

# BALAAM — Numbers 22; 23; 24

## INTRO

For review it is enough for the children now to recall that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years in all and had many adventures and trials, and that the events of our lesson for today took place close to the end of the forty years and constitute the last of their trials before they entered the Holy Land. In all classes stress the prophecy of the Star and point out that Balaam and the Wise Men came from the same country and possessed knowledge handed down from the Ancient Word.

## Doctrinal Points

In the Ancient Church the knowledge of correspondences was turned by the evil into magic.

Even common sense tells us that we ought to obey the Lord's laws.

If we recognize and obey them, the Lord can protect us.

## Notes for Parents

The book of Numbers gets its name from the fact that the Lord commanded Moses to number the people before they started on their journey from Mount Sinai, and the first few chapters of the book are concerned with this numbering. It is not until chapter 10 that the pillar of cloud and fire is taken up from the tabernacle, giving them their command to break camp and take up their march. The rest of the book treats of their journeyings. Because of their complainings and rebellion and their lack of trust in the Lord, it was nearly forty years before they finally reached the site of our lesson for today and made their last camp "in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan by Jericho."

They had conquered a number of enemies but had been commanded by the Lord not to disturb the nations of Moab, Ammon, and Edom because these three peoples were their own kin. However, the king of Moab, knowing their success against other nations, was afraid of them.

Everyone knows something of the story of Balaam and his donkey, but few have read it carefully enough to realize the deep lessons it is given to teach us. Balaam came from Aram, or Syria, the "land of the east," the same land from which the Wise Men later came with their gifts to worship the infant Jesus. It was a land in which knowledge from the Ancient Word had been preserved, the Word from which the first eleven chapters of our Bible were taken. In our lesson (chapter 24:17) we find Balaam speaking the prophecy of the Star, and you remember that the Wise Men came to seek the Lord because they had "seen his star in the east." The Wise Men cherished the knowledges from the Ancient Word with a desire to serve the Lord, but Balaam used them for selfish purposes. In the same way, some people today use their knowledge of truth from the Bible to advance themselves to positions of honor and influence instead of for its true purpose.

Balaam wanted the rewards which Balak offered him, but he knew that he had no power except from the Lord. Read these chapters carefully, realizing that they picture the Lord's dealings with us when we are bent on seeking our own advantage. The Lord does not force us to do right — He

always leaves us free to make our own choice — but He tells us first plainly what we should or should not do; then, if we choose the wrong way, He warns us, He puts obstacles in our way to make us stop and think, and in the end He turns our selfish efforts as far as possible into blessings for those whom we sought to injure.

Perhaps you remember from our lesson on Ishmael and Isaac that the donkey represents our natural reason — our common sense. How often mere common sense will show us the folly of our selfish ways, if we will but listen! The donkey, of course, did not actually speak, but because of the correspondence of the donkey, the voice of the Lord seemed to come to Balaam through the donkey's mouth.

## Primary

The story of the donkey and the angel is the part of the lesson which will most interest this class, but they should be told the highlights of the rest of the story. Even the youngest may remember pictures of the Wise Men and the Star, and they should learn Balaam's prophecy as a preparation for the Christmas lesson. They should be shown the reason why Balaam could not curse Israel when he saw them encamped around the tabernacle, which contained the ark with the ten commandments. They can be told that this means that if we believe in the Lord and keep the commandments, nothing can hurt our souls.

After the Lord had given Moses all the laws for the government of the people and for their worship, the pillar of cloud and fire finally moved on. The people took down their tents and the Levites took down the tabernacle and they all followed the pillar. For forty long years it led them from place to place in the wilderness before it finally brought them near to the Jordan River and the Holy Land.

They had conquered several enemies, but there were three nations which the Lord told them not to fight because they were their own relatives. These nations were Moab, Ammon, and Edom. But you know there are people who are never willing to trust anyone. The king of Moab was such a person. His name was Balak. When he saw the great encampment of the children of Israel so near the border of his land, he was frightened and sent for a famous wizard named Balaam and offered him great rewards if he would come and curse Israel for him.

Balaam lived in Aram, or Syria, the country between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

He was a diviner — that is, a man who has magic powers.

What did Balak, king of Moab, ask Balaam to do?

What did the Lord tell Balaam?

Balaam knew that he would have no power unless the Lord gave it to him.

Why was Balaam so anxious to do what Balak wanted?

Who stopped Balaam on the way?

How many times was he stopped?

This was to show Balaam that he must speak only what the Lord told him to speak.

Where did Balak take Balaam to see the camp of Israel?

What did Balaam have Balak do there?

How many times did Balaam try to curse Israel?

What happened each time?

Balaam could not do what Balak wanted, but we learn in the book of Revelation that he did give Balak advice which helped him to injure some of the Israelites.

Balaam was finally killed while fighting with the Midianites against Israel. The Wise Men who followed the star to Bethlehem so long afterward came from and knew the same prophecy.

## Junior

Balaam's background and connection with the Ancient Word and with the Wise Men will interest the Juniors, and also Balaam's character. Have them look up the Bible references to learn of the harm that Balaam actually did, and of his death. The meaning of the encampment of Israel is a good lesson to develop and illustrate.

In our lesson for today the children of Israel have nearly reached the end of their journey. The pillar of cloud and fire has been leading them about in the wilderness for almost forty years. In Numbers 33 you will find a list of all the places where they had camped during this journey. Now they are in their last encampment in the valley on the east side of the Jordan River not far from the head of the Dead Sea and just across the river from Jericho. They are in a country which had belonged to Moab, but which the Amorites had taken from Moab. The Israelites had overcome the Amorites, but they had been commanded not to fight with the nations of Moab, Ammon, and Edom because they were their relatives. You remember that Edom is another name for Esau. Moab and Ammon were the two sons of Abraham's nephew Lot. In spite of Israel's peaceful intentions, the people of Moab were afraid of the Israelites. What did the king of Moab decide to do?

Balaam lived in Aram or Syria, a country also called Mesopotamia, which means "between the rivers" — the rivers being the Tigris and the Euphrates. In that country the people had had the Ancient Word and had understood the knowledge of correspondences, according to which it was written. The remains of this knowledge made it possible for them to receive enlightenment from the Lord, but it also made it possible for some of them to use this enlightenment for selfish purposes.

Balaam, as we learn from other statements in the Bible, was an evil man. When Balak, the king of Moab, asked him to come and curse Israel, he wanted very much to obey because of the great reward offered. But he knew that the power by which he worked magic came from the Lord and that he could not exercise it if the Lord was against him. All the incidents of his journey were meant to keep him reminded of this.

How many times did Balak send messengers to Balaam?

What stopped Balaam on the way?

How often was he stopped before he saw the angel?

The story says that Balaam's donkey saw the angel when Balaam did not. The donkey, which pictures our natural intelligence, is a very sure-footed animal — just as our natural intelligence enables us to make our way safely in the world. Balaam was blind to the angel because he was so bent on having his own way, even though he possessed enough natural intelligence to know that it was not the way the Lord wanted him to take. The Lord put obstacles in his way three times to make him stop and think, but he did not want to listen to reason. When we are bent on doing something which even our common sense shows us is wrong, don't we often try to force our reasoning into the way we want to go, just as Balaam tried to drive his donkey? Finally the Lord spoke to Balaam through the mouth of the donkey — the donkey of course did not really speak — and showed him how foolish he was, and then he saw the angel in the way.

The Lord does not make us do what He wants us to do. If He did, we should be like slaves and could have no happiness. But He tries always to show us what we ought to do, and He continually puts obstacles in the way of our evil courses to make us stop and think. When this happens, we should not try to "ride over" the obstacles, but should ask ourselves if what we are trying to do is really right. The Lord also gives us parents and friends who, like the angel, help us to see the difference between right and wrong. And then if we persist in doing wrong, the Lord turns the things we do into blessings for others, although we ourselves must suffer.

From the heights overlooking the valley Balaam and Balak could see the whole encampment of the Israelites.

What did Balaam tell Balak to do?

You see, Balaam knew the correspondence of numbers and animals and sacrifices. So his arrangements established a connection with the spiritual world through which he could receive power from the Lord.

How many times did Balaam try to do what Balak wanted?

What happened each time?

The thing which saved Israel was the order of its encampment, with the tabernacle at its center. It pictured the true order of heaven or of a heavenly character, with worship of the Lord at the center and all the other affections and thoughts taking their proper places with respect to that. If we live in this order, no evil can harm our souls.

Let us see if we can understand this. Take such a simple evil as the temptation to overeat. Our bodies are given to us to use in the service of the Lord and the neighbor. They need to be properly cared for and fed in order to be useful, and so one of our proper affections is the affection for good food. But this affection should not have a very large place in our whole life. So long as we keep in mind the true purpose of eating, our love of good food stays in its proper place and we cannot be tempted to overeat. So it is with all our other affections.

Balaam did not succeed in cursing Israel, but we learn elsewhere (Revelation 2:14) that he did give Balak some advice which enabled him to lead some of the Israelites into idolatry and other evils.

For this reason, Balaam was afterward killed in a battle which Israel fought with the Midianites (Numbers 31:8).

Notice the prophecy in Exodus 24:17. This reminds us, of course, of the star of Bethlehem. The Wise Men who followed the star so long afterward came from the same eastern country from which Balaam came. So they also had remains of knowledge from the Ancient Word, and knew the prophecy of the star and what it meant. They used their knowledge to find the Lord and worship him.

## Intermediate

The correspondence of the donkey should be stressed with this class. Call attention to the similarity of the meaning of Ishmael and the donkey, and tell them that Ishmael was called a "wild-donkey man." In Genesis 16:12 the word which the King James version translates "wild man" really means "onager." Balaam's donkey was not an onager. It saw the angel. An onager would not.

The story of Balaam's efforts to curse Israel and of his words being turned into blessings is a wonderful picture of the inability of evil to harm those whose lives are centered in service to the Lord. It is the same lesson which in the New Testament is taught by the parable of the house on the rock and the house on the sand.

The plan of encampment of Israel was prescribed by the Lord at Sinai and pictures the true order of life, with worship of the Lord at its heart and all other pursuits and enjoyments taking their proper place with reference to that central aim. A life so ordered cannot be shaken by trial or temptation. Attacks made upon it turn to blessings because they are accepted as opportunities to exercise the virtues of forgiveness and charity, and thus strengthen instead of weaken the character.

Balaam tried to make use of his knowledge of correspondence to do evil. He knew that the number seven was a holy number and he knew the proper sacrifices to make in order to establish connection with the spiritual world. But when this connection was established, the evil spirits could not stand against the power expressed in the order of Israel's encampment.

Balaam pictures those who seek to use sacred things, the Bible and the church, for selfish purposes. The evil efforts of Balaam, instead of injuring Israel, returned upon his own head. So we read in Numbers 31:8 that he was later killed when Israel overcame the Midianites. He did, however, show Balak how to lead some of the Israelites astray, as we learn in Revelation 2:14. We are weakened when we allow any of our desires to stray from their true relation to the Lord's service.

We learned in an early lesson in this course that animals represent affections. The horse and the donkey represent affections for reasoning. Swedenborg says that the horse represents the power to reason from inner and higher principles and the donkey, the power to reason from external knowledges. Or, the donkey represents the natural reason which we sometimes call "common sense." This is a useful power in its proper place, although we must not think it is our only guide. If we do, it becomes an "onager." Ishmael, who mocked at the baby Isaac, was called an "onager."

In the story of Balaam the donkey was a trained beast who had served his master faithfully. He saw the angel in the way when Balaam did not, and it was through the mouth of the donkey that the Lord finally induced Balaam to stop and think. Often when we are bent on doing something we know is wrong, our very common sense tells us that we are making a mistake. The Lord never

forces us to do right, but He warns us and tries in every possible way to show us the folly of wrongdoing.

Balaam's prophecy in 24:17 reminds us, of course, of the star of Bethlehem, and of the fact that the Wise Men who saw the star and knew its meaning came from the same country which produced Balaam. This was the land called Aram or Syria, and also Mesopotamia — which means "between the rivers" — because it was watered by the two famous rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The people of this country were remnants of the Ancient Church who derived their religion by tradition from the Ancient Word. The prophecy of the star was undoubtedly a part of that Word. The chief delight of the people of the Ancient Church was the study of correspondences. It is evident from Balaam's directions to Balak for his offerings that even hundreds of years after the breakup of the Ancient Church (described in the story of the Tower of Babel) some of this knowledge of correspondences still remained in Mesopotamia. We may also assume that it lasted even to the Lord's time, since the Wise Men brought correspondential gifts to Him. Swedenborg tells us that the hieroglyphics of Egypt were a survival of this same knowledge, and that the magicians of Egypt, like Balaam, found their power in it. The Wise Men are examples of those remnants of the Ancient Church who cherished the knowledges which remained from a love of the truth and a desire to learn of the Lord. Balaam represents those who used the same knowledge for selfish ends.

## Basic Correspondences

seven = holy things the donkey or onager = the natural reason

## Senior

(1) The origin and character of Balaam, (2) the working of divine providence in warning him, and (3) the meaning and power of the orderly encampment of Israel are all important for the Seniors. They are just at the age when they most need this last lesson especially. Also, if they can be impressed with the important teaching of this familiar story in its internal sense, it will guard them against the temptation to fall in with any casual or profane talk about the Word.

Swedenborg says of Balaam: "Balaam was a hypocrite and a wizard, for he spoke well concerning the sons of Israel from Jehovah, and yet in his heart he burned to destroy them, and also did destroy them through the advice he gave to Balak, from which it is evident that his works were hypocritical" (@AR 114). It is in Revelation 2:14 that we learn that Balaam did succeed in giving some help to Balak, for it is said "he taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication."

The first part of the story of Balaam, which is the part usually studied, teaches in the letter how the Lord impressed upon Balaam the fact that in his character of diviner he must speak only what the Lord gave him to say. In the spiritual sense this teaches us how the Lord makes use of even our natural reason, our common sense, pictured by the donkey, to force us to stop and think when we are bent on a selfish course.

Two general lessons may be drawn from the story of Balaam.

One is that if we order our lives according to the Word, our souls cannot be injured by the evil efforts of others. We recall that the encampment of Israel, with the tabernacle in the center and the

tribes each in its allotted place around it, pictures the order of heaven and of a heavenly character in the individual, with service of the Lord as its inmost motive and all the affections and abilities kept in their proper relation to that service. When our lives are so motivated and so ordered, temptations are easily recognized and resisted. Take for example the temptation — to which we are all sometimes subject — to feel that others have a better chance in the world than we have. If we really have at heart the service of the Lord, we see at once that we have ample opportunity for this service whatever the conditions of our outward life may be. "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much."

The second general lesson is that it is quite possible to manifest great power and zeal in spiritual matters and still be a hypocrite, and that we need to guard against undoing by our example good which we may try to do by our words. A common instance of this is the man who goes to church regularly and gives to it generously, and at the same time in his business underpays his employees, "outsmarts" his competitors, and evades taxes. Here we should remember that we may be doing the same thing in our small affairs, and that the verse quoted above (Luke 16:10) continues "and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much." Balaam, when he spoke from the Lord, could speak only the Lord's words; but when he spoke from himself, the evils which were in his heart appeared.

The same lesson is drawn from the fact that, while the Israelites could not be harmed by Balaam when they were encamped, they could individually be led astray by the temptations which he taught Balak to put in their way. For the encampment of the Israelites was representative, and did not reflect their actual state as individuals. Swedenborg says: "The reason Balaam was able to lead astray the people by guile, was because that people were at heart of such a character" (@AE 140[5]).

It is significant that Balaam was killed by Israel (Numbers 31:8) in a battle they fought by the Lord's command against the Midianites. For the Midianites in a good sense — as when Jethro protected and advised Moses — represent "those who are in the truths of simple good"; but in a bad sense, when they are enemies of Israel, they represent "those who are in the knowledges of truth; but still not in life according to them."

## Adult

Note that the events of our lesson took place when the Israelites were in their final encampment near the Jordan. Then perhaps begin with the point made in the final paragraph of the Adult notes. The most important discussion topics are the way in which divine providence warns us, and hinders but does not force us to discontinue a wrong course, and the safety which comes with the proper ordering of our lives around worship of the Lord and in accordance with the commandments of His Word.

The story of Balaam contains a great many things of interest. In popular thought the incident of the donkey has come to seem the principal part of the story, but it is merely preparatory to the real lesson.

First we should note that Israel has completed the wilderness journey and is encamped "in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan by Jericho." Balak, king of Moab, is afraid of the consequences of their coming, but he knows that the Lord is with them and that he cannot hope to conquer them by force. So he turns to sorcery and sends far away to the east for the famous wizard Balaam to come and curse Israel for him. Moab in a good sense represents natural good, a kinsman of Israel, whom

Israel was commanded not to injure. But this Moab, when it sets itself up against the higher things of the spirit, represents the adulteration of good. Many today exalt natural goodness, saying that it is not necessary to worship the Lord or even to acknowledge Him if only one lives a life of neighborly kindness, enters into reform movements, gives to charitable causes, etc. This thought is expressed frequently by the misleading half-truth: "There are better people outside the church than many in it." This points to another and more subtle form of the same general thought — religious hypocrisy. of such people Swedenborg says: "They are, in general, those who are in external worship, which appears in some respects holy; but not in internal worship; and who seize upon as goods and truths the things which are of external worship, but reject and despise the things of internal worship" (@AC 2468). Later in the same number he says: "They who are in such good, care for external things only, and despise, reject, and indeed spew out the internal things of worship and doctrine." It is fitting that Balak should send for Balaam, for Balaam is the symbol of hypocrisy.

It is not easy to see this hypocrisy at first in the story, for one is impressed with Balaam's frequent declaration that he can speak only what the Lord gives him to speak. But it appears clearly later in his persistent attempt to satisfy Balak and win the rewards offered, and it is also stated in Revelation 2:14 where Balaam is named as the one who taught Balak how to lead the children of Israel astray. In interpreting this verse (@AR 114, @AE 140), Swedenborg tells interesting things of Balaam. He came from Aram, or Syria, also called Mesopotamia, where there existed remains of knowledge from the Ancient Word, which included a considerable knowledge of correspondences. Among the good, this knowledge was cherished; it culminated in the visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem to find the newborn King. Among the evil, it was turned to sorcery and magic, as with Balaam. Even the evil, however, recognized that they could accomplish nothing by their own power, but only by the Lord's power working through the correspondences which they knew. It was this knowledge or correspondence which taught Balaam to instruct Balak to build seven altars and to sacrifice a bullock and a ram on each. And it was this knowledge in Balaam's mind through which the Lord could speak to him even to the point of enabling him to prophesy. We should note especially the wonderful prophecy in Numbers 24:17, referring to the Lord's Advent. The Star stands for the Lord as truth and the Sceptre the Lord as King: the smiting of the corners of Moab and the destruction of the children of Sheth show the Lord's complete conquest of evil and falsity in the natural man.

In general, the attempt of Balak with Balaam's help to undermine and overthrow Israel after they had reached the very border of the Promised Land pictures the last stand of the rebellious natural man against the spiritual. Even when we have fulfilled the requirements of the period of external reformation, have set our lives in order from the principle of obedience to the Lord, and are all ready to take the final step which will establish the spiritual principle within us and make us "at home" in heavenly living, friends instead of mere servants of the Lord ... even then all that is earthly and natural in our minds rises up and conspires to undermine our resolution, even attempting to draw arguments from the Word itself to confirm the superiority of external over internal living. Witness the cry for "practical" Christianity. The loaves and fishes were not the real blessings which the Lord sought to give to men.

The story of Balaam and the donkey is a wonderful picture of the Lord's providence over us when we are intent on doing evil. There is first the voice of conscience telling us that what we purpose to do is not the Lord's will: "And God came unto Balaam, and said." There is the second warning: "And God came unto Balaam at night and said unto him." But if we still wish to do wrong, the Lord

permits us to go our way. He follows us, however, and puts obstacles in our path which appeal to our lower minds, since we have closed our higher selves to His counsel. The donkey represents the natural reason. From merely natural considerations it becomes increasingly evident to us that what we are planning to do will get us into difficulties: we even experience some of these difficulties, as Balaam's foot was crushed against the wall. Three times the angel appeared to the donkey and checked Balaam's journey. The Lord leaves nothing undone which will show us the folly of pursuing our own way. The donkey of course did not speak, but the Lord spoke to Balaam through the mouth of the donkey as a symbol of the appeal of His truth to our natural reason. When Balaam finally listened to this voice, his spiritual eyes could be opened to see the angel in the way.

In spite of all warnings Balaam went his way and made his three attempts to curse Israel. But when he looked upon the encampment of Israel — in one case even upon a small portion of the camp — the curse which he intended was turned into a blessing. This was because the encampment of Israel — with the tabernacle in the center and each tribe in its assigned place with reference to it — was according to the order prescribed by the Lord. It represents a life organized according to heavenly order, with worship of the Lord at the center and all our affections and thoughts kept in their proper relation to this center. Balaam could not curse a people so encamped. If our lives are organized according to this divine pattern, no outside cause can prevent our entering the Holy Land of spiritual living in this world or the next. We may be severely tempted and may yield here and there (Revelation 2:14), but we shall be given light to see the evil and to stamp it out, as the Israelites finally destroyed Balaam (Numbers 31:8). A good man whose inmost desire is to know and serve the Lord may be deceived from time to time by false prophets and may fall here and there into external evils, but the Lord's power is with him and will eventually give him light to see and strength to overcome.

We need to be deeply impressed with the power and beauty of this story of Balaam in its internal sense, because it is one of the stories often held up to ridicule by those who choose to think of the Bible as a man-made book. If we can realize what a tragedy it is to stop in the letter of the story and thus make it a means of discrediting the Word and cutting oneself and others off from the possibility of being reached through it by the Lord, we may be emboldened to speak out against such profanation and so help others to a truer appreciation of what the Lord has for them in the Word.

## From the Writings of Swedenborg

@AC 3762: "And went to the land of the sons of the east. That this signifies to the truths of love (that is, elevation thereto) is evident from the signification of the 'land of the sons of the east.' That Aram, or Syria, was called the 'land of the sons of the east,' is evident, because it was thither that Jacob betook himself. That by 'Syria' in general are signified the knowledges of good, was shown above; but specifically, by 'Aram-Naharaim' (that is, 'Syria of the rivers') are signified the knowledges of truth ... These truths, that relate to charity toward the neighbor and to love to the Lord, must be learned before it is possible for a man to be regenerated; and must also be acknowledged and believed; and insofar as they are acknowledged, believed, and ingrafted in the life, so far the man is regenerated, and insofar they are at the same time implanted in the man's natural, in which they are as in their own ground ... That the wise men from the east who came to Jesus at His birth were of those who were called 'the sons of the east,' is evident from the fact that they were in the knowledge that the Lord was to be born, and that they knew of His advent by a star which appeared to them in the east ... That from ancient times such a prophetic knowledge had existed

among the sons of the east, who were of Syria, is evident from Balaam's prophecy concerning the Lord's advent ... (Numbers 24:17). That Balaam was from the land of the sons of the east, that is, from Syria, is evident from these words: 'Balaam uttered his enunciation and said, Balak hath brought me from Syria, out of the mountains of the east' (Numbers 23:7)."

## Suggested Questions on the Lesson

Primary: Do you remember what led the children of Israel through the wilderness? pillar of cloud/fire

Junior: How long did it keep them wandering there? forty years

Junior: What was their last encampment in the wilderness? plains of Moab

Primary: What king was afraid of them? Balak (king of Moab)

Primary: To whom did he send for help? Balaam

Primary: What did he want Balaam to do? curse Israel

Primary: Where did Balaam get his power? from God

Junior: What did the Lord first tell Balaam? not to go

Junior: What did He tell him when Balak sent for him the second time? speak only My word

Primary: What happened to Balaam on the way? angel frightened his donkey

Intermediate: What preparations did Balaam have Balak make? seven altars, oxen, rams

Intermediate: How did Balaam know what should be done? knowledge of correspondences

Junior: How many times did Balaam try to curse Israel? three

Junior: What happened each time? became a blessing

Intermediate: Why could he not curse Israel? no real power in evil intentions

Primary: What special prophecy did Balaam speak? Star

Junior: How was he able to injure Israel? taught Balak how to tempt people

Junior: What finally happened to Balaam? killed in battle between Israel and Midian

Intermediate: What does the donkey represent? natural or "common—sense" reasoning

Senior: What does the encampment of Israel picture? truly orderly life, with worship of the Lord at the center