

The passage likes three, God speaks to Balaam three times and three times Balaam will try to prophesy against Israel.

What does the donkey ask?

The donkey talking is one thing, the prophet talking back is quite another.



How does Balaam answer?

Why is he angry?

How had the donkey made a fool of him?

Would Balak still have invited him if he had known about this incident?



"You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

This is number 206 on the list of 500 things never to say to your donkey.



The Donkey is a foil for the prophet.

What do you expect from a donkey?

How do the donkey and the prophet compare?

The donkey comes across as wiser, more caring and more articulate than the prophet. But there is more. The donkey assumes that Balaam can see the angel she does not answer Balaam by saying "I am trying to avoid that big scary angel over there, the one with the sword."

Who is the better prophet, Balaam or the donkey?



A prophet is one who hears from God and who sees what others do not see, One who sees spiritual things not just physical things. A prophet must obey God. Balaam is being ridiculed. What kind of a prophet fails to see an angel. The donkey is the better prophet. A diviner is supposed to be able to interpret the strange behaviour of animals as omens. Balaam fails big-time here. Moreover, the donkey saves Balaam's life.

The donkey business tells us not to take Balaam too seriously.

Just like God opens the mouth of the donkey, He now opens the eyes of the prophet.



What does Balaam see?

How does he respond?

What kind of repentance is this?



What does God say to Balaam? v32

What does reckless mean here?

It is notable that God cares about the donkey.

Balaam is not only being ridiculed he is being warned. He is discovering how strongly God is against this project. He is also being made into someone who will only do what God want him to. He is not a prophet he is a mouthpiece. He is no different from the donkey.



What does this passage say about the ways that God may choose to speak?

What does God have to do to you to make you listen?

What does God have to do to you to make you obey?

Behind this text are some interesting biblical parallels. Paul on the way to Damascus and Moses failure to circumcise his children Acts 9:4-9, Exodus 2:24-26. There are also some profound similarities with the account of the Garden of Eden and Abraham offering Isaac.

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Balaam and the Donkey



The Balaam narrative is quite strange, it is either quite funny, or deadly serious, or both. The main characters in the story are not Israelite and the story is told from a foreign perspective. Israel is not involved in the account and they never seem to know what is going on in the hills above them. It is also a long narrative covering 4 chapters. The question is, what is it about?

The story occurs at the crossover between the old generation (Moses, Miriam, Aaron) and the new generation (Joshua, Caleb). The nation of Israel is moving north out of the Negev towards the promised land. They have just defeated Sihon and Og the Amorite kings. As the Amorites are a major force in the region, everyone is scared of the Israelites. They are camped in the plains of Moab, on the eastern bank of the Jordan, This is the staging point for the invasion and the place where the book of Deuteronomy is given.



Read Numbers 22:1-6

What happens?

How does Balak describe Israel?

What does he want to achieve?

How does he describe Balaam?

For Balak, blessing and cursing are commodities to be bought.

Can they?

Balak does something very clever and very stupid in this passage.



Firstly, he assumes Israel intends to invade his land. But this is not the case. Israel has no designs on his territory. Balak tries to solve a problem that he does not have and in doing so makes an enemy. Doing nothing in this situation would have solved the problem. Balak miss-read the situation. (considering the situation quite an easy thing to do).



Do we make unnecessary problems?

How will we avoid doing this?

Are there times in our lives where doing nothing is the best thing?

Why is this so difficult for us to do?

Do we make unnecessary enemies?

It is really worth understanding an issue before we address it. It is really good to identify what is a threat to us and what isn't. Making enemies is a dangerous thing to do.



The second thing he does is perceptive and more helpful for us.

He recognises that some problems cannot be dealt with by physical means and have to be addressed spiritually. Balak does not believe his army will triumph so if he can't defeat them physically he will defeat them spiritually.

Balak wants to use God as a weapon against Israel. He plans to do this by hiring Balaam. He intends to create a wedge between God and Israel and hence remove their protection.



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Later in the account seven altars were built, seven altars were used in exorcism in parts of the ancient world. Balak is trying to exorcise God from Israel.

To what extent does our success as Christians rely on our relationship with God? What happens when we lose it?

Balak finds a weak point in Israel and us. If we can be separated from God then we become weak. The first lesson we need to take from this story is to guard our relationship with God. When we are close to God we are strong.

How are you going to do this?

The second lesson that we learn is that we too need to learn how to fight battles spiritually.

How do we do this?

The most obvious answer is through prayer. Fasting, spiritual warfare, finding a word of wisdom or knowledge also spring to mind.

Balak's plan is to have Balaam curse Israel.

Is it OK of us to curse people? Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14

Why?

What should we do instead?

There are just a couple of places in the bible where curses are called in God's name. As a whole both Testaments reject cursing as a spiritual tool.

3 The story is structured in three parts.

Balaam and the Donkey
The "cursing" of Israel"
The Baal Poer Incident.

Read Numbers 22:7-14 **What happens?**

Pethor is probably the same place as Paddan Aram near Heron, a place Genesis associates with a knowledge of YHVH. This is a 20-25 day journey from Moab.

There are probably two reasons that Balak sends for Balaam:

1 Balaam knows the name of God. Knowing the name YHVH in Balak's mind means Balaam will have a degree of control over YHVH. It is likely that God was worshiped as one of many gods outside of Israel, there are several places in the first five books of the bible that suggest this.

How does a knowledge of God give us power?

2 The second is that Balaam was famous. We know this because of an inscription found at Tell Deir 'Alla in modern-day Jordan discovered in 1967. The inscription is in ink on plaster, it dates from about 800BC (500-600 years after this story) and is poorly preserved. It is headed "from the book of Balaam." In it, Balaam is described as "Seer of the gods". This explains why Balaam does not need to be introduced. The inscription contains the names El Elohim and Shaddai, alongside Canaanite deities.

The inscription is a prophecy of judgement. This is amazing because up until this discovery we thought this kind of prophecy was unique to Israel. All other Ancient Near East prophecy is affirmative prophecy, (ie happy ending prophecy) much like the way we tend to do prophecy today.

Balak sends a fee for divination. The vast majority of prophecy in the ancient world involved

divination. ie examining the insides of animals or reading the stars etc. But like all biblical prophecy, Balaam does not use divination. Divination was outlawed in Israel as it is for us.

How does God speak to Balaam? **How comfortable is Balaam in speaking to God?** **How comfortable is God in speaking to Balaam?**

Balaam and God seem very comfortable talking with each other.

It is interesting that Tell Deir inscription follows the same pattern; a vision at night followed by action in the morning.

What does God say to Balaam? **What reason does God give?** **How might this apply to us?** **What does Balaam do?**

Balaam obeys God. He does not go.

Read Numbers 22:15-21 **What happens?** **How does Balak interpret Balaam's refusal to come?**

Balak clearly thinks Balaam is adopting a negotiating position. He wants more money.

What does God say this time? **Does God change His mind here?** **Do you think Balaam wanted to go?**

This is one of the difficult issues in this passage. God only changes in that He allows Balaam to go. He will not let Balaam curse Israel and remains opposed to him going.


It is from passages like this that some people develop the idea or the permissive will of God. There is what God wants, and there is what we can talk God into.

Do you think this permissive will of God exists? **If it does what should our attitude towards it be?** **What should Balaam have done?**

In going, Balaam puts himself in danger. God, however, will not stop him even though it is clear that God does not want him to go. Balaam talks about obeying God, but in the end, he does not. It is clear that Balaam thinks he can change God's mind.

What condition does God place on Balaam?

Read Numbers 22:22-31 **What happens?** **What do you make of this account?**

 This can seem confusing; God said don't go, then He says go. Now he intends to kill the prophet. The story does not work unless Balaam goes. The issue here is not that God has changed His mind, it is the prophet. It is not that the prophet is going that is the problem but how the prophet is going, he intends to curse, he intends to take the money. The angel is not there to stop Balaam but to express God's displeasure at him.

How did the donkey talk?

The donkey refuses to go forward three times because she sees the Angel of the Lord ahead of her. It is God that enables the donkey to speak. The donkey is a divine agent, effectively God is speaking through creation.