

Numbers 22:22-35-Balaam's Donkey and the Angel (ESV)

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. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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?" ²⁹ 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." ³⁰ 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."

³¹ 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. ³² 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^[a] before me. ³³ 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." ³⁴ 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." ³⁵ 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.

I chose this passage because of my fascination and experience with donkeys. Cursory bible study shows us that donkeys are animals of peace, while their fellow equines, horses, are animals of wealth, power, and war. In fact King David, King Solomon, all of the prophets and Jesus himself are NEVER seen riding a horse; they are ALWAYS described as riding donkeys!¹

¹ <https://www.jpost.com/blogs/torah-commentaries/donkeys-in-scripture-469276> accessed 11/21/2022

My experience caring for and training donkeys has taught me that the stubborn reputation of the donkey is due to their strong sense of self-preservation; a trait that makes them excellent protectors and loyal companions. Donkeys are fiercely loyal and will protect their family; be it sheep, calves, or their human. The guardian of the donkey must prove his own loyalties and skills as a leader to earn the donkey's loyalty and trust.

In addition, the donkey is one of only two animals in the bible texts to be given a voice of speech; the other being the serpent (Genesis 3:1-6). While Balaam's donkey spoke with power from God, the serpent's words come from the power of the devil.

So why did God choose the donkey, and more specifically, a jenny? What is so profound about Balaam's experience? Why was the angel only first visible to Balaam's donkey? These questions and more drove me to a deeper study and further understanding of God's message for Balaam, and for us, in this passage.

Who is Balaam?

Throughout most of the bible Balaam is viewed as a negative character. In the Old Testament, Micah is the only one to present him in a more positive light (Micah 6:3-5). Other Old Testament passages reference Balaam's petitions to curse Israel (Joshua 24:9-10), cursing again of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:4-7, Nehemiah 13:2), and soliciting Israel to turn against Yahweh (Numbers 25:1-16).

The New Testament sheds an even more negative light on Balaam. In 2 Peter he is referred to as one "who loved gain from wrongdoing" (2 Peter 2:15-16 ESV, and also referenced in Jude 11). Revelation refers to the Balaam stories of Numbers 22-25 saying "you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the

sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality” (Revelation 2:14 ESV).

Balaam is a prophet with an attitude of self-importance, pride and power. He believes he can fulfill God’s orders and at the same time serve his own interests and put some money in his own pocket.² Historically, Balaam was a very successful diviner, and likely his success and reputation is the reason Balak called on him to put a curse on the people of Israel. In fact, Balak was first rejected, so it could be presumed that to continue to solicit Balaam for the task instead of finding another prophet would reflect Balaam’s reputation in curses. The text of Balaam’s talking donkey would appear to break down the reputation of Balaam and prove God is superior in any situation.

Some call Balaam a false prophet, some a diviner, others consider him soothsayer (a sort of fortune teller) turned prophet. Balaam clung to the notion of self-justification even though this story shows he may have a certain respect for God’s power.

Significance of a Donkey

The Donkey Sanctuary of the UK, a worldwide leader in donkey knowledge and rescue, says, “Donkeys have been a cornerstone in human existence and they still prop up entire communities today, ferrying water, food and crops. They are highly intelligent creatures, sociable and calm, capable of independent thinking and decision making. They are strong and won’t do something they consider unsafe, which makes them a great, trusted companion. Donkeys are, quite simply, amazing”³.

² Moshe Anisfeld *The Psychology of Balaam* (Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2013)

³ <https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/why-donkeys-matter> accessed 11/29/2022

This seems to be a common, wide-spread opinion. The Expanded Bible describes the donkey as “more spiritually sensitive than Balaam” in verse 33. Even Muslims report the bray of a donkey to be a warning of evil spirits. Both of these references indicate the sensitivity of a donkey both historically and presently.

The donkey is found in the bible only in time of peace. If a person wanted to flaunt their wealth they would choose a thoroughbred horse. If they were approaching for war, they would be astride a horse. A person travelling by donkey was not seen as a threat. They were a peaceable traveler and would cause no alarm in passing through.

In *Donkeys in the Biblical World* Kenneth C. Way notes the significance of donkeys in biblical times is indicated equid burial studies. “John S. Holladay Jr., director of excavations at Tell el-Maskhuta and Wadi Tumulat, suggested that ‘the donkey was, somehow, qualitatively different [than the bulls, or sheep or goats sacrificed]. By virtue of its centrality to the economy, it attained the status of a worthy offering.’”⁴

Donkeys and mules as “divine agents” are shown in 2 Samuel 18:9, 1 Kings 12:24, 28 and 1 Samuel 9:1-10:16. This connection is not limited to equine; however for the purposes of this study I have limited most of my studies to that of donkeys, mules and horses.

The Big Picture

Throughout the bible we see accounts of God asking for obedience; not for his own vanity, but because of what he can do for us. Each time God calls us to obey there follows a “so that”. For example, the Small Catechism tells us the benefits God gives in Baptism are that

⁴ Kenneth C. Way *Donkeys in the Biblical World Ceremony and Symbol* (Eisenbrauns, Indiana, Winona Lake, 2011), 7.

“God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation...”; a very big promise for us!

While we as sinners always look for how WE can take care of ourselves—fix everything ourselves—the predominant message of the entire bible is of God restoring the world through Jesus Christ. If we look past the task of obedience to the promise that comes after we should surely be exuberantly obedient!

In the Old Testament, we see the promise of Jesus throughout the texts. The books of the Old Testament show the good and all-powerful God in the world using history, parables, psalms and more to echo this message to us. Even more specifically, the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) “contains stories about the creation of the world, the flood, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the children of Israel in Egypt, the exodus, and the time the children of Israel spent in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.”⁵ This text records the narrative and law surrounding Moses from his birth, through his leadership and until his death.⁶ Within the book of Numbers we find primarily four parts: the preparations for the removal from Mount Sinai, the journey from Sinai to Moab, the prophecies of Balaam and his death, and the division of Canaan. The narrative of Balaam and his donkey in Numbers Chapter 22 falls in the middle of the journey of the Israelites.

While Moses was leading the Israelites towards the Promised Land, the prophet Balaam was summoned by Balak to curse Israel and prevent them from entering the Promised Land (Num. 22-24). Balaam has the sense to listen for God’s permission, which is denied, yet he succumbs to subsequent requests from Balak presumably seeing the personal profit and status he

⁵ *Rose Book of Bible Chart, Maps and Time Lines* (Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, Peabody, 2005) 7.

⁶ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0092.xml#:~:text=obo%2F9780195393361%2D0092-,Introduction,books%20together%20as%20the%20Torah.>
Accessed 11/21/2022

could gain. Eventually God grants Balaam to continue on the journey Balak requests but indicates he will only speak God's message rather than curse the Israelites.

As we narrow the text, we continue to see the theme of obedience and the story of Balaam and his donkey is no exception. This passage shows the old Adam in Balaam as he attempts to please both God and man. It describes an unbelievable experience of the power of God through of all creatures, a humble donkey. Within this account we see several mirrors, which prove to reinforce the disobedience of Balaam, and ourselves, throughout the text. Balaam is shown as a mirror of Balak⁷, however unlike Balak, Balaam does realize the error of his ways and ultimately attempts to correct his obedience. Or does he?

When God told Balaam to go but only speak the words God tells him, did Balaam truly have a choice in his words? Having just been shown that God could put words in a donkey's mouth, surely he knew he could not speak against God's order. He knew God could prevent him from speaking his own agenda; that willing or not he was a tool that God was using to bless the Israelites. We can't assume at this point that Balaam was even willingly obeying God as he had just witnessed God's power being so vastly superior to his own as a diviner and soothsayer.

Balaam wished for a sword as he would kill his donkey while the Angel of the Lord carries a sword and spares Balaam. In verse 33 we read "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." The donkey saved Balaam from certain death—just as donkeys has always behaved, protecting what they are loyal to. Could we also see ourselves in Balaam and God in the donkey? The donkey three times protects Balaam only to have Balaam repeatedly

⁷ Clinton J. Moyer *Who Is the Prophet, and Who the Ass? Role-Reversing Interludes and the Unity of the Balaam Narrative* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 37.3, 2012, 167-183)

beat him for doing so much like we refuse to acknowledge God's protection of us. Is that unlike our betrayal of our Father despite his efforts towards our best interest? Balaam did not treat his jenny fairly and with respect even though it had been faithful and never done him wrong. Is that not the same as Balaam's lack of respect to God himself?

In verse 34, Balaam exclaims he has sinned for he did not know the Angel stood in the way...yet he clearly knew God had already denied him going on this journey. It seems Balaam is repentant and willing to turn back more because he was caught than because he was truly convicted of his wrongdoing. This is evident later on as he convinces the Israelites to worship Baal even after blessing them several times.

In the end, Balaam's actions cost him his life. After four oracles God remains changeless and will not allow Balaam to curse the Israelites. In spite of the unchanging order of God, Balaam does influence the Israelites and causes them to betray God and worship Baal. Not only did this result in the death of 24,000 but in Numbers 31:8 we learn it also resulted in the death of Balaam himself.

Common Questions

Did the donkey actually "speak"? Using the hermeneutical principles, we find no indicators that this text is anything other the plain and obvious meanings of the words we read. Balaam is a real character in the bible being mentioned in many passages in both Old and New Testaments. There are no hints of figurative speech or parables. The text is plainly written as a historical writing. To assume the donkey spoke in any way other than literal is to read more into the passage than is written. In addition, we see references to this passage in other books of the bible to further solidify the interpretation to be true to its word. To regard the voice as anything but literal diminishes the power of God.

Why wasn't Balaam alarmed hearing his donkey speak to him? In that time, it was a common belief, likely especially to a diviner, that animals had the possibility to speak. It was common in folklore of the age to give animals a human reason and voice. Nava Schorer-Finkelman proposes “This miracle is presented as God’s doing: Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey...(Numbers 22:28). This can be compared with what God tells Moses.... (Exodus 4:11). Just as God can give voice to a person, or sight to the blind, so in our narrative God gives voice to the donkey, and sight to the ‘blind’ Balaam who did not see the angel even when his beast did (Numbers 22:31).”⁸ It is possible that God was even mocking Balaam showing he is less perceptive than even his donkey!

Word & Grammar Studies

’Ātôn

The term ’Ātôn refers specifically to a jenny (female donkey). “The gender of ’Ātôn is made explicit in Numbers 22:23-33, where ’Ātôn is the subject of 13 verbs in the feminine singular form.”⁹ It is unclear exactly why it is so specifically a jenny donkey referenced in this story, but comparisons with other bible texts suggest that in addition to transportation and beast of burden, ’Ātôn can serve as a measure of wealth as in Genesis 12:16 and I Chronicles 27:30, serve as booty as in describing Job’s character and wealth in Job 1:3 and as wealth taken by Satan in verses 14-15. ’Ātôn is frequently associated with royalty (Genesis 49:10-11, Zechariah 9:9; cf. Judges 5:10; 1 Samuel 9:3, 5, 20; 10:2, 14, 16; 1 Chronicles 27:30)¹⁰

⁸ Nava Schorer-Finkelman *Understanding Balaam’s Donkey: An Intertextual Approach* (Jewish Bible Quarterly Vol. 49, No. 2, 2021) 97.

⁹ Kenneth C. Way *Donkeys in the Biblical World Ceremony and Symbol* (Eisenbrauns, Indiana, Winona Lake, 2011), 162.

¹⁰ Kenneth C. Way *Donkeys in the Biblical World Ceremony and Symbol* (Eisenbrauns, Indiana, Winona Lake, 2011), 162.

At the very least this comparison would help to confirm the reputation of Balaam as a successful diviner. Further in-depth study may show even more significance of this detail into the gender of Balaam's donkey. Some believe a jenny is more protective; having maternal instincts as well as the trait of loyalty and protection that all genders exhibit.

Verse 29

As we look at various translations, it is interesting to note the reasons that Balaam gives for beating his donkey. The following actions describe what the donkey has done to Balaam:

- “by playing a dirty trick on me” (ISV)
- “made a fool of me (NIV)
- “you have abused me” (NKJV), also “mocked”
- “thou hast dis-served (me), and hast scorned me.” (WYC)
- “you made me look stupid” (NET)
- “you have made me look like a fool” (TLB)
- “you have ridiculed and provoked me” (AMPC)
- “you have made me look foolish” (EXB)

These descriptions clearly show how Balaam valued his reputation! The numerous uses of ‘you’ and ‘me’ lend even a narcissistic view of Balaam.

Verse 34

In verse 34, Balaam says he will turn back, if:

- “I am wrong” (EXB)
- “my going displeases you” (AMPC)
- “you don't want me to go on” (TLB)
- “it displeaseth thee” (WYC)
- “it displeases you” (NKJV) lit. “it is evil in your eyes”
- “you are displeased” (NIV)

And, the only versions that show Balaam's acknowledgement of already knowing it is against God's wishes:

- “since it displeases you” (ISV)
- “it is still evil in your sight” (NET)

The NET Bible maybe describes this best in the footnote, saying “he is saying if what he is doing is so perverse, so evil, he will turn around and go home. Of course it did not appear that he had much of a chance of going forward.”

Similar passages

The story of the man of God from Judah (1 Kings 13) tells of a prophet who disobeyed God. As he went away after lying and disobeying the command not to eat or drink there, he was met in the road by a lion. The lion killed him throwing his body into the road and the donkey and lion stood beside his body (I Kings 13:24). In verse 26 we read, “And when the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, “It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the LORD; therefore the LORD has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word that the LORD spoke to him.”” Just as Balaam ultimately suffered death for his disobedience, so did this prophet in 1 Kings.

Conclusion- How does this apply to our lives here and now?

Like Balaam, how often do we cling to our own self-justifications? How often do we try to appease God with small gestures in a pathetic effort to justify our actions to please our own wills; to ‘take care of ourselves’? Like Balaam, we as sinners often have *some* respect for God, but how often do we barter with God by making small offerings to try to prove ourselves while continuing on our own sinful path? Like Balaam’s treatment of his donkey, our sinful acts constantly hurt our God. Perhaps we would do well to realize, and respect, that God’s will for us is perfect and that his power is mighty; big enough to even give voice to a humble donkey.

How much did God love the people of Israel? So much that he went to great lengths to protect them, even interjecting this little story of a talking donkey as a sideline to the story of Moses leading the people to the Promised Land. The Lutheran Bible Companion describes the

account of Balaam and his donkey this way: “God cannot be manipulated, and His Word must not be twisted for sinful purposes....God is a God of both Law and Gospel. He metes out punishment to drive people to repentance but also has compassion on His wayward sons and daughters.”¹¹

Balaam was certainly a wayward son with many opportunities to turn back to God, yet he continually exposed his own cunning trying to please both God and his own sinful desires, just as we continually cling to the notion that we can do for ourselves. Like with Balaam, God is constantly showing his compassion and grace to our sinful selves, and like Balaam, our sinful human nature is constantly thinking we can handle things ourselves and rejecting the notion that we need God. The moral of the passage could possibly be over-simplified saying don't beat your donkey for balking because there may be an Angel of the Lord preventing you from doing something stupid!

¹¹ *The Lutheran Bible Companion Volume 1: Introduction and Old Testament* (Concordia Publishing House, Missouri, St. Louis, 2014) 146.

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