

“AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD CAME UPON BALAAM”: A PENTECOSTAL HEARING OF NUMBERS 22–24

Lee Roy Martin

Enigmatic sorcerers ... talking animals ... otherworldly visitors ... imminent battles ... mysterious prophecies. No, this is not *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *Harry Potter*. It is the biblical story of Balaam. We might wonder what significance this bizarre narrative offers to us who live in a technologically advanced world where people are more concerned about Facebook hackers than malicious spells and incantations. A growing number of people, however, are showing a resurgence of interest in the supernatural world and spiritual realities. We are, in fact, faced with a multitude of spiritualities from which to choose. The belief in the supernatural is a vital component of my own Pentecostal faith, and accompanying that belief is the necessity for spiritual discernment. We are warned in the New Testament, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Consequently, one of the many questions that emerges from a Pentecostal hearing of the Balaam story is not “Do spiritual forces exist?” but “Are all spiritual forces equally good, trustworthy, and benevolent?” The well known sorcerer Balaam had been accustomed to engaging the spirit world by means of common ancient near eastern practices such as divination, reading omens, consulting ghosts, and necromancy (Num. 22:7; cf. Deut. 18:10-12), but here he is confronted by a new spiritual force, one that he cannot manipulate, one that he cannot master. This new spirit, the “spirit of God”, comes upon him (24:1-2) and his “eyes are opened”; he “sees clearly”; he “sees a vision from the Almighty” (Num. 22:31; 24:3-4, 15-16). This spirit demonstrates that Yahweh will not be resisted and his purposes will be fulfilled—purposes that include the blessing of God’s people and their inheritance of the Promised Land.

Yet Balaam is a slow learner. From the beginning, Yahweh warns him that he would not be allowed to utter a curse against the Israelites.

As soon as Balaam receives word that Balak, the Moabite King, is seeking his magical aid in defeating the Israelites, Yahweh forbids him to participate in the plan, saying “You cannot curse those people because they are blessed” (22:12). Balaam, however, is offered more money and again seeks God’s permission to go with Balak’s men. This time, Yahweh allows him to go, but insists that he do only what Yahweh tells him (22:20). Balaam is met on his journey by the angel of the Lord, who is visible to Balaam’s donkey but not to Balaam. When Balaam beats his donkey, God causes her to speak out. The angel then rebukes Balaam, saying, “I have come to oppose you because your way is contrary to me” (22:32). Apparently, the Lord knew that in spite of his warnings to Balaam, Balaam was still hoping to curse Israel and to receive his reward from Balak.

It is repeated throughout the story that Balaam can not curse Israel and that he can speak only the words that Yahweh gives him to speak (22:12, 13, 18, 20, 35, 38; 23:3, 8, 20, 26; 24:13), still Balaam continues to assist Balak. Not once, but three times, Balak takes Balaam to a hilltop, offers sacrifices, and asks Balaam to pronounce a curse upon Israel. Each time Balaam can utter only blessings, and each subsequent oracle is more and more favorable to Israel, with the final oracle explicitly predicting Israel's defeat of Moab. Despite Yahweh’s repeated insistence that Balak’s plan will fail, Balaam continues to participate with Balak, in hope that Yahweh may change his mind and Balaam may receive his conjurer’s reward.

We might wonder if Balaam’s hopes are not grounded in a bit of truth. Has not Yahweh himself threatened to disown the Israelites (Exod. 32:10, Num. 14:12), and has he not repeatedly stricken the Israelites with deadly plagues and other judgments (Exod. 32:35; Lev. 10:2; Num. 11:1, 33; 12:1-10; 16:31-35; 41-50; 21:6)? The book of Numbers, whose Hebrew title means “In the Wilderness”, recounts the numerous murmurings, grumblings, complainings, and outright rebellions of the Israelites against God and Moses. Each of these episodes of disobedience provokes God to anger and moves him to strike the guilty with deadly judgments. Ultimately, God declares that every person aged twenty and above (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) must die in the wilderness (Num. 14:29). When Balak contacts Balaam and hires him to conjure a curse against Israel, we wonder if God might use Balaam as an instrument to destroy the remainder of

the doomed Israelites. However, we learn that although God is prepared to punish his people, he will not allow Balaam to do his work for him. Therefore, God forces Balaam to proclaim blessings upon Israel, reaffirming God's ultimate purposes in bringing Israel into the land that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel had rebelled against God repeatedly, and they had suffered divine punishments, but Balaam affirms, "Yahweh their God is with them" (23:21). Yahweh is Israel's "king" (23:21), and he serves both as disciplinarian and as protector; therefore, Balaam admits that his sorcery is powerless against them—"There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel" (23:23). Yahweh will protect his people, a people that he has saved from slavery in Egypt (23:22; 24:8). Yahweh will fulfill his promise to bring Israel into the Promised Land (23:19). Therefore, within the narrative context of Israel's wilderness wanderings, the story of Balaam offers hope that God has not abandoned his people on account of their repeated episodes of unfaithfulness.

But if Yahweh never intended to allow the cursing of Israel, why did he choose to speak through Balaam at all? Why not simply put a stop to Balak's plan from the very beginning? And if Yahweh wanted to speak a word of blessing, why would he speak through a non-Israelite sorcerer? Perhaps the time had come in Israel's journey for a reminder of God's promises, and perhaps the word of blessing would have more impact if spoken from the "outside" rather than from the "inside".

Up to this point, the events in the story of the exodus and Israel's wilderness experience have been presented from Israel's perspective, with God, Israel, and Moses as the main characters. But here, the main characters are God, Balak, and Balaam—Moses is not mentioned at all, and Israel is not active in the story. The Balaam narrative, therefore, looks at Israel from the outside, at a distance. This perspective, called dramatic irony, is rare in the Old Testament (but see Job ch. 1). The oracles of Balaam are beautiful, powerful, and moving both in their content and in their unique origin. The same words spoken by Moses, Joshua, or Caleb would have been just as beautiful, but hearing the blessings from an enemy adds to their weight and significance.

Furthermore, the fact that Yahweh chooses to speak through Balaam demonstrates the way that God chooses to speak in the world.

Yahweh is able to adapt to whatever situation may arise, and he is free to speak through unconventional means and through people that we would deem to be unqualified. Often in the Old Testament, God will choose a person to be his spokesperson—for example, Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, David, Elijah, Elisha, and the other prophets. But here, Yahweh does not choose Balaam, rather Balak chooses Balaam to be his spokesperson, and Yahweh hijacks Balak’s plan, choosing to speak through Balaam. This is not the first nor the last instance of Yahweh’s putting his Spirit upon a person whom he had not initially chosen. Earlier, Moses had chosen seventy elders, and Yahweh put his Spirit upon them and they prophesied (Num. 11). In a later example, the elders of Gilead chose Jephthah to be their leader, and Yahweh took advantage of the situation to put his Spirit upon Jephthah and empower him to deliver Israel. Here in Numbers, Yahweh does not initially choose Balaam as his spokesperson, but Yahweh adapts to the situation and orders the events to show that Balak is not in control.

Yahweh, however, does not choose to obliterate entirely Balaam’s powers of volition. Yahweh is free to speak through recalcitrant Balaam, but Balaam retains some degree of freedom as well. He is free to continue in his selfish ways, seeking the “wages of wickedness” for which he is later condemned (2 Pet. 2:15). Balaam’s later actions in leading Israel into sin (Num. 25:1; 31:16) prove that, although he briefly abandoned divination and experienced the Spirit of God (Num. 24:1-2), he went back to his old familiar spirits, a choice which led to his demise (Num. 31:8).

Lee Roy Martin (DTh, University of South Africa) is Associate Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, TN, USA. This essay will appear in a book entitled *Global Perspectives on the Bible*, Mark Roncace, ed.