

## READING SCRIPTURE TODAY: THE STORY OF BALAAM (Numbers 22:1-35)

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Speaker: Walter Moberly

“It is too clear that intelligent and fruitful discussion of the Bible begins when the judgment as to its human, its historical and psychological character has been made and put behind us. Would that the teachers of our high and low schools, and with them the progressive element among the clergy of our established churches would forthwith resolve to have done with a battle that once had its time but has now *had* it. The special content of this human document, the remarkable *something* with which the writers of these stories and those who stood behind them were concerned, the biblical object — this is the question that will engage and engross us today — Karl Barth, 1920 (“Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas” in his *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1957), 60-61).

### SOME BASIC ASSUMPTIONS:

#### 1. The world of the Bible is our world

This is not to deny the enormous differences between the cultures of the ancient Near East & the Hellenistic world and the cultures of today. Nonetheless: a) The God of the Bible is our God — our God is not other than the God of Israel who is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; b) Human beings face the same existential realities now as then - life and death, good and evil, love and hate, trust and fear, compassion and resentment, generosity and greed. Without this perspective the Bible becomes like “heritage” — interesting, but detached from the “real world”.

#### 2. The biblical story is our specific story

When we become Christians, we discover that the particular story of Israel and Jesus is our story - the story of how and why we are in God's world. As a child forms his or her identity in a large part through absorption into particular cultures, so one way in which we grow as Christians is through absorbing a biblical and Christian pattern of thought and life. Hence regular reading of scripture, both corporate and individual, so as to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” its content, is a basic spiritual discipline.

#### 3. The Bible must be read with full imaginative seriousness

“It is not reason that is against us, but imagination” (John Henry Newman).

Why, in a contemporary culture which does much of its thinking via stories (novel or film), should it be difficult to recognize that the biblical writers may have operated similarly? Or to allow that they may have done so with the kind of subtlety that characterizes skilled communicators? If we will not study and preach the Bible with at least the same degree of imaginative engagement which we accord to our favourite novels or soaps, no account of biblical authority or trustworthiness is likely to be much more than a form of words.

### INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS 22

“God does not offer himself for observation” (Hegel). But how then can theology, as concerned with God, be taken seriously in a world where the methods, practices, and results of the natural sciences have been hugely fruitful? Knowing, and relatedly seeing, God involves character, the kind of person one is; not an onlooker, but a participant...

## A READING OF NUMBERS 22:

vv.1-6 Scene setting: Balak, king of Moab, is fearful of Israel; he summons assistance in the form of a religious hit-man, whose ability to pronounce blessings and curses (and so disadvantage or disable the opposition) is, in Balak's view, definitive (v.6) — which, in the wider OT context, implicitly challenges the definitive nature of the LORD'S promise to bless Abram and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3).

vv.7-14 Balaam, when summoned, consults God, who refuses to let him go with Balak's men for a principled, axiomatic reason: Israel "are blessed" (v.12). NB that Balaam, though not an Israelite, is portrayed as truly knowing the LORD and as a "prophet/seer".

vv.15-17 When does "no" really mean "no"? Balak thinks Balaam is playing hard to get, and soups the offer to "name your price".

vv.18-19 Balaam's response may sound fine. But may it really be a pious-sounding smokescreen for a desire to corrupt his vocation by accepting Balak's offer? The principle of v.12 would still stand; so is Balaam wanting to circumvent it — get some wiggle room — without, of course, advertizing the fact?

vv.20-22a God's permission is initially surprising, but is most likely ironic — telling Balaam what he wants to hear, though it will not mean what he wants it to mean. If Balaam is succumbing to greed, God is displeased and wants to teach him a lesson.

vv.22b-27 A remarkable, and drily humorous, sequence. Three times the deadly angel appears, each time harder to circumvent.

a) The she-ass, proverbially dull, can see what the "Top Man from Mesopotamia" cannot see; Balaam has become blind to the divine presence.

b) What is the symbolic significance of the stationary angel? Why not immediate deadly judgment on Balaam? The meaning is that a journey motivated by corrupt self-seeking is not immediately disastrous, yet its end is not gain but destruction, and the destruction looms larger and becomes harder to avoid the further one goes along that road.

vv.28-30 The ass's second question gets to the point. Her unusual behaviour, entirely unprecedented, had an obvious significance which Balaam had failed to see: something must be wrong. Even the simplest act of seeing/comprehending has become too much for Balaam.

vv.31-35 Angel opens Balaam's eyes, so that he does see what is going on. Angel does not say why Balaam's course was wrong (both know why), and the angel's words achieve their purpose: Balaam is "convicted of sin", and becomes willing to renounce the enterprise that is causing offence. But the task that was a deadly error when undertaken self-seekingly becomes fruitful if done in obedience to God (even though the fruit will no longer take the form of financial reward, 24:10-11).

Thereafter.. Blind Balaam's threefold urging of seeing ass anticipates blind Balak's threefold urging of seeing Balaam; in chs. 23,24 Balaam pronounces three solicited oracles, and one unsolicited one, concerning Balak and Moab.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

a) Note subtlety and irony within text, esp. in recognizing that what people say is not necessarily to be taken at face value. Don't read Scripture flatly!

b) Why could not Balaam see the angel? Calvin: "Whence came such blindness, but from the greed by which he had been rendered so senseless, that he preferred filthy lucre to the holy calling of God? ". Moral failure induces spiritual blindness. Avaricious self-seeking obscures the reality of the Other. The impure in heart fail to see God.