

**Exegetical Notes, Numbers 22:1-24:25**  
**"The Wayward Prophet"**

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**NUMBERS 22:1-24:25**

**Verses 22:1-7**

*Then the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho.*

*<sup>2</sup> Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, <sup>3</sup> and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.*

*<sup>4</sup> The Moabites said to the elders of Midian, "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field."*

*So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, <sup>5</sup> sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the Euphrates River, in his native land. Balak said:*

*"A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. <sup>6</sup> Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed."*

*<sup>7</sup> The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. When they came to Balaam, they told him what Balak had said.*

- Israel was camped on the plains of Moab. This was the staging ground for their eventual entrance into the Promised Land.
- Balak, the King of Moab, having seen Israel defeat the Amorites, was terrified that Israel would attack Moab, too. To protect his interests against Israel, he first made an alliance with the Midianites to stand with him to defeat Israel. Second, he summoned Balaam of Beor to come and curse Israel.

- Balaam practiced "divination." (See verse 7) This means that he practiced magic arts to see into the future and determine the will of the gods. Balak believed that Balaam had the power to curse Israel so that Israel would not be successful in battle against him.
- Balaam did what he did for profit. He sold himself to the one who could pay the most.

#### **Verses 8-14**

*“Spend the night here,” Balaam said to them, “and I will report back to you with the answer the LORD gives me.” So the Moabite officials stayed with him.*

*<sup>9</sup> God came to Balaam and asked, “Who are these men with you?”*

*<sup>10</sup> Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: <sup>11</sup> ‘A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.’”*

*<sup>12</sup> But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”*

*<sup>13</sup> The next morning Balaam got up and said to Balak’s officials, “Go back to your own country, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.”*

*<sup>14</sup> So the Moabite officials returned to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”*

- At this point the story gets confusing. Balaam, who is not a prophet of YHWH, inquires of YHWH to determine what he should say to Balak's request. Apparently, he knew of YHWH, and YHWH is one of the gods of whom he inquires. Apparently, in his practice, Balaam refers to many sources for insight. This time he manages, by God's grace, to contact the one true God.
- YHWH tells Balaam that he must not curse Israel, and that he must not "go back to Balak" as requested.
- So, perhaps shaken by his surprise conversation with YHWH, Balaam sends the men from Moab home. They returned to Balak explaining that Balaam had refused his request.

### Verses 15-19

*Then Balak sent other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first. <sup>16</sup> They came to Balaam and said:*

*“This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, <sup>17</sup> because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me.”*

*<sup>18</sup> But Balaam answered them, “Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God. <sup>19</sup> Now spend the night here so that I can find out what else the LORD will tell me.”*

- Balak was unwilling to accept Balaam's decision. He sent another delegation to Balaam offering to increase his payment to Balaam if Balaam would just come and curse Israel.
- Balaam played the situation for all it was worth because he saw in it great advantage for himself. He told the delegation that he dare not speak other than allowed by God. To increase the importance of his situation, he wants to please the King but cannot speak other than allowed by God. He refers to YHWH as his personal deity. But YHWH is only one of the gods to whom he refers professionally.
- He asks the delegation to wait until morning for his final response. He is hoping that he will be allowed to curse Israel and so benefit from the reward the King has promised.

### Verses 20

*That night God came to Balaam and said, “Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.”*

- YHWH knew the desire of Balaam's heart. YHWH intended to use Balaam to accomplish his purposes even though Balaam did not understand. So God told Balaam to go back to King Balak with this group. God allowed Balaam to do what Balaam most wanted to do.

### Verses 21-35

*Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. <sup>22</sup> But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing*

*in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.*

*<sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. <sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.*

*<sup>26</sup> Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. <sup>28</sup> Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"*

*<sup>29</sup> Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."*

*<sup>30</sup> The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"*

*"No," he said.*

*<sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.*

*<sup>32</sup> The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. <sup>33</sup> The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."*

*<sup>34</sup> Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."*

*<sup>35</sup> The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials.*

- Though YHWH had "allowed" Balaam to go back to King Balak, God was angry with Balaam because Balaam had placed his own desires (getting the King's reward and favor) over being completely obedient to God. So God

arranged this elaborate scene involving Balaam's donkey to impress Balaam with the power and authority of YHWH.

- God sent an impressive angel, most likely Gabriel (although the angel is not named) to block Balaam's progress. Balaam was kept from seeing the angel, but his donkey was allowed to see it. The donkey attempted to protect Balaam from danger by refusing to move forward three times. Each time, Balaam, unaware of the angel blocking his path, beat his donkey for disobeying him. Balaam was, of course, disobeying God by doing what he had been told not to do. Finally, the donkey spoke to Balaam asking why he was being mistreated. Balaam responded to his talking donkey by explaining that the animal had made a "fool" of him before these distinguished men because it had been disobedient. Then Balaam was allowed to see the angel.
- The angel explained that if the donkey had not done as it had Balaam would have been killed by the angel. His purpose was to redirect Balaam because he had set himself on a dangerous path. He was moving in the direction of temptation (the King's reward) which could only be secured if he disobeyed the command of God concerning Israel.
- At the angel's warning, Balaam fell face down and promised that he would turn around and go home immediately. He was impressed with the power of YHWH.
- But, now that he understood his helplessness in YHWH's hands, he was again instructed to go on to Moab, but duly warned that he should do nothing without the direct approval of YHWH.

### Verses 36-38

*When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the Moabite town on the Arnon border, at the edge of his territory.<sup>37</sup> Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?"*

*<sup>38</sup> "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth."*

- When Balaam finally arrived, Balak scolded him for his delay in coming and reminded him of the stakes. He promised Balaam a large reward. There is a veiled threat implied, too. If Balaam does not do as requested, he is in the King's hand.
- However, Balaam has heard YHWH's warning. He has felt the powerlessness of his situation before the true God. He warns the King that he must only say what God tells him to say. Balaam does not use the name

YHWH. He uses the plural word for God. While this is normal Hebrew usage, YHWH is always referred to as plural, the pagan King Balak would have heard Balaam say, "I must speak only what the gods put in my mouth."

**Verse 22:39-23:10**

*Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath Huzoth. <sup>40</sup> Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep, and gave some to Balaam and the officials who were with him. <sup>41</sup> The next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp.*

*Balaam said, "Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me." <sup>2</sup> Balak did as Balaam said, and the two of them offered a bull and a ram on each altar.*

*<sup>3</sup> Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stay here beside your offering while I go aside. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet with me. Whatever he reveals to me I will tell you." Then he went off to a barren height.*

*<sup>4</sup> God met with him, and Balaam said, "I have prepared seven altars, and on each altar I have offered a bull and a ram."*

*<sup>5</sup> The LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Go back to Balak and give him this word."*

*<sup>6</sup> So he went back to him and found him standing beside his offering, with all the Moabite officials. <sup>7</sup> Then Balaam spoke his message:*

*"Balak brought me from Aram,  
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.*

*'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me;  
come, denounce Israel.'*

*<sup>8</sup> How can I curse  
those whom God has not cursed?*

*How can I denounce  
those whom the LORD has not denounced?*

*<sup>9</sup> From the rocky peaks I see them,  
from the heights I view them.*

*I see a people who live apart  
and do not consider themselves one of the nations.*

*<sup>10</sup> Who can count the dust of Jacob  
or number even a fourth of Israel?*

***Let me die the death of the righteous,  
and may my final end be like theirs!"***

- Balaam then put on an elaborate ritualistic show. He offered sacrifices. The next day he continued the show. None of the sacrifices offered are done in accord with the rules YHWH gave regarding the offering of sacrifice. This shows Balaam's complete ignorance of the ways of YHWH. If these sacrifices were done to please God, they failed because they were done improperly. They may have been done in hopes of changing God's mind so as to allow Balaam to curse Israel. But this, too, is hopeless, showing Balaam's lack of understanding, for God's will is immutable. Most likely this was all done to impress King Balak.
- The end result was that YHWH required Balaam to bless Israel not curse her.

#### **Verses 11-24**

***Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!"***

***<sup>12</sup> He answered, "Must I not speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?"***

***<sup>13</sup> Then Balak said to him, "Come with me to another place where you can see them; you will not see them all but only the outskirts of their camp. And from there, curse them for me." <sup>14</sup> So he took him to the field of Zophim on the top of Pisgah, and there he built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.***

***<sup>15</sup> Balaam said to Balak, "Stay here beside your offering while I meet with him over there."***

***<sup>16</sup> The LORD met with Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Go back to Balak and give him this word."***

***<sup>17</sup> So he went to him and found him standing beside his offering, with the Moabite officials. Balak asked him, "What did the LORD say?"***

***<sup>18</sup> Then he spoke his message:***

***"Arise, Balak, and listen;  
hear me, son of Zippor.***

***<sup>19</sup> God is not human, that he should lie,  
not a human being, that he should change his mind.***

*Does he speak and then not act?*

*Does he promise and not fulfill?*

<sup>20</sup> *I have received a command to bless;  
he has blessed, and I cannot change it.*

<sup>21</sup> *“No misfortune is seen in Jacob,  
no misery observed in Israel.*

*The LORD their God is with them;  
the shout of the King is among them.*

<sup>22</sup> *God brought them out of Egypt;  
they have the strength of a wild ox.*

<sup>23</sup> *There is no divination against Jacob,  
no evil omens against Israel.*

*It will now be said of Jacob  
and of Israel, ‘See what God has done!’*

<sup>24</sup> *The people rise like a lioness;  
they rouse themselves like a lion  
that does not rest till it devours its prey  
and drinks the blood of its victims.”*

- Balak was furious with Balaam. He was upset because he expected Balaam to curse Israel and Balaam had blessed Israel instead. Balaam’s fear of YHWH was greater than his fear of the King. Balaam reminded the king that he could only speak what YHWH allowed him to speak.
- Balak suggested that they try again. Balaam agrees because he is not in a position to argue with the King. Perhaps he still hoped that something would happen and God would change his mind.
- But the results are the same. Though he desired to please the King and gain the reward, Balaam is required to bless Israel a second time.

**Verses 23:25-24:9**

*Then Balak said to Balaam, “Neither curse them at all nor bless them at all!”*

<sup>26</sup> *Balaam answered, “Did I not tell you I must do whatever the LORD says?”*

<sup>27</sup> *Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come, let me take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God to let you curse them for me from there.”* <sup>28</sup> *And Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, overlooking the wasteland.*



<sup>29</sup> *Balaam said, “Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.”* <sup>30</sup> *Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.*

*24 Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not resort to divination as at other times, but turned his face toward the wilderness.*

<sup>2</sup> *When Balaam looked out and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God came on him* <sup>3</sup> *and he spoke his message:*

*“The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor,  
the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly,  
<sup>4</sup> the prophecy of one who hears the words of God,  
who sees a vision from the Almighty,  
who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened:*

<sup>5</sup> *“How beautiful are your tents, Jacob,  
your dwelling places, Israel!*

<sup>6</sup> *“Like valleys they spread out,  
like gardens beside a river,  
like aloes planted by the LORD,  
like cedars beside the waters.*

<sup>7</sup> *Water will flow from their buckets;  
their seed will have abundant water.*

*“Their king will be greater than Agag;  
their kingdom will be exalted.*

<sup>8</sup> *“God brought them out of Egypt;  
they have the strength of a wild ox.  
They devour hostile nations  
and break their bones in pieces;  
with their arrows they pierce them.*

<sup>9</sup> *Like a lion they crouch and lie down,  
like a lioness—who dares to rouse them?*

*“May those who bless you be blessed  
and those who curse you be cursed!”*

- The king's new plan is that Balaam "neither bless nor curse Israel." It is better if Israel is not blessed even if they are not cursed. So the scene is repeated from a different place.
- This time, Balaam does not resort to divination as before (see 24:1). The implication is that in both previous episodes Balaam used his usual magic arts to discover the will of the gods. Most likely he read signs in the entrails of the sacrificed animals. In this third attempt to discern God's will, the Holy Spirit moved on Balaam and caused him to bless Israel yet again.
- In the third blessing Balaam now claims to see clearly and to understand the will of God. He now knows that it is God's will to bless Israel and that those who join in blessing her will be blessed but that those who curse her will be cursed.

### Verses 10-25

<sup>10</sup> *Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam. He struck his hands together and said to him, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times. <sup>11</sup> Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the LORD has kept you from being rewarded."*

<sup>12</sup> *Balaam answered Balak, "Did I not tell the messengers you sent me, <sup>13</sup> 'Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the LORD—and I must say only what the LORD says'?" <sup>14</sup> Now I am going back to my people, but come, let me warn you of what this people will do to your people in days to come."*

<sup>15</sup> *Then he spoke his message:*

*"The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor,  
the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly,  
<sup>16</sup> the prophecy of one who hears the words of God,  
who has knowledge from the Most High,  
who sees a vision from the Almighty,  
who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened:*

<sup>17</sup> *"I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near.  
A star will come out of Jacob;  
a scepter will rise out of Israel.  
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,*

*the skulls of all the people of Sheth,  
18 Edom will be conquered;  
Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,  
but Israel will grow strong.*

*19 A ruler will come out of Jacob  
and destroy the survivors of the city.”*

*20 Then Balaam saw Amalek and spoke his message:*

*“Amalek was first among the nations,  
but their end will be utter destruction.”*

*21 Then he saw the Kenites and spoke his message:*

*“Your dwelling place is secure,  
your nest is set in a rock;  
22 yet you Kenites will be destroyed  
when Ashur takes you captive.”*

*23 Then he spoke his message:*

*“Alas! Who can live when God does this?  
24 Ships will come from the shores of Cyprus;  
they will subdue Ashur and Eber,  
but they too will come to ruin.”*

*25 Then Balaam got up and returned home, and Balak went his own way.*

- When Balaam blessed Israel for the third time, Balak lost his temper. He ordered Balaam to leave immediately without any payment for his services. The fact is that Balaam had not delivered what the King requested. He had, in fact, blessed Israel three times instead.
- Balaam responded that he was unable to do what Balak had requested because he was obligated to say only what YHWH allowed him to say. Balaam announced that he was done with all this and was returning home.
- But before going, Balaam was given three more messages from YHWH to deliver to King Balak. The first one spoke of far off things. It spoke of the coming of a king that would defeat the enemies of Israel. This prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of David and the coming of Jesus. The second message and third message predicted the fall of the Amalekites and the

Kenites. Balaam had come hoping to curse Israel and so earn the favor of King Balak. But God used him to curse Israel's enemies and to bless Israel.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Wayward Prophet*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)