“I Love to Tell the Story: Balaam’s…Donkey”

Numbers 22:22-40

Sarah Wolf

July 19, 2020

Because there is a lot going on in the book of Numbers where today’s text occurs, I thought it might be helpful to have some background information so we know a little bit about where the story picks up.

In the larger Old Testament narrative, this passage takes place after the Israelites have wandered in the desert for 40 years. They are finally ready to enter the Promised Land, but there are a few kingdoms and ethnic groups who stand in their way. Two enemy groups, the Moabites and the Midianites team up to try to stand against the Israelites. They elect Balak to be King of Moab. Balak has heard of Balaam, a powerful sorcerer and prophet, and he commissions him to put a curse on Israel.

When today’s story begins, Balaam has been visited by God in a dream, who tells him to go with the officials of Moab, but only to do what God tells him to do. So in the morning, Balaam gets up, saddles his famous donkey, and starts off with the officials from Moab to go find Balak.

Let’s hear what happens next from Numbers 22:22-40.

—

I saw a meme online a few weeks ago that challenged people to tell their favorite Bible story in the most boring way possible. I thought this might be a fun way for me to get into the spirit of preaching on my favorite Bible story and so I challenged Covenant members on Facebook to do the same. And they did not disappoint. Here are just a couple.

“Reception chef orders too few bottles of wine.”

“Man builds a boat. Everyone shows up wanting to be his friend.”

And one of my personal favorites -

“A man blames a woman and starts a trend.”

If you had trouble figuring out which Bible stories were just retold, I’ll give you the answers. The reception chef and the wine is Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding of Cana — aka Jesus’s first miracle in the book of John.

The man building a boat is Noah. And yes, everyone really wanted to be his friend when that rain started falling.

And the man blaming a woman is from Adam and Eve and I’ll just leave that one at that.

It was a fun exercise and I enjoyed checking in on the other answers submitted. If you’ve got some free time this week, check them out. They are both funny and profound. We’ve got some creative people at Covenant.

But try as I could, I couldn’t write a *boring* version of Balaam’s donkey. Because…there’s a talking donkey! God makes a donkey talk! There is no way that I can make that boring.

This has always been one of my favorite Bible stories. My parents gave me a Bible when I was in elementary school. I loved that Bible because it had a picture with just about every story. One day I stumbled upon the picture of Balaam and his donkey and while I couldn’t tell that the donkey was talking in the picture, there was just something in the donkey’s expression that told me that there was more going on in this story than just another Bible character riding a donkey.

As I read the Bible story, I thought, “This is amazing.” Then I quickly thought, “Hold on. You’re telling me that there’s a *talking animal* in the Bible and our Sunday school teachers aren’t leading with *that*? I mean, the other stories are great and all, but this is a donkey who can *talk*.”

Pretty soon, it became my favorite Bible story and I told it to everyone who would listen. I remember one Sunday when our Sunday school teachers had us illustrate our favorite Bible stories and then they’d display them on the wall outside our classrooms. When our parents came to pick us up, they would attend our “art gallery” of Bible stories.

Well, I think we know what I drew.

As the parents came down to get us for worship, I watched them slowly walk down the art gallery, scrutinizing a manger scene, pointing out the numerous Noah’s arks, and frowning a bit at the gore of one boy’s David and Goliath. But when they came to mine, they paused. What had Sarah drawn? My poor parents had to explain to other parents that their daughter’s favorite Bible story was Balaam’s donkey — an obscure story from Numbers that isn’t in the lectionary but features a talking donkey.

It’s no wonder I became a minister.

I liked this story not just because there is a talking donkey, but what to me, the talking donkey conveyed — that God has a sense of humor. It was like God had made this talking donkey situation happen knowing that thousands of years later, in 1994, Sarah Wolf would find it particularly hilarious.

But as I studied this week, I’m starting to appreciate it for the other messages that it conveys.

While I prefaced the Scripture reading with some background information, it may have struck you as odd to hear the passage begin with “God’s anger was kindled because Balaam was going.” You may have thought to yourself, “Didn’t Sarah just say that God *told* Balaam to go to Balak? What gives, God?”

Well, there had been a back and forth dream sequence between God and Balaam regarding whether or not Balaam should go to curse the Israelites. In the first dream, God says, “No, you may not go.” And Balaam reports back to the officials from Moab, “I cannot go do this thing you are asking me to do, because God said I couldn’t.” So Balak sends even more impressive officials to entice Balaam.

This tactic works. Balaam says to the officials, “Let me sleep on it. Let me see what God says.” And in a dream, the one immediately preceding today’s text, God says yes. God tells Balaam to go ahead to see Balak.

But the very next verse, our first verse from today’s text, says that, “God’s anger was kindled because Balaam was going.” So what *does* give, God? Why the anger?

God’s anger is connected to Balaam’s hubris — his extreme self-confidence.

You see, Balaam was a famous non-Jewish prophet, which was why Balak chose him.

According to Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, “Balak recognized that the power of the Jews was supernatural, so he too sought a way of undermining them supernaturally. Together with the elders of Midian, he hatched a plan to hire Balaam - a well known and powerful sorcerer and prophet — to curse the Jews. Since the Jews’ strength lay in their mouths, i.e., prayer, he planned to defeat them with a strong ‘mouth’ - Balaam’s curse.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Balaam wasn't just a prophet, he was a powerful one. He was a dangerous one.

According to an ancient Midrash commentary, Balaam was “so great a prophet, his prophecy equaled that of Moses. Since God created [the] world with symmetry, everything that exists on the positive side has a negative counterpart. The equivalent of Moses was Balaam.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Balak needed a powerful prophet to curse the Israelites. Balak needed Balaam’s assets. ;)

And Balaam knows this, because Balak keeps sending more impressive officials to him. Right before the second dream, the one right before today’s text, Balaam says to the officials, “Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver or gold, I can only go if the Lord tells me to.” It’s Balaam’s way of saying, “Balak *should* give me his house full of silver and gold.”

In his dream that night, it’s almost as if God sighs and says, “I know you, Balaam. And I know you will only keep pestering me about this because you are dreaming of the riches that Balak can promise you. Fine. Go. But, only do what I say.”

So God tells Balaam to go, but because God knows everything, God knows that Balaam *won’t* listen to God and say only what God tells him to say. God knows that Balaam will say whatever will elevate Balaam the highest.

And so God brings in the donkey and the angel to humiliate Balaam and take him down a few notches, to remind Balaam who is really in charge.

The donkey does the job. Balaam can’t see the angel and neither can his two servants and more importantly, neither can the officials from Moab who are accompanying Balaam. All they can see is a man who cannot control his donkey, who resorts to striking his donkey three times.

We don’t know if the officials can hear the conversation between Balaam and the donkey, but I like to think that they can’t, which would really lower their perception of Balaam. Here is a man who can be belittled by a donkey.

So Balaam is shamed by this talking donkey. God’s anger was kindled against Balaam. Balaam is shamed. Mission accomplished.

Except, the story continues. God has even bigger plans.

Rabbi Avrohom Dov Avrutch explained that, “God wanted Balaam to go [with the officials] so that [instead of cursing the Jews] he would bless the Jews. The problem was, however, that Balaam was too vain and self-centered to be a conduit for God’s blessing. In order for God’s energy to flow through him, he needed to become transparent. He needed to realize that he was powerless, a mere pawn in God’s hand.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The rabbi explained that as a result of this humiliating experience, Balaam is now a “broken man, with no self to get in the way, he [is] finally fitting to be the deliverer of God’s infinite blessings.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

It is only when Balaam is stripped of his ego, that he is able to fully be a conduit of God’s blessings.

And he is. When he reaches Balak, he refuses to curse Israel. Instead, he praises them. He offers a series of blessings — one of which is used by the Jewish people to this day. When Balaam ascends a high place and looks out over the camp of Israel he says, “How great are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” This is the prayer that Jewish people still say when they enter the synagogue. This blessing from a man that would curse them.

Maybe *that* is the message of Balaam’s Donkey for us. Not so much that God has a sense of humor in making animals talk (although I *do* still think this story points to God’s sense of humor), but also that God can use any of us, flawed as we are to be a blessing to others.

Balaam was the most flawed. He was the antithesis of Moses, the leader of the Israelites. It took the spectacle of a talking donkey to bring Balaam down, but God could still use even him.

This story invites us to ask ourselves three questions: 1. How might God use me to be a blessing to others? 2. What is standing in the way? My ego? My insecurity? What? And 3. What will it take for me to realize that God is calling me?

In these uncertain times, God needs us more than ever to be conduits for God’s blessings for others. What is standing in our way? And will it take the absurdity of a talking donkey to wake us up, to bring us down a few notches, to make us aware of what is right in front of us?

If and when that happens, I pray that we will have the humility to become the blessings that God is calling us to be. And if it takes a talking donkey to shake us out of our egos, then so be it. But let the donkey have Eddie Murphy’s voice.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. “Balaam and Balak: The Full Story.” Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Kesselman; <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3715894/jewish/Balaam-and-Balak-The-Full-Story.htm/fbclid/IwAR1fsqwY3n7wEf0wS6NCbkkp2W9vL1lSx5GzgQxwhfAOWlkAygpzK-PEO1I> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20 (Hebrew Midrash on Numbers) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Bat Ayin, Parshat Balak, pp 363-364 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)