**Balaam the Soothsayer**

The Epistle of Jude describes how there were “certain men crept in unawares” into the ecclesia, and compares them to unfaithful examples of old:

“Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran ***greedily after the error of Balaam for reward,*** and perished in the gainsaying of Core” (Jude 11).

These three men characterise certain traits present in the apostate influence of false brethren. Cain assumed he could worship in any way he chose, Balaam was motivated by personal gain, and Korah sought after honour and prestige in the congregation. In our considerations today, we shall consider the example of Balaam, a soothsayer (Jos. 13:22), who was employed by the king of Moab to pronounce a curse upon the people of God.

The narrative in Numbers chapter 22 records the mission of Balaam, given to him by one of Israel’s enemies: Balak, the king of Moab:

“He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam … saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me: Come now, therefore, I pray thee, ***curse me this people;*** for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I should prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed” (Num. 22:5-6).

The whole enterprise was a foolish one: it was assumed that if Balaam would pronounce a curse against the people of Yahweh, that their God would curse them – whereas the Almighty will not bow before the pronouncements of men. This was the real issue here: Yahweh demonstrated His Superiority over both the king and his prophet, as it is written, “Nevertheless Yahweh thy God ***would not hearken unto Balaam;*** but Yahweh thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, ***because Yahweh thy God loved thee”*** (Deut. 23:5, also Neh. 13:2).

Notice that the Lord refused Balaam specifically because he loved Israel – despite their murmurings and lack of faith. The point here, is that nothing can separate a man from the love of God – except one thing, which we shall consider shortly. So it is written:

“I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature ***shall be able to separate us from the love of God*** which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

So it was that the king sent the elders to meet with Balaam “with the rewards of divination in their hand” to bring him to Balak. He, being desirous of this world’s goods was tempted to go, yet was forbidden by God: “God said to Balaam, thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people for they are blessed” (Num. 22:12).

Even Balaam himself recognised that despite his best efforts, he would not be able to bring a curse upon the blessed people of Israel: and the warning had already been given in the words of Yahweh to Abram:

“I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, ***and curse him that curseth thee:*** and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3).

In these words, we find that those who do seek to curse God’s people will be unable to do so – they will end up being cursed themselves, and Balaam is a case in point.

After having been told that the Lord refused to give him leave to go with them, the elders brought back the message to Balak. The king supposed that Balaam would do the deed if he gave him more benefits: “And Balak sent yet again princes, more, and more honourable than they” and promised him “very great honour” (Num. 22:15, 17). However, even Balaam himself understood that he could not circumvent the words of Yahweh, despite the increased reward:

“If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of Yahweh my God, to do less, or more” (vs 18)

In the event, God permitted Balaam to go with the princes, with the understanding that he would only speak what He determined: “… if the men come to call thee, rise up and go with them but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do” (Num. 22:20). But being greedy for the reward, Balaam did not wait to be called, but rather as soon as he rose up in the morning, he “saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab” (vs 21). Hence the anger of the Lord rose up against Balaam, and was expressed in a most unusual and interesting way: an Angel encountered them on the way, and blocked their path. Balaam’s ass saw the angel, but the prophet himself did not, hence he smote the ass with a staff. So it is written that “a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Prov. 12:10). What followed was truly remarkable: the ass was permitted to speak, and reproved her owner:

“and Yahweh opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times …” (Num. 22:28).

These events are alluded back to in the words of Peter, speaking of the emergence of false brethren in the ecclesia:

“… which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet” (2 Pet. 2:15-16).

Perhaps we have an illustration of the prophet’s madness in the events in Numbers 22: most people would be astonished that the ass could speak, but Balaam responded by holding a conversation with the animal, as if it were normal! But be that as it may, the Angel subsequently make himself known to Balaam, and instructed him: “… Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that shalt thou speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak” (vs 35).

In the event, Balaam opened his mouth and tried to speak words of cursing against God’s people – but instead, “Yahweh put a word in Balaam’s mouth, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus shalt thou speak” (Num. 23:5). So, God turned the proposed cursing into a blessing (Deut. 23:5), and Balaam uttered a wonderful prophecy regarding the future prosperity of Israel. In this way, Yahweh turned the counsel of the heathen to nought (Psa. 33:10). Joshua later related these events:

“Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and warred against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you: but I would not hearken unto Balaam; therefore he blessed you still: so I delivered you out of his hand” (Josh. 24:9-10).

In these events, we have a wonderful illustration of the process of Inspiration: the means whereby men were used to pen the words of God. Instead of pronouncing a curse upon the people, the prophet instead spoke of a future blessing to come upon them. Again, he tried to utter a curse, but again, “Yahweh met Balaam and put a word in his mouth” – another beautiful prophecy of the future blessing of Israel. Then again a third time, he sought to utter a curse – yet again, there came another blessing. No matter how hard he tried, Balaam was incapable of uttering a curse upon the people.

Sometimes the process of inspiration is described as men deciding what they were going to wrote, and then God ensured that the end result was accurate and correct. But Just as “Yahweh put a word in Balaam’s mouth” (23:5,12), the Spirit placed Divine Words upon David’s tongue, “… the sweet Psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of Yahweh spake by me, and his word was in my tongue” (2 Sam. 23:2). God is an author, not an editor: He caused His Words to be uttered by men, who were themselves unable to change the message being communicated – and Balaam is a case in point. As the prophet himself spake: “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? Or how shall I defy, whom Yahweh hath not defied? … Must I not take heed to speak that which Yahweh hath put in my mouth?” (23:8,12). Balaam made repeated attempts to speak curses against God’s people, yet each time the Spirit overruled his natural desires, that the blessings of God be uttered instead – as in Chapter 25, where one of the most beautiful prophecies of all Scripture was given. So it was, that his prophecy came “not by the will of man” (2 Pet. 1:21), but contrary to the will of Balaam, and despite his utmost efforts to resist, Inspiration took place. God breathed His words through Balaam, who was powerless to influence them – for “good or bad.”

But Balaam would not let the matter rest there. We saw earlier that nothing can separate a man from the love of his God – except one thing: ourselves. Hence Jude describes:

“These be they that separate themselves…” (Jude 19)

and Ezekiel described Israel:

“… they are all estranged from me through their idols” and again, “every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me; I Yahweh will answer him by myself” (Eze. 14:5,7).

Again, Balaam illustrates the point. Being unable to curse Israel directly, he instigated a situation where they would bring a curse upon themselves. He “taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication” (Rev. 2:14). Hence the record in Numbers reads: “…the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab, And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods” (Num. 25:1-2). So Israel brought upon themselves the wrath and displeasure of their God: “and Israel joined himself unto Baal-Peor; and the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel” (Num. 25:3).

Much later, Micah the prophet brought Israel’s attention back to these events:

“O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; ***that ye may know the righteousness of Yahweh”*** (Mic. 6:5).

The righteousness of God was seen in the way in which Balaam’s proposed curse was changed into a blessing. But rather than have faith in those blessed promises, the people turned aside to worship the idols of Moab, and so brought calamity upon themselves.

Returning to Jude 11, we read earlier of false brethren in the ecclesia, that they “ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward”. In other words, they were motivated by self-interest, to the expense of the people of God. The believers in Christ must be wary of such false brethren, lest they also “separate themselves” from the love of their God. Rather, they must trust in the glorious pictures of the kingdom that came from the mouth of Balaam, and look forward in hope to better days to come.

*Christopher Maddocks*