

Balaam and The Issue of Compromise

A quick glance at Numbers 22 - 24 could leave a person with the impression that Balaam was a godly prophet, who provided an exemplary model of devotion and loyalty to the God of the Bible. However, a closer look at these chapters, as well as at references about Balaam found elsewhere in the Bible, reveals that his superficial piety covered up a deceitful and corrupt heart.

Below, we examine various issues which are related to Balaam and the events that came about because of him.



Throughout the account (chapters 22 - 24), even though Balaam frequently seems to have a willingness to do only what God tells him to do, there are continual hints that something is wrong on a deeper level.

1. Balaam was a diviner for hire. (Numbers 22:7; Joshua 13:22)
 - a. He was willing engage in occult practices, for pay, in an attempt to influence matters (in a way favorable to the one paying the money), or to provide guidance, or to reveal things about the future. This willingness to rely on demons and spirit beings is a detestable offense to God, who alone is worthy of our devotion and who alone has sovereign control over all things.
 - b. At the same time, some of the things Balaam says would make it sound as though he were devoted and loyal to the God of the Bible, and that he intended to obey God. (See 22:8.)
 - c. It was common for people of Balaam's day to have more than one "god." Balaam would have considered the God of the Bible to be merely one of many - a concept that is actually a rejection of the God of the Bible.
2. After God tells Balaam that Israel is blessed, and that he must *not* try to curse them (22:12), there should have been no further questions about it. Yet when King Balak offers a greater reward, Balaam asks God a second time. (All the while, he acts very "spiritual" about it - 22:18.)
3. The fact that God allows Balaam to go (v. 20), yet is angry with him for doing so (v. 22), shows that something is wrong.
 - a. Balaam is warned that he is going down a reckless path (v. 32), one that leaves him worthy of death. (If it weren't for the faithfulness of his donkey, he would have been put to death!) [In the New Testament, people who follow Balaam's example are described as wandering off the "straight (or right) path." Such conduct is considered an expression of "madness," which, in Balaam's case, was restrained only by the actions of his donkey! (2 Peter 2:15-16)]
 - b. From the perspective of an observer, Balaam may have appeared to be devoted to God. Yet when confronted by God, Balaam admits that he has been sinning. This shows us that there are deeper issues of sin, hidden from the casual observer by Balaam's appearance of spirituality.
 - c. Balaam acts as though he is willing to turn around and go back home. But the fact that God allows him to continue on suggests that the deeper issues have not been dealt with. (This suspicion is confirmed elsewhere in the Bible - see below.)
4. Wealth and riches are often mentioned in these chapters (Numbers 22 - 24), as a reward for Balaam, if he succeeds at cursing Israel.
 - a. A true prophet is not motivated by wealth and riches. He may accept a gift as an expression of love - after all, he also has to eat, in order to survive! Yet he will refuse a payment (or bribe) that is intended to influence his actions, or the outcome of his prophetic activity. He will not do prophetic activity for the purpose of personal material gain. (Look, for example, at Elisha's response to Naaman, in 2 Kings 5. Even in the New Testament, the apostles refused to let money influence their actions - see Acts 8:18-

23. In contrast, Balaam loved the "wages of wickedness" - 2 Peter 2:16. And because of his love for money, he eagerly "rushed" into his error - Jude 1:11.)
- b. Even though Balaam claims he will say only what God allows him to say, he never *rejected* the idea of receiving the reward. The reason he *didn't* curse Israel wasn't because of loyalty to God, but *because God would not let him do anything except bless them* (22:35 and later). God overruled Balaam's desires (Joshua 24:9-10). If he had been successful in cursing Israel, he would have gladly taken the reward.
5. When Balaam speaks his prophetic oracles, he constantly affirms that he can *only* speak what the Lord has told him to say (Numbers 23:12, 26; 24:13). This may have the appearance of "spirituality," but in reality, *he had no choice*. He was helpless to do otherwise, for God would not let him do so (23:8, 20). Remember that God had already threatened him with death (22:33)!

Various issues show that Balaam is not a true prophet of God, and that there are spiritual problems in his heart.

6. As already mentioned, Balaam claims to have loyal devotion to the Lord, yet he practices divination and related occult activities - a thing which God hates. A true prophet of God would know God's will on *this* issue, as much as he would know God's will on *other* issues! (In this case, once Balaam realized these practices were not working - Numbers 23:23 - he stopped using them - 24:1. But it wasn't because he considered them wrong.)
7. Balaam and Balak made sacrifices *together* (Numbers 23:1-2), even though Balak served a false god (Baal). A genuine prophet of God *cannot* tolerate the worship of a false god, and will always oppose *anything* that usurps the rightful place of the true God. Balaam, however, was willing to *cooperate* in worship with an idolater.
8. Balaam's influence was the cause of the problems Israel had in Numbers 25.
 - a. He wasn't able to curse them himself, so he devised a plan that (whether he knew it or not) would cause them to bring down a curse upon themselves! What he did was to get them to compromise, both spiritually and morally. And actually, he was teaching them to do nothing more than what he himself had been doing (compromise). They might not have realized it, but they were following Balaam's example! [The connection between Balaam and the events of Numbers 25 is not clearly stated in that passage, but we find out later (Numbers 31) that he was the instigator of those events.]
 - b. Balaam supposedly went home (24:25) - a distance of approximately 400 miles (compare with 22:5, where his home town is said to be near "the River" - that is, the Euphrates River). Yet later we discover that he had come back to the area (probably still trying to find a way to get the money), and was advising the Midianites (and Moabites) on how to *indirectly* destroy Israel. [Ironically, though he had expressed the desire to die "the death of the righteous" (23:10b), he ended up dying the death of the wicked, for he ended up getting killed along with the Midianites (31:8).]

Concerning Israel's sin and the judgments that followed.

9. They were *deceived* or tricked into compromise, through the allurements of the Moabite and Midianite women (Numbers 25:1-3, 6, etc.).
 - a. They didn't necessarily consider it an *abandoning* of Israel's God. More likely, it was just an addition of a *second* god. [Even today, people often have multiple gods - they just don't normally call them "gods." A person who claims to be a "Christian," yet loves wealth, has two gods. Today, "Christians" often have *many* gods - health, wealth, security, sports, entertainment, family, celebrities, religious activities - and anything else which is given more attention and devotion than God. Yet it bothers them *no worse than* it bothered Balaam or the people of Israel.]
 - b. The connection between idolatry and immorality is a natural one. These two actions often go together, for both involve the same attitudes of the heart. Both involve issues related to purity, faithfulness and loyalty, and when any of these godly character traits is abandoned for one of these sins, there is very

little to prevent it from being abandoned for the other. [This connection is seen throughout Scripture - in fact, the very nature of the physical union between male and female was intended (by God) to teach us about spiritual principles. One such example is the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). On the other hand, spiritual compromise, such as an attempt to be friends with both God and the world's way of life, is described as *adultery* (James 4:4).]

10. These women were following Balaam's advice, according to 31:16.
 - a. Balaam's advice was fully compatible with the compromising way he lived. Having already given-in to compromise, and being blinded by the riches that had been offered to him, he probably saw nothing wrong with his advice.
 - b. Both Midianite and Moabite were involved. But the emphasis on the prominent Midianite woman (25:15-18), as well as the nature of the judgment that followed (chapter 31), suggests that the Midianites were the primary instigators of this sin.
11. The Midianites provided the leadership, and the women were examples for the others to follow (compare to 25:15-18; 31:16). Because of the nature of their sin, their judgment was death.
 - a. This included the incident in which Phineas, a priestly leader of Israel, killed an Israelite man and a prominent Midianite woman, while they were in the very act of committing this sin. What he did was described as an act of righteousness - Numbers 25:6-9. He did this for *God's* honor, and to stop the sin (hence to stop the plague, which was causing the deaths of thousands). It was not done as an expression of personal vindictiveness - 25:10-13, but for God.
 - b. This judgment involved the Midianites who were residing in that area - in the land of the Amorites - Joshua 13:22. Other Midianites lived elsewhere (further south) and in later years became a major problem for Israel - Judges 6 - 7.
 - c. Interestingly Moses' wife was the daughter of a Midianite, who lived in this region to the south - Exodus 2:15-22; 3:1.
12. The Moabites, were *not* killed because of this sin. (This also suggests that they were not the main instigators.) They were judged, but for other matters.
 - a. First, they were judged because of what Balak did. Second, they were judged because of their constantly hostile attitude toward Israel, when Israel was attempting to enter the promised land. The nation of Ammon also shared in this judgment because of their hostility toward Israel. (They may have also been in agreement with what Balak did, but they are not mentioned as direct participants.)
 - b. Their judgment was exclusion from the assembly of the Lord - Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and Nehemiah 13:1-3. Even their descendants would be excluded, down to the tenth generation - Deuteronomy 23:3. [This may refer to participation in the religious activities of worship at the temple, by those who had joined the community.]
 - c. Interestingly, both the Moabites and the Ammonites were related to Israel, having descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot - Genesis 19:30-38. Also, one of Jesus' ancestors, Ruth, was a Moabite woman who turned to the true God (Ruth 1:16-17).

Comments about the judgment against Israel and Midian.

13. This was a sin against *God*, more than it was a sin of one nation against another. And being such a serious sin against God, it required the death of those who were guilty in *both* nations.
14. Today, some people take offense at the way God judged Midian. Some even try to compare it to "genocide" - in which one group of people attempts to annihilate another group of people. Here, however, it was not an issue of one nation against another, but of individuals from *both* nations against the God who made them, and who alone has the right to their loyalty.
 - a. People who have this condemning attitude do not appreciate the seriousness of this sin - a sin which deserves, *and earns*, a judgment of *eternal* proportions (much worse than mere *physical* death). People

who take this position (offense over God's justice) are themselves guilty of compromise; for they have chosen to disregard the complete incompatibility that exists between truth and error (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1), and have suppressed what they could have known about God and his justice (Romans 1:18-21, 32).

- b. We tend to view things *backwards*. Otherwise, we would never accuse God of injustice, when he judges people for sin. It is the person who *isn't* being put to death, when he compromises, who isn't getting what he deserves. (He will, though, at the coming Day of Justice.)
- c. The New Testament *also* says that people who do this deserve death. God's attitude remains the same from beginning to end of the Bible (See, for example, Revelation 2:16, where Jesus warns those who are guilty of this sin that they are in danger of the sword of judgment.) However, we also learn, in the New Testament, that there is hope, forgiveness and renewal, for all who are willing to repent of their ways, to abandon their false gods (whatever form they may take), and to trust in the true God *alone*.

There are several things we can learn from Balaam and these events in Israel's history. Among them are the following:

- 15. The apostle Paul tells us that the events in Israel's history were written down to teach us, to warn us of the consequences of sin - 1 Corinthians 10:6. He uses this very judgment (Numbers 25) as an example of this. (See 1 Corinthians 10:8, where he tells us that 23,000 Israelites died *in one day*.)
 - a. According to Paul, the same types of sins can occur among people who call themselves "Christians." One specific example at Corinth is mentioned in 10:14-22.
 - b. It is also of note that people in the Corinthian church were being judged and were sick or dying, because of sin - 11:27-32.
- 16. These events show us that God takes the sin of compromise *very seriously*. It is *not* something for us to take lightly. We must completely reject Balaam's teaching, that compromise is an acceptable practice (compare to Revelation 2:14).
- 17. The fact that God can use a person to accomplish good things is *not* a guarantee that the person is saved. God used Balaam to say good things about Israel, even though Balaam had an evil heart. All this proves is that God can use people *in spite of* who they are. He can even use a donkey, if he wishes (Numbers 22:21-33).
- 18. We are under the New Covenant (New Testament), and do not have the right to *kill* compromisers who may exist in the church. However, we still have the *mandatory obligation* to deal with the sin and to remove the offenders from the church, if they refuse to repent. [This was also illustrated at the church of Corinth. In chapter 5, Paul told them to expel a certain individual who was guilty of sexual sin.]
- 19. Note that this sin of compromise involves issues in which truth and error are deemed compatible. It involves attempts to encourage "fellowship" between moral opposites. (See 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.) It does *not* have reference to instances in which people try to reach an agreement on differences of opinion that do *not* involve moral and spiritual issues, or to "compromises" such as may be suggested in Luke 12:58-59.