

## Lesson 8. BALAK AND BALAAM

**READING:** Numbers 22 to 24; Psa.106: 28-31; II Pet. 2:15-16; Jude II; Rev. 2:14.

**AIM:** To consider the "error of Balaam" as Israel stood at the border of the Promised Land, and learn to serve God alone.

### 1. BACKGROUND

Approaching Canaan from the south, Israel turned east to skirt the border of Edom, then marched north through the plains of Moab to the range of forest and pasture lands on the east of Jordan. The desert was left far behind and on the eastern side of the Jordan opposite Jericho, they could see the real beauty of the land they were to inherit.

Two kings opposed them - Sihon and Og (Num. 21:23, 33) - but they were defeated in pitched battles. News of Israel's victories travelled before them, as Rahab testified (Josh. 2:9).

Balak, king of Moab, sent for Balaam, the Babylonian prophet, asking him to curse Israel. Balaam had probably heard of the victories of Israel from the time of the Exodus. Living in Mesopotamia, where Abraham and Jacob had lived, some knowledge of God's dealings with these Fathers of the Israelite nation would probably persist amongst the inhabitants. We can understand, therefore, that Balaam knew something of the God of Israel, and the way He watched over His chosen nation.

### 2. BALAK ENTICES BALAAM. Num. 22:1-21

Balak sent messengers from Midian and Moab to Balaam. They took rewards for Balaam (Num. 22:7), to entice him to come and curse Israel. Balaam asked the men to wait until the next day, when he would tell them the answer the Lord would give to him. That night God told him he was not to go with the messengers of Balak, "Thou shalt not curse this people for they are blessed". Accordingly, Balaam told them that the Lord refused to give him leave to return with them, but he made no mention of God's prohibition that he should not curse Israel.

Balak decided he would try again, He sent more honourable princes and promised anything Balaam cared to ask for, if only he would come and curse the people. At first Balaam replied, "I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord", but his greed could not be suppressed. So again he suggested that the messengers should stay overnight. By morning he had persuaded himself that he might go. God had told him he could go if the men came and called him, but evidently he did not wait for their call.

### 3. THE ANGEL OF THE LORD WITHSTANDS BALAAM. Num. 22: 22-34

The angel of the Lord, with sword drawn, withstood Balaam. Note the marginal reading in Num. 22:32, "to be an adversary unto thee" (literally a "satan" unto thee). The Lord gave the ass the power of speech (Num. 22:28-30). The Apostle Peter states that Balaam "was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbade the madness of the prophet" (II Pet. 2: 16).

We can understand how humiliating it must have been to Balaam to be rebuked in this way (Num. 22:3 1). He professed to Balak's princes to be in close touch with the Lord and to receive messages directly from Him. But he failed to see the angel of the Lord; yet the ass did, and, by swerving, saved Balaam, who in his temper had struck the ass on three occasions. Eventually, when Balaam perceived the angel, he confessed "I have sinned ... now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again" (Num. 22:34). But God had work for Balaam to carry out.

### 4. BALAAM'S PARABLES. Num. 22:36 to 24:25

Balaam started out on the journey to do his own will; now he was to go on his way to do God's will: "Go with the men, but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak". In the hands of God, Balaam was helpless and on four occasions was impelled to speak the Lord's words in the form of parables.

1. Balak, impatient and angry, took Balaam to the high places of Baal, that he might see Israel camped on the plains below (Num. 22:41). Seven altars were built and a ram and a bullock were sacrificed on each. Balaam went to the top of a hill and received a message from God, very direct and explicit: "Return unto Balak and thus shalt thou speak". "How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed?" Understandably, Balak was astonished and angry.

2. Balak resolved to try again (Num. 23: 13). Balaam was taken to the top of Pisgah. Again sacrifices were offered. Again God "put a word in Balaam's mouth". God had blessed; Balaam could not reverse the blessing. There would be no curse against Israel, no enchantment against Jacob.
3. Again, the third time, Balak hoped that a change of place would produce a curse (Num. 23:27). They went to the top of Mt. Peor. Sacrifices were offered. Balaam did not turn aside this time: "he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments". The Spirit of God came upon him and instead of cursing Israel, he predicted the defeat of their enemies: "He shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones ... Cursed is he that curseth thee". Furious, Balak ordered Balaam to go.
4. But God had not finished with Balak. Balaam, uninvited this time, had another message to give (Num. 24: 14). Balak was told what should happen to his people in the latter days. " ... There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth....Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion ..." (Num.24:17-19).

Notice the development of the "parables" of Balaam. In the first, he could not curse Israel, but in the second he definitely blessed him. In the third, those who cursed Israel were cursed, and Israel's enemies were overthrown, while in the fourth is the prophecy of Christ, the "Star out of Jacob", and the "Sceptre that shall rise out of Israel", who should "smite the corners of Moab and destroy all the children of Sheth" (or, as the original gives it, "all the sons of tumult"). Underlying all present and future events, in the divine purpose was God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

#### **5. BALAAM'S EVIL INFLUENCE AND PUNISHMENT. Num.25: 3, 31:8,16; Psa.106: 28-31; Rev. 2:14**

Although Balaam was prevented from cursing Israel, he nevertheless brought about their downfall by advising Balak how Israel could be undermined: turn them from the worship of the true God to join with Moab in the idolatrous worship of Baal-peor (Num. 31:16; Rev.2:14).

Israel transgressed and God's retribution fell on them. Twenty-four thousand died of the plague. Phineas, the son of Eleazar the High Priest, and grandson of Aaron, received God's approbation and continuation of the priesthood by his action in slaying Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon, who appeared to be a ring-leader in this apostasy. We should expect that divine retribution would also overtake Balaam as a result of such conduct. Associated with Moab in the corruption of Israel (in the worship of Baal-peor) were the Midianites, and God decreed their punishment for this sin. Under the leadership of Phineas, war was declared on Midian; the five kings of Midian were slain and, with them, Balaam, the son of Beor also perished (Num. 31:8; Josh.13: 22).

#### **6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The Scriptures leave us in no doubt as to the character of Balaam. His besetting sin was covetousness - the love of money. He was prepared to curse Israel to secure "the reward of divination".

Jude's epistle speaks of those who "ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward", whilst the Apostle Peter refers to those "which have forsaken the right way and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (II Pet. 2: 15).

Balaam indeed affords a striking example of Christ's statement: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24).

#### **QUESTIONS**

1. Tell how Balak and Balaam became associated with Israel at the border of Canaan.
2. What prevented Balaam from cursing Israel in the "parables" which he spoke?
3. Explain, with Balaam in mind, what Jesus meant when he said, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon".