

Who was Balaam in the Bible?

Balaam was a wicked prophet in the Bible and is noteworthy because, although he was a wicked prophet, he was not a false prophet. That is, Balaam did hear from God, and God did give him some true prophecies to speak. However, Balaam's heart was not right with God, and eventually he showed his true colors by betraying Israel and leading them astray.

In Numbers 22–24, we find the story about Balaam and the king of Moab, a man called Balak. King Balak wanted to weaken the children of Israel, who on their way to Canaan had moved in on his territory. Balak sent to Balaam, who lived in Mesopotamia along the Euphrates River (Numbers 22:5), and asked him to curse Israel in exchange for a reward. Balaam was apparently willing to do this but said he needed God's permission (verse 8). Balaam, of course, had no power, in himself, to curse Israel, but, if God were willing to curse Israel, Balaam would be rewarded through Balak. God told Balaam, "You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" (verse 12). King Balak then sent "other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first" (verse 15), promising a handsome reward. This time God said, "Go with them, but do only what I tell you" (verse 20).

The next morning, Balaam saddled his donkey and left for Moab (Numbers 22:21). God sent an angel to oppose Balaam on the way. The donkey Balaam was riding could see the angel, but Balaam could not, and when the donkey three times moved to avoid the angel, Balaam was angry and beat the animal. "Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth" (verse 28), and it rebuked the prophet for the beatings. "Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn" (verse 31). The angel told Balaam that he certainly would have killed Balaam had not the donkey spared his

life. Ironically, a dumb beast had more wisdom than God's prophet. The angel then repeated to Balaam the instruction that he was only to speak what God told him to speak concerning the Hebrews (verses 33-35).

In Moab, King Balak took the prophet Balaam up to a high place called Bamoth Baal and told him to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:41). Balaam first offered fourteen sacrifices on seven altars and met with the Lord (Numbers 23:1-5). He then declared the message God gave him: a blessing on Israel: "How can I curse / those whom God has not cursed? / How can I denounce / those whom the Lord has not denounced?" (verse 8).

King Balak was upset that Balaam had pronounced a blessing on Israel rather than a curse, but he had him try again, this time from the top of Pisgah (Numbers 23:14). Balaam sacrificed another fourteen animals and met with the Lord. When he faced Israel, Balaam again spoke a blessing: "I have received a command to bless; / he has blessed, and I cannot change it" (verse 20).

King Balak told Balaam that, if he was going to keep blessing Israel, it was better for him to just shut up (Numbers 23:25). But the king decided to try one more time, taking Balaam to the top of Peor, overlooking the wasteland (verse 28). Again, Balaam offered fourteen animals on seven newly built altars (verse 29). Then "the Spirit of God came on him and he spoke his message" (Numbers 24:2-3). The third message was not what the Moabite king wanted to hear: "How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, / your dwelling places, Israel!" (verse 5).

Balaam's three prophecies of blessing on Israel infuriated the king of Moab, who told the prophet to go back home with no reward: "Now leave at once and go home! I said I

would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded” (Numbers 24:11). Before he left, Balaam reminded the king that he had said from the very beginning he could only say what God told him to say. Then he gave the king four more prophecies, gratis. In the fourth prophecy, Balaam foretold of the Messiah: “A star will come out of Jacob; / a scepter will rise out of Israel. / He will crush the foreheads of Moab, / the skulls of all the people of Sheth” (verse 17). Balaam’s seven prophecies were seven blessings on God’s people; it was God’s enemies who were cursed.

However, later on Balaam figured out a way to get his reward from Balak. Balaam advised the Moabites on how to entice the people of Israel with prostitutes and idolatry. He could not curse Israel directly, so he came up with a plan for Israel to bring a curse upon themselves. Balak followed Balaam’s advice, and Israel fell into sin, worshiping Baal of Peor and committing fornication with Midianite women. For this God plagued them, and 24,000 men died (Numbers 25:1-9; Deuteronomy 23:3-6).

Balaam’s name and story became infamous, and he is referred to several times in the New Testament. Peter compares false teachers to Balaam, “who loved the wages of wickedness” (2 Peter 2:15). Jude echoes this sentiment, associating Balaam with the selling of one’s soul for financial gain (Jude 1:11). Finally, Jesus speaks of Balaam when He warns the church in Pergamum of their sin: “There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality” (Revelation 2:14). Satan’s tactics haven’t changed all that much. If he cannot curse God’s people directly, he will try the back-door approach, and idolatry and sexual immorality are his go-to temptations.