

## Intro:

Last week we began our Christmas series on passages associated with the Moravian Christmas star.

The first passage comes, not from the creation of Sun, moon, and stars, but from the very first act of Creation: *'Let there be light'*.

From light life comes. Without light there is no life.

As we closed last week's message, we considered the sin of Adam, a sin in the light and against the light he had from God: in the day you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, *'dying you shall die'*.

That one act of Adam plunged the human race into darkness. Man became estranged from the light and enemies of the light.

We discover that without light from God, man cannot live, and will surely perish.

This Sunday, we are going to consider an unusual prophecy and an unusual prophet.

- The prophet is unusual because he is not an Israelite.
- The prophecy is unusual because it come from such a prophet — but the prophecy is true.

Balaam, the son of Beor, is our man.

How many of you know about Balaam?

What do you know?

- He had a famous talking donkey.
- He was hired to curse Israel, but could only bless.
- ... anything else?

Today we are going to look at his prophecy in Num 24 because he speaks of a 'star' that will come out of Jacob. That is the connection with our theme.

I think that as we look at him we will find him very representative of many people today, perhaps even of ourselves. He is a man like other men, and it appears he died apart from the light he prophesied about. His is a tragic tale.

Read Num 24.1-19

**Proposition:** The star out of Jacob only has value to those who repent from their evil ways and turn to God and God's ways.

## I. The kind of man who could see the rising star

A. Balaam is not an insignificant Bible character: mentioned in 12 chapters in the Bible

1. Central character of Num 22-24, also Num 31
2. Deuteronomy 23 (twice)
3. Joshua 13, 24 (twice)
4. Nehemiah 13, Micah 6
5. 2 Peter 2, Jude, Rev 2

These subsequent passages view Balaam negatively. We will see the reason why as we work through this message.

B. Balaam introduced (Num 22.1-6)

1. Balaam's name: "'destruction of people' which accords with his reputation as a charmer and conjurer"<sup>1</sup> or "devourer"
  - a. Some commentators think this may have been a name he gained because of his activities or
  - b. Others think it might have been a given name
2. son of Beor: "to burn, to eat off, to destroy" — so 'devourer, son of destroyer' [nice family]
3. Lives in Pethor, near the River (22.5)
  - a. That is, near the Euphrates, in Iraq
  - b. No little distance from Moab (modern Jordan)
  - c. Archaeologists think that Pethor might have been very near a city called Mari, discovered in 1933 by archaeologists

"Balaam was from **Pethor**, a city on **the River**, probably the Euphrates. Possibly Pethor was not far from the great city of Mari, discovered in 1933 in the Euphrates Valley. The discovery of a vast number of cuneiform tablets at Mari, beginning in 1933, revealed among other things the existence of a complex cult of prophets and seers whose activities precisely resemble those of Balaam. The fact that he undoubtedly represented the prophetic customs and practices of Mari and vicinity makes possible a better understanding of Balaam's narrative in Numbers."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Bibleworks electronic edition, © 2003.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge*

4. Balaam is a 'diviner' (see 22.7)
  - a. The term is *qesem* – divination, witchcraft
  - b. The term is never used of faithful OT believing prophets (usually *nadib*)
  - c. Nevertheless, Balaam has some connection with the Lord (22.8)

- 1) Melchisedec, king of Salem, was a priest of the Lord (Abraham's day)

- 2) Job, non-Israelite, was a priest of the Lord

There appear to be a class of people who were in contact with, who worshipped the Lord, prior to the formation of the Israelite nation and the establishment of Tabernacle worship.

- d. Balaam appears to be a perverted version of men like Melchisedec and Job

- 1) He knows the Lord, he communicates with the Lord, he fears the Lord

- 2) But he is a 'soothsayer for hire'

He reminds me of the western gunman, "Have gun, will travel" — except he is more like "Have familiar spirit, will travel"

- e. Balaam is a man who built his reputation and wealth on trading in curses and blessings

- 1) He would use whatever spirit would talk with him, including the Lord

One writer said he was, "a diviner who was expert in examining the entrails of animals and in watching the movements of birds to divine the will of the gods."<sup>3</sup> [Not a particularly appealing career choice, if you ask me!]

- 2) Balaam had a wide reputation that lasted for centuries

- a) During our Through the Bible series, I mentioned an archaeological discovery in 1967

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*Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 1:241 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers", *Expositors*, p. 677.

- b) In an area east of the Jordan river, by the brook Jabbok, archaeologists found plaster remains with writing on them
- c) The writing was carefully pieced together in two sections – They start out this way:

“Book of Balaam son of Beor, the man who was a seer of the gods...”

- d) Note place and time:
    - i) Plaster from a house in Jordan, near Israeli border, dated in about 700s BC, probably destroyed in an earthquake during reign of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel
    - ii) Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers occurs in about 1446 BC, he is from a city near the Euphrates
    - iii) About 700 years later, people are painting his words on the wall of their house...
- 3) He could be hired to pronounce curses against enemies

“And from the very time when Balaam sought Jehovah [*i.e.*, sometime before encounter with Balak], the fame of his prophetic art appears to have spread. It was no doubt the report that he stood in close connection with the God of Israel, which induced Balak, according to chapter 22.6, to hire him to oppose the Israelites; as the heathen king shared the belief, which was common to all the heathen, that Balaam was able to work upon the God he served, and to determine and regulate His will. God had probably given to the soothsayer of a few isolated but memorable glimpses of the unseen, to prepare him for the service of His kingdom. But ‘Balaam’s heart was not right with God,’ and ‘he loved the wages of unrighteousness’ (Ac 8.21; 2 Pt 2.15). His thirst for honor and wealth was not so overcome by the revelations of the true God, that he could bring himself to give up his soothsaying, and serve the living God with an undivided heart.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 3:162.

We will see more of this later... Note these facts as we turn to his prophecy:

- He knows God in a way, and would claim to be a spokesman for the Lord
- He is a spiritualist for hire – money is big with him.

## II. The light of the star so the nations might see (24.15-19)

### A. Note the situation of the prophecy

1. This is Balaam's fourth prophecy about Israel
2. Balak has been moving Balaam from place to place in the hopes of inducing Balaam to curse God's people
  - a. Balak is very superstitious
  - b. This is costing Balak big-time: many sacrifices in each place
3. This prophecy appears to be an 'extra' one, sort of a 'gratis' gift to Balak since he hasn't been happy with the previous ones
4. This prophecy is divided into four different sections by the words "he took up his parable" (vv. 15, 20, 21, and 23) — we will only look at the first section

### B. Note Balaam's claims (15-16)

1. Very similar to his claims as he introduces the earlier third prophecy (24.3-4)
2. Balaam says he is a man whose eyes are opened (15)
3. He claims to be one who hears the 'words of God' [*el*] (16a)
4. One who knew the knowledge of *elyon* (16b)

These words are added "to show that Balaam possessed the knowledge of the Most High, *i.e.* that the word of God about to be announced had already been communicated to him, and was not made known to him now for the first time."<sup>5</sup>

5. One who sees the vision of '*shaddai*' (16c)

<sup>5</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 3:192.

6. One who falls before God with his eyes open (16d)
  - a. These words are meant to convey first Balaam's gift of spiritual insight – the gift of prophecy.
  - b. Second, they present his credentials as a spokesman for the true God – note multiple claims and multiple names.
  - c. Third, there is a poetic structure here, eyes opened create a 'parenthesis' around the credentials

Now Balaam is not a faithful prophet – these could just be empty boasts to bolster himself. But note this:

- Everything Balaam prophesies is true.
- The Lord had indeed spoken to him (remember the donkey incident)
- So we have a man who is unstable spiritually – he is a 'religious mercenary', he consorts with other gods, but he does know and speak with the true God
- And in this case, he speaks *for* the true God

C. The content of the prophecy (17-19)

1. The prophecy is for the future (17a)
2. The prophecy is about royalty in Jacob (17b)
  - a. A 'star' – a common word referring to royalty
  - b. A 'sceptre' – the word confirms the meaning of the word star

Balaam is talking about a royal king who will come out of Jacob.

Israel himself had used the term 'sceptre' in his blessing of his son, Judah:

**Genesis 49:10** The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him *shall* the gathering of the people *be*.

3. This ruler will defeat the enemies of Israel (17*cff.*)
  - a. The enemies of Israel are representative of those who will oppose Israel in the end of time

- 1) Moab, then opposing the Israelite entrance to the promised land
  - 2) Edom, who refused Israelite passage on the way to the promised land
  - 3) Amalek, traditional enemies
  - 4) Kenites
- b. This will all be accomplished by one from Jacob who shall have dominion (19)
- 1) This one is the 'star' who shall come
  - 2) This dominion is world dominant: this king will rule the nations
  - 3) Which coming does the star speak of? The second coming... Balaam's prophecy is still awaiting fulfillment

Now, clearly we see here a man who has insight from Jehovah God.

He even has some kind of relationship with Jehovah God.

But what is his destiny?

### **III. The end of a man turning from the star**

#### **A. Balaam headed home (24.25)**

1. He is viewing the Israelites from the south, home is north
2. He must travel through the Israelite camp to go home

How did Moses come to know about this activity so that he could include it in Numbers?

- God could have told him directly, but...
- More likely, Balaam told him personally, as he was heading home

#### **B. Balaam never made it home (31.8, 16)**

1. Israelites tempted to sin 'in the matter of Peor' with Midianites (allied to Moabites)
2. Moses led the people in a great battle, where they defeated the Midianites ... and killed Balaam (31.8)

3. Moses instructed the people to kill the Midianite women because they were the source of the temptation ... by way of Balaam (13-16)

C. What is the lesson for us?

1. Balaam is a 'religious mercenary' – do you think he wanted to give Moses his information for nothing? [Balak hadn't paid...]
2. Balaam turned to the Midianites – perhaps he can still score Balak's cash by compromising the Israelites with the Midianites [also sons of Abraham, but idolaters]
3. Was Balaam a good man? He could see the rising star after all...

“He could not of course be a good man and a false prophet; but he may have been a bad man and a true prophet. Such in fact he was. Morally Balaam comes before us as a man of keen insight and of wide culture, having broad glimpses of the truth, which seem to have grown clearer with his investigations, a heart susceptible to noble impulses, a conscience awakened, but not authoritative, with strong convictions of right and duty, which are yet sacrificed to the cravings of avarice and ambition; ever practically selling all his better impulses, his convictions and his conscience, for the sake of gain, and yet never doing it without a conscious and serious struggle.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion:

Now, what kind of man are you?

Here in this place, in this church, you can see the light of the star. It is placed before you every week.

Salvation is in that star, in Jesus Christ, if you will receive it.

You may delight in it. You may love it.

But you refuse to live it. Are you a Balaam?

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<sup>6</sup> Lange, Vol. 2, p. 122.