

**Lesson 16 (Study Notes):** “I Cannot Go Beyond the Word of the Lord”

**Class Member Reading:** Numbers 22; 23; 24; 25:1-3; 31:1-16

Numbers 22; 23; 24; 25:1-3; 31:1-16

This is entertaining because it is a “I do not think this story means what you think it means” example.

**22**The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. <sup>2</sup>Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. <sup>3</sup>Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were so numerous; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup>And Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.’ Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. <sup>5</sup>**He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him**, saying, ‘A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. <sup>6</sup>Come now, **curse this people for me**, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed.’ So, this is a story where a little Biblical knowledge and close reading goes a long way. This is a story about \*outsiders\*. The Moabites are enemies of the Israelites. Note that Balak calls Balaam at 1-800-Prophets, meaning that he looks him up for a blessing or cursing on demand, which means Balaam is a prophet for hire! (as is made completely explicit in verse 7) As we will discuss, this is a humorous, folktale-type story. Even the outsiders are proving that the Israelites are chosen

of God and that the God of Israel is the true, powerful God.

7 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the **fees for divination in their hand**; and they came to Balaam, and gave him Balak's message. <sup>8</sup>He said to them, 'Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, **just as the LORD speaks to me**'; so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam. <sup>9</sup>God came to Balaam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' <sup>10</sup>Balaam said to God, 'King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: <sup>11</sup>"A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out."<sup>12</sup>God said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them; **you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.**' <sup>13</sup>So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, 'Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.' <sup>14</sup>So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, 'Balaam refuses to come with us.' Some enjoyable dramatic irony in the conversation between the \*God of Israel\* and this foreign, mercenary prophet. The high amount of dialogue contributes to the enjoyment of the story.

15 Once again Balak sent officials, **more numerous and more distinguished** than these. <sup>16</sup>They came to Balaam and said to him, 'Thus says Balak son of Zippor: "Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; <sup>17</sup>for I will surely do you great honour, and whatever you say to me I will do (Balak gives Balaam a blank check); come, curse this people for me." ' <sup>18</sup>But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, **I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God, to do less or more.** <sup>19</sup>You remain here, as the others did, **so that I may learn what more the LORD may say to me.**' <sup>20</sup>That night God came to Balaam and said to him, 'If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but **do only what I tell you to do.**' <sup>21</sup>So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

## Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel

Note that the previous and following stories don't line up. God could not have asked more of Balaam. He is completely faithful and trustworthy, and this from a used-car salesman version of prophet! And now God is mad at him? These stories might have different histories. Most scholars agree that this most memorable portion was a later insertion into an older story.

22 God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary (*interestingly, this is the Hebrew verb with the same root as Satan*). Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup>The **donkey saw the angel of the LORD** standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. <sup>24</sup>Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. <sup>25</sup>When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. <sup>28</sup>Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, **'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'** <sup>29</sup>Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!' <sup>30</sup>But the donkey said to Balaam, **'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?'** And he said, 'No.' (*It is unfortunate that the NRSV changed the "she" to "it". The Hebrew word for the donkey is pronounced like "atone", which specifically means "she donkey" as opposed to the word "chamor" which means male donkey. Also, the*

verbs are female. So no question. Amazingly, the donkey is speaking in the place of God! There is also much to learn from the donkey, such as how it appeals to the relationship, and stays soft and calm and asks why Balaam is hurting her.

31 Then the **LORD opened the eyes of Balaam**, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. <sup>32</sup>The angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. (This makes no sense, as God himself commanded Balaam to go in v. 20) <sup>33</sup>The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. **If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.**' <sup>34</sup>Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.' <sup>35</sup>The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak. Note how wise and humble Balaam's response is: he immediately admits his fault and asks what he can do to make it right.

36 When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. <sup>37</sup>Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you?' <sup>38</sup>Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? **The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.**' <sup>39</sup>Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. <sup>40</sup>Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent them to Balaam and to the officials who were with him.

### **Balaam's First Oracle**

41 On the next day Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal; and from there he could see part of the people of

Israel. **23**<sup>1</sup> Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.' (Extravagant, costly divination, like saying "burn up these seven sports cars") <sup>2</sup> Balak did as Balaam had said; and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar. <sup>3</sup> Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stay here beside your burnt-offerings while I go aside. **Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me. Whatever he shows me I will tell you.**' And he went to a bare height.

<sup>4</sup> Then God met Balaam; and Balaam said to him, 'I have arranged the seven altars, and have offered a bull and a ram on each altar.' <sup>5</sup> The **LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth**, and said, 'Return to Balak, and **this is what you must say.**' <sup>6</sup> So he returned to Balak, who was standing beside his burnt-offerings with all the officials of Moab. <sup>7</sup> Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Balak has brought me from Aram,  
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:

"Come, curse Jacob for me;  
Come, denounce Israel!"

<sup>8</sup> **How can I curse whom God has not cursed?**

How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced? [Worth discussing. How can we apply this question to ourselves?](#)

<sup>9</sup> For from the top of the crags I see him,  
from the hills I behold him;  
Here is a people living alone,  
and not reckoning itself among the nations!

<sup>10</sup> Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
or number the dust-cloud of Israel?  
Let me die the death of the upright,  
and let my end be like his!

<sup>11</sup> Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? **I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them.**' <sup>12</sup> He answered, '**Must I not take care to say what the LORD puts into my mouth?**'

## Balaam's Second Oracle

13 So Balak said to him, 'Come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only part of them, and shall not see them all; then curse them for me from there.'<sup>14</sup> So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah. He built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. (Balak keeps throwing more and more resources into this question, hoping that he will get the answer he seeks)<sup>15</sup> Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand here beside your burnt-offerings, while I meet the LORD over there.'<sup>16</sup> The LORD met Balaam, put a word into his mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and this is what you shall say.'<sup>17</sup> When he came to him, he was standing beside his burnt-offerings with the officials of Moab. Balak said to him, 'What has the LORD said?'<sup>18</sup> Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Rise, Balak, and hear;

listen to me, O son of Zippor:

<sup>19</sup> **God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.**

Has he promised, and will he not do it?

Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?

<sup>20</sup> See, **I received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.**

<sup>21</sup> He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob; nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The LORD their God is with them, acclaimed as a king among them.

<sup>22</sup> God, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for them.

<sup>23</sup> Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel;

now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, "See what God has done!"

<sup>24</sup> Look, a people rising up like a lioness, and rousing itself like a lion!

It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey

and drunk the blood of the slain.'

25 Then Balak said to Balaam, 'Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.' <sup>26</sup>But Balaam answered Balak, 'Did I not tell you, **"Whatever the LORD says, that is what I must do"**?' This story is quite a powerful illustration of standing your ground and doing what you feel is right despite tremendous pressure and opposition.

27 So Balak said to Balaam, 'Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.' (He keeps trying, keeps spending his resources, won't submit to God) <sup>28</sup>So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the waste-land. <sup>29</sup>Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.' <sup>30</sup>So Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

### **Balaam's Third Oracle**

**24** Now Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, so he **did not go, as at other times, to look for omens**, but set his face towards the wilderness. <sup>2</sup>Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the spirit of God came upon him, <sup>3</sup>and he uttered his oracle, saying:

'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,

the oracle of the man whose **eye is clear**,

<sup>4</sup> the oracle of one who **hears the words of God**,

who sees the vision of the Almighty,

who falls down, but with eyes uncovered: **Balaam stops using his "tools of the trade", and acts as an Israelite prophet would.**

<sup>5</sup> how fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
your encampments, O Israel!

<sup>6</sup> Like palm groves that stretch far away,  
like gardens beside a river,

like aloes that the LORD has planted,  
like cedar trees beside the waters.

<sup>7</sup> Water shall flow from his buckets,

and his seed shall have abundant water,  
his king shall be higher than Agag,  
and his kingdom shall be exalted.  
<sup>8</sup> God, who brings him out of Egypt,  
is like the horns of a wild ox for him;  
he shall devour the nations that are his foes  
and break their bones.

He shall strike with his arrows.  
<sup>9</sup> He crouched, he lay down like a lion,  
and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?  
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,  
and cursed is everyone who curses you.'

<sup>10</sup> Then Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. Balak said to Balaam, 'I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times. <sup>11</sup>Now be off with you! Go home! I said, "I will reward you richly", but **the LORD has denied you any reward.**' (Balak **STILL** refuses to see what is going on and blames Balaam rather than seeing God's hand. Note how now Balaam is in the role of the donkey and Balak is in the role of Balaam in the earlier story)<sup>12</sup> And Balaam said to Balak, 'Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, <sup>13</sup>"If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the LORD says, that is what I will say"? <sup>14</sup>So now, I am going to my people; let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come.'

### **Balaam's Fourth Oracle**

<sup>15</sup> So he uttered his oracle, saying:  
'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,  
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,  
<sup>16</sup> the oracle of one who hears the words of God,  
and knows the knowledge of the Most High, (With each oracle  
Balaam sees more and demonstrates greater spiritual  
understanding)



who sees the vision of the Almighty,  
who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered:

<sup>17</sup> I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near—

a star shall come out of Jacob,

and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; (Prediction of Davidic dynasty)

it shall crush the borderlands of Moab,  
and the territory of all the Shethites.

<sup>18</sup> Edom will become a possession,

Seir a possession of its enemies,  
while Israel does valiantly.

<sup>19</sup> One out of Jacob shall rule,

and destroy the survivors of Ir.'

<sup>20</sup> Then he looked on Amalek, and uttered his oracle, saying:

'First among the nations was Amalek,  
but its end is to perish for ever.'

<sup>21</sup> Then he looked on the Kenite, and uttered his oracle, saying:

'Enduring is your dwelling-place,  
and your nest is set in the rock;

<sup>22</sup> yet Kain is destined for burning.

How long shall Asshur take you away captive?'

<sup>23</sup> Again he uttered his oracle, saying:

'Alas, who shall live when God does this?

<sup>24</sup> But ships shall come from Kittim

and shall afflict Asshur and Eber;

and he also shall perish for ever.' These last oracles seem particularly ancient, since they are unaware of Edom's resurgence and name "Shethites" as among the enemies of Israel. Micah mentions Balaam (Mic. 6:5) as does an inscription found at Deir 'Alla' (but that inscription Balaam is a "seer of the gods" and sees "a vision like an oracle of El", the top Canaanite god.

To include Kugel's CSI: Bible conclusions in full: "it seems to some scholars that Balaam's last two blessings may go back to the time of

David's kingdom, if not earlier. These only later came to be attributed to Balaam, a legendary soothsayer, and the first two blessings added to them. At that time or possibly still later on, a surrounding narrative was created to contain them, one that presented Balaam as an altogether positive figure. Then—perhaps at a time when the very idea of a pagan prophet being addressed by Israel's God had become anathema—the talking donkey was introduced, and with it, the presentation of Balaam as a buffoon. This negative assessment of Balaam may well have been the work of a priestly writer, scholars say, since such an assessment is reflected elsewhere in priestly writings." (How to Read the Bible, 340)

25 Then Balaam got up and went back to his place, and Balak also went his way.

### **Worship of Baal of Peor**

**25** While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. <sup>2</sup>These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. <sup>3</sup>Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel. *Why are just these verses assigned? Ah, to create a narrative about Balaam.*

The following verses are some of the more disturbing in the OT:

<sup>4</sup>The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the LORD, in order that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.' <sup>5</sup>And Moses said to the judges of Israel, 'Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.'

6 Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the

whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. <sup>7</sup>When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, <sup>8</sup>he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. <sup>9</sup>Nevertheless, those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

10 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>11</sup>Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. <sup>12</sup>Therefore say, "I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. <sup>13</sup>It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites." ' "

Quote from the manual "Although Balaam would not curse Israel directly, he apparently wanted a reward from Balak badly enough that he suggested tempting Israel to sin, causing them to lose God's protection.)"

## War against Midian

**31** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites; afterwards you shall be gathered to your people.' <sup>3</sup>So Moses said to the people, 'Arm some of your number for the war, so that they may go against Midian, to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian. <sup>4</sup>You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.' <sup>5</sup>So out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe were conscripted, twelve thousand armed for battle. <sup>6</sup>Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for sounding the alarm in his hand. <sup>7</sup>They did battle against Midian, as the LORD had commanded Moses, and killed every male. <sup>8</sup>They killed

the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian, in addition to others who were slain by them; and they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. <sup>9</sup>The Israelites took the women of Midian and their little ones captive; and they took all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods as booty. **Is anyone else deeply disturbed by this? And this is by the command of God? Kill every male and then take women and children as "booty"?** <sup>10</sup>All their towns where they had settled, and all their encampments, they burned, <sup>11</sup>but they took all the spoil and all the booty, both people and animals. <sup>12</sup>Then they brought the captives and the booty and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the Israelites, at the camp on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.

### **Return from the War**

<sup>13</sup>Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. <sup>14</sup>Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. <sup>15</sup>Moses said to them, 'Have you allowed all the women to live? <sup>16</sup>These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the LORD in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

Additional Reading: [2 Peter 2:15-16](#); [Jude 1:11](#); [Revelation 2:14](#)

#### [2 Peter 2:15-16](#)

<sup>15</sup> 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;  
<sup>16</sup> But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet.

#### [Jude 1:11](#)

<sup>11</sup> 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.

[Revelation 2:14](#)

14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Other Reading: