab on the border formed by the Anon at the extremity of the border And Balak said to Balaam Did I not send to you to call you?

Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you? Balaam said to Balak Behold I have come to you Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth that must I speak Then Balaam went with Balak and they came to Kiriath-Huzath And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him And in the morning Balaam took Balaam and brought him up to Bemath-Bael and from there he saw a fraction of the people The story of Balaam which begins in Numbers chapter 22 is a very strange one First of all we should notice that the characters of Balak and Balaam recall characters that we've met previously in scripture Rifki Stern observes the similarities between Balak and Jethro and Pharaoh In Exodus chapter 18 verses 1-5 we read Jethro the priest of Midian Moses' father-in-law heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt

Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife after he had sent her home along with her two sons The name of the one was Gershom for he said I have been a sojourner in a foreign land and the name of the other Eliezer for he said The God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh Jethro, Moses' father-in-law came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God So here we can see a number of similar elements The reference to all that God had done for Moses All the things that Israel had done that Balak heard about Zipporah and the fact that Balak is the son of Zippor the association with Midian in both cases and the reference to the camp of the people of God These are common elements in the story In the story of Pharaoh we see further similarities in Exodus chapter 1 verses 8 to 12 Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph and he said to his people

[7 : 04] Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us Come, let us deal shrewdly with them lest they multiply and if a war breaks out they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens They built for Pharaoh's store cities Python and Ramses But the more they were oppressed the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad and the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel Here we can see further common details the reference to Israel being too mighty for them and this plan to come and to design some way to bring them down The dread of the people of Israel that has fallen upon another people and the way that they multiply and spread abroad All of these are common elements So we can see that the character of Balak is like Pharaoh He also stands as someone who is in some respects like Jethro but in a way that invites us to see how he is the opposite of Jethro

Jethro is someone who sees how God is prospering his people He's a Gentile He's a Midianite but he sees that as a good thing He's rejoicing in the blessing of the Lord upon Israel rather than perceiving it as a threat So there are two contrasting responses to God's blessing on Israel from Gentile rulers and Balak reminds us of both these characters while clearly following the Pharaoh model There's also similarities between the character of Balaam and Abraham of all characters David Foreman observes these First of all the way that Balaam is described the power of his blessing 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 That recalls Genesis chapter 12 verse 3 I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed

But there's more In verses 21 to 22 So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab Now he was riding on the donkey and his two servants were with him Where have we heard this before?

Genesis chapter 22 verse 3 When Abraham goes to the mountain to sacrifice Isaac So Abraham rose early in the morning saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac There's further things to observe Numbers chapter 22 verse 22 But God's anger was kindled because he went and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary And then in Genesis chapter 22 verses 10 to 12 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said Abraham Abraham And he said Here I am He said Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him For now I know that you fear God seeing you have not withheld your son your only son from me Genesis 12 and 22 are great passages at the beginning and the end of Abraham's life in which he and his offspring Israel are blessed Now these blessings are starting to come into fulfilment and Balaam is called upon to curse them and so the contrast should jump out at us

This is the fulfilment of the blessings of Abraham and now Balaam is brought in as a character who is supposed to push back against that David Foreman again observes the contrast between the characters of Balaam and Abraham Abraham in his preparedness to sacrifice his son is an example of extreme obedience This is a command that you would not want to hear You would not want to follow through You'd go back to God again and again Is this really what you want me to do?

[11 : 04] Constantly questioning perhaps if you are not a faithful person like Abraham And Balaam is an example of disobedience But it seems strange to us Doesn't God tell Balaam to go with them in verse 20?

Balaam himself presents himself as a faithful prophet But Balak knows that he can be bought for the right price and with enough persistence Balaam doesn't like the Lord's initial answer in verse 12 So he inquires again rather than simply obeying It becomes apparent that he is a mercenary prophet likely self-deluded about his faithfulness or even using that faithfulness as a cynical ploy to get more money for himself God tells him to go because Balaam has already determined his course He will keep on rolling the dice as it were until he gets the result that he wants Both Abraham and Balaam are arrested by the angel of the Lord on their path But Abraham is stopped in his demonstration of his obedience to the most difficult command imaginable whereas Balaam is stopped in his willful pursuit of material gain What's with the donkey in the story?

It's a rather comic story with the prophet carrying on a conversation with his donkey and this long episode with the donkey disobeying on these three occasions Why is this in the text?

And why on earth does the donkey speak? These are perhaps some of the most strange things that hit us immediately about this chapter Robert Alter has some perceptive remarks upon this and first of all we need to notice there are three actions of resistance to Balaam as the rider The donkey takes him into a field The donkey squeezes his foot against a wall and then the donkey finally just lays down beneath him And there's a parallel between the first and the second half of the narrative that Alter observes Balaam three times tries to get his donkey to cooperate without success before realising the presence of the angel of the Lord Balak will three times try to get Balaam to curse Israel without success before again it becomes clear that the Lord is behind it all Balaam is the donkey relative to Balak usually entirely cooperative but resisting on this occasion due to the Lord's intervention and the speaking donkey also helps us to understand Balaam himself when near the end of this chapter he declares to

Balak in verse 38 Behold I have come to you have I now any power of my own to speak anything the word that God puts in my mouth that I must speak a question to consider in 2 Peter chapter 2 verses 12 to 22 we read but these like irrational animals creatures of instinct born to be caught and destroyed blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant will also be destroyed in their destruction suffering wrong is the wage for their wrongdoing they count it pleasure to revel in the daytime they are blots and blemishes reveling in their deceptions while they feast with you they have eyes full of adultery insatiable for sin they entice unsteady souls they have hearts trained in greed accursed children forsaking the right way they have gone astray they have followed the way of Balaam the son of Beor who loved gain from wrongdoing but was rebuked for his own transgression a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness these are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm for them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved for speaking loud boasts of folly they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error they promise them freedom but they themselves are slaves of corruption for whatever overcomes a person to that he is enslaved for if after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ they are again entangled in them and overcome the last state has become worse for them than the first for it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them what the true proverb says has happened to them the dog returns to its own vomit and the sow after washing herself returns to wallow in the mire in this long description of false prophets

[15 : 32] Balaam is set up as a great example of the false prophet the false teacher how can we see Balaam as an example of the false teacher and the ways of the false teacher within Numbers chapter 22