The story of Balaam, referred to by Peter (2Peter 2:15-16), is one of the strange yet true stories of the Bible. It is found in Numbers 22, 23, 24.

While the Israelite multitude was camped in Moab listening to Moses, the Moabites and Midianites were receiving oracles from God through Balaam—one of those many prophets whom God had dispersed throughout the world since the dawn of history.

Balaam was of Mesopotamian extraction (Deuteronomy 23:4). He was therefore a foreigner among the Ammonites and Moabites (the name Balaam apparently means foreigner). He was considered by them to be a diviner or soothsayer of considerable power.

The intrusion of the Israelites alarmed Balak, king of Moab. He called upon the services of Balaam, who had a reputation for powerful divining. Balak wanted Balaam to put a curse upon the Israelites so as to stop their progress.

1 What Balaam did right

Balaam refused to make any pronouncement other than what God says. Even though the king pressed Balaam for another message, Balaam would give him none but God’s. The king wanted a curse upon the Israelites, but Balaam gave them a blessing.

Over and over the leaders of Moab asked Balaam to have another go at divining the message they wanted. Each time the Lord gave Balaam a stronger version of the truth, and told him to pronounce a blessing instead of a curse.

Balaam repeated the blessing faithfully, defying the king. His attitude was, "I must be careful to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth." (Numbers 23:12).

2 Bible Blasts Balaam

Although Balaam was right to speak only what God told him to speak, Balaam gets very bad press repeatedly in the Bible...

- God was angry with Balaam because he went to Balak (Numbers 22:5-7, 22).
- Moses said Balaam gave evil counsel that brought a plague on Israel (Numbers 31:14-16).
- Balaam had wanted to curse the children of Israel, to be paid the hire (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).
- Balaam was killed by the Israelites in the days of Joshua (Joshua 13:22).
The Lord recalled Balaam's sin in Joshua's farewell speech (Joshua 24:8-10).

Recalled again through the prophet Micah (Micah 6:5).

Re-visited in Nehemiah's time (Nehemiah 13:1-3).

Peter recalls how Balaam "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2Peter 2:15-16).

Similarly Jude recalls how "for pay... the error of Balaam was committed (Jude 1:11)

Jesus recalls how Balaam "Kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality" (Revelation 2:14)

### 3 What Balaam did wrong

**An unfaithful prophet.** Balaam, by the powers granted him by God, had the opportunity to demonstrate the power of the true God against the deception of false gods and idols.

When Balaam pronounced a blessing or a curse, it worked. Balak said as much when he summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:6).

Balaam could have helped the Moabites and their neighbours to "turn to God from idols, to serve the living God" (1Thessalonians 1:9). However Balaam let God down badly.

**A false prophet.** Balaam was too easily led away from God’s truth into error, and he in turn led many others astray (Numbers 31:8,16, Revelation 2:14).

Instead of giving the counsel of God, he taught people to practise idolatry and to commit fornication (Revelation 2:14) It was his counsel that caused the children of Israel to sin and to suffer a terrible plague (Numbers 25:1-9, Numbers 31:14-16).

**Loved money more than truth.** For all Balaam's talk about speaking only what God put into his mouth, he was wishing to curse the children of Israel for the generous fee Balak would pay him. Instead of loving righteousness, Balaam "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2Peter 2:15-16).

Balaam knew what pleased the Lord, but what pleased the Lord did not please Balaam.

**Presumed to manipulate God.** Sure, Balaam uttered a blessing instead of a curse, but only because God gave him no option. What would be the point in Balaam pronouncing a curse, if God was going to give a blessing?

Balaam would look stupid and damage his reputation. However Balaam kept going along with Balak's repeated attempts to get a curse from God upon the Israelites,
because like Balak he hoped that maybe somehow God could be pressured into doing a backflip.

God, however, refused to listen, and he was angry with Balaam for not rejecting Balak's proposal outright from the very first (Numbers 22:12).

4 How God dealt with Balaam

- God told Balaam the truth clearly. "Do not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed" (Numbers 22:12).

- God gave Balaam an unmistakable sign. The incident with the donkey and the angel left Balaam without any excuse for continuing to compromise with Balak's wishes (Numbers 22:21-35).

- God judged Balaam worthy of death. The reason was that Balaam still insisted on going to Balak. But for his donkey, Balaam would have been killed by the angel of the Lord (Numbers 22:33).

- God provided a saviour for Balaam. Balaam’s donkey was Balaam’s suffering saviour (Numbers 22:33 again). As such the donkey may be seen as a type (prophetic symbol) of Christ.

- God was longsuffering to Balaam. God was showing patience with Balaam's pandering to Balak’s three attempts to change God’s word by changing mountaintops. (Numbers 24:10-13).


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