

10. The “Madness” of the Prophet (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 22–24; Deut. 1:30; 20:4; Matt. 15:14; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Pet. 2:14-16; Rev. 3:17.

Quotes

- Madness is badness of spirit, when one seeks profit from all sources. *Aristotle*
- He who is greedy is always in want. *Horace*
- Hell has three gates: lust, anger, and greed. *Bhagavad Gita*
- Prophecy: The art and practice of selling one’s credibility for future delivery. *Ambrose Bierce*
- I don’t make mistakes. I make prophecies which immediately turn out to be wrong. *Murray Walker*
- Ages when custom is unsettled are necessarily ages of prophecy. The moralist cannot teach what is revealed; he must reveal what can be taught. He has to seek insight rather than to preach. *Walter Lippmann*

Questions

What is the meaning of the story of Balaam? How do we see this fitting into the grand scheme of the great controversy? What lessons can we learn about how religion is used for other purposes? Why would God have a prophet in the pagan lands bordering the Euphrates? To what extent did God limit Balaam’s free will? How is this relevant to us?

Bible discussion

The story of Balaam recorded in Numbers 22-24 gives us some interesting insights—not just about talking donkeys! First there are clearly prophets of God beyond Israel. Yet this one is “for hire.” Balak’s request to Balaam reveals there is much more going on than we may realize, and that the surrounding nations had some idea of what was going on with Israel and their God. In addition we see God’s intent playing out, even among these “heathen” people around.

Balaam’s attempt to curse Israel for money is not the first nor the last time that religion has been exploited for personal ends. The whole scenario shows how we often want to “use” religious systems and beliefs to accomplish our own will—Balak to remain in power and to defeat his enemies, Balaam to turn a profit on his “prophet” business etc.

The text reveals that God works despite us. Interestingly God eventually allows Balaam to go with the messengers of Balak (22:20) but then is angry with Balaam for going (22:22)! Balaam also reveals problems with anger management until he sees the angel. Once more he is allowed to go provided he only delivers what God tells him, as any prophet should.

When he does get the message from God, it’s not the one he or Balak wants. The key is 23:8 (NLT), “But how can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I condemn those whom the LORD has not condemned?”

Trying a second time in a different place, the response is “God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind.” (23:19 NLT). At that

point you would think they would have given up. But in a third attempt not only is there no curse, but an extended blessing—and a curse on Moab and Israel’s other enemies.

Comment

As we try to do things our own way, we fail. The good part of the story of Balaam is that he did at least stay true to his commitment to only say what God told him, even though he would have liked Balak’s promised reward. We hear no more about all this, except for a few footnotes such as his death during the war with Midian (Numbers 31:8). Joshua 13:22 indicates that the Israelites killed Balaam for using magic, and in Revelation 2:14 it mentions “Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin.” This references what happens in Numbers 25 and the aftermath in Numbers 31.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of this whole story is the context. Israel has repeatedly failed; Miriam and Aaron are gone, and Moses too has lapsed. Yet God still sends this incredible message of assurance and his blessing to a people that have not demonstrated their fitness to be his people. This is grace!

Ellen White Comments

Balaam inquired of God if he might curse Israel. He was anxious that the permission might be given, because he had the promise of great reward. But God said, “Thou shalt not go.” Balaam was urged the second time, by messengers more honorable than the first, and greater inducements were offered. He had been shown the will of the Lord in this matter, but he was so eager for the reward that he ventured to ask God a second time, and the Lord permitted him to go. Then he had a wonderful experience; but who would wish to have such an experience? Many examples might be given to show how people have been deceived by relying upon what they supposed to be their experience. {CTBH 110}

Balaam was once a good man and a prophet of God; but he had apostatized, and had given himself up to covetousness; yet he still professed to be a servant of the Most High. He was not ignorant of God’s work in behalf of Israel; and when the messengers announced their errand, he well knew that it was his duty to refuse the rewards of Balak and to dismiss the ambassadors. But he ventured to dally with temptation, and urged the messengers to tarry with him that night, declaring that he could give no decided answer till he had asked counsel of the Lord. Balaam knew that his curse could not harm Israel. God was on their side, and so long as they were true to Him no adverse power of earth or hell could prevail against them. But his pride was flattered by the words of the ambassadors, “He whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.” The bribe of costly gifts and prospective exaltation excited his covetousness. He greedily accepted the offered treasures, and then, while professing strict obedience to the will of God, he tried to comply with the desires of Balak....

The sin of covetousness, which God declares to be idolatry, had made him a timeserver, and through this one fault Satan gained entire control of him. It was this that caused his ruin. The tempter is ever presenting worldly gain and honor to entice men from the service of God. He tells them it is their overconscientiousness that keeps them from prosperity. Thus many are induced to venture out of the path of strict integrity. {CC 112}

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