

In our passage tonight, a man rides his donkey (not a bronco),  
a seer hawks his abilities to manipulate the gods,  
and the people of God are blithely oblivious to the big game.

How often are we blithely oblivious to *really important* stuff?  
If we knew, then obviously, we would not be oblivious!

Israel has no idea that the most powerful seer in the ancient world  
has been called in to quarterback the Moabite offense!  
Israel is just sitting there – perhaps mopping up Og of Bashan.

But as we go through our passage tonight,  
remember that Israel only discovers all of this after the fact.  
Sometimes God does mighty deeds that you may never know about!

Last time, we saw Israel repentant and triumphant.  
Israel has repented of their grumbling.  
It doesn't mean that they won't sin – but at least they don't grumble!  
And so now they believe God's promises and act accordingly!  
When God said to fight against the Amorites – Sihon and Og –  
Israel obeys, and defeats their enemies, and takes possession of their land.

But this creates a crisis for the Moabites.  
Sihon had invaded the Moabites several years before –  
and now Israel demolishes Sihon with ease!

Balak the son of Zippor, the king of Moab, realizes that he cannot defeat Israel.  
Israel is too powerful – and too numerous – for Moab to defeat.  
“They cover the face of the earth” –  
in other words, the promises to Abraham are beginning to come to pass!

But Balak has forgotten the promises to his great-uncle Abraham.  
If he had remembered them,  
then he would have known that through Abraham's seed  
all the nations of the earth would be blessed.  
And if he had remembered them,  
then he would not have sought to *curse* Israel,  
because God had said to Abraham,  
“those who curse you shall be cursed.”

## 1. The Power of Words (22:1-21)

**a. “He Whom You Curse Is Cursed” Balak Seeks to Hire Balaam (v1-6)**

*Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. <sup>2</sup> And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. <sup>3</sup> And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> And Moab said to the elders of Midian, “This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.” So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, <sup>5</sup> sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw,<sup>[a]</sup> to call him, saying, “Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. <sup>6</sup> Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”*

But Balak trusts in the power of words.

You often hear that in the ancient world they believed in the power of words –  
that blessings and curses had power.

And that’s true.

But they were not egalitarians.

*Some people* had more powerful words than others.

And in the ancient world, few people had more powerful words than Balaam son of Beor.

Our text says that Balaam lived “at Pethor” near the River.

The River is the Euphrates River –

and Deuteronomy identifies him as being from Mesopotamia –

and there is a Pethor near Carchemish in modern day Syria –

so it seems clear that Balak sends for Balaam to come from quite a distance.

There is another reference to Balaam found in an inscription

on an Ammonite temple in the Valley of Succoth (ca. 840-760 B.C.).

In this inscription, Balaam receives a message from the gods of impending judgment  
that no one will survive.

The Shaddai-gods (the “mighty gods”) have decreed that the heavens shall be sewn up,  
turning all the world to darkness.

The fragmentary nature of the text makes it hard to piece together the conclusion,

but it is clear that Balaam’s incantations and sacrifices change the course of the gods.

So according to an Ammonite legend (from 800 B.C. or earlier),

Balaam was a truly powerful diviner.

He had access to the divine council – and so he knew *in advance* what the gods were planning –  
and his words had power to manipulate the gods and change history.

So, if you knew of a prophet who had the power to change history –  
who had the words that could prevent *the gods* from destroying you –  
who would you call?

**b. “You Shall Not Curse the People, for They Are Blessed”: Balaam Rejects Balak (v7-14)**

<sup>7</sup> So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. <sup>8</sup> And he said to them, “Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me.” So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. <sup>9</sup> And God came to Balaam and said, “Who are these men with you?” <sup>10</sup> And Balaam said to God, “Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, <sup>11</sup> ‘Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.’” <sup>12</sup> God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” <sup>13</sup> So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, “Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.” <sup>14</sup> So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

So Balak sends the ordinary fee for divination – and asks Balaam to come to his aid.

Balaam replies in verse 8.

“Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as *Yahweh* speaks to me.”

In the Ammonite inscription, Balaam interacts with El and the Shaddai gods –  
the familiar pantheon of the Canaanite world.

But here Balaam invokes the name of *Yahweh* – the distinctive name of Israel’s God.

And when the LORD says, “You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed,”

Balaam tells the princes of Moab, “*Yahweh* has refused to let me go with you.”

So what do we make of Balaam?

Here is this incredibly powerful diviner,  
who is plainly *not* an Israelite.

And yet he knows the name of *Yahweh* –

and he professes to *speak* in the name of *Yahweh*.

It is curious that the *narrator* always says that *God* (Elohim) speaks to him.

Balaam *claims* that he speaks with – and for – *Yahweh*,

but the narrator is quietly challenging Balaam’s claims.

The *point* here is that Balaam claims to have access to the divine council.

But Balaam is still operating as a pagan seer –

he still thinks that he can manipulate the deities.

Only when the man is riding his donkey will he come to *see* otherwise!

This is where the ancient commentators provide so much more help than the moderns!

Ancient Jewish and Christian commentators were quick to point out  
that the most powerful *Gentile* prophet  
appears in parallel with the most powerful Hebrew prophet.  
Balaam and Moses need to be seen side-by-side.  
The pagan way of manipulating the gods by incantations  
needs to be shown for what it is –  
feeble and foolish.  
And the greatest of pagan diviners will be the example.

We have our own temptations today to try to manipulate God.

We think, “if I’m good, then God will give me what I want!”

Or, “if I get enough people to pray for me, then God will give me what I want!”

Or, “if I get *the pastor* to pray for me...”

Or, “if I give 10%, then God will be happy with me.”

That’s all magical thinking.

And the fundamental problem with all of it is that all of it is focused on *me*  
and what *I* want.

Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

At first it sounds like it’s giving to magical thinking –  
“he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Woo-hoo!

I can get whatever I want!

What was that again? What do I have to do?

“Delight yourself in the LORD.”

Find your delight – your joy – your happiness – in him.

If you do that, then you will find that you have all the desires of your heart –  
*because you have him!*

To you who are to be ordained tonight, I implore you,

“Delight yourself in the LORD” – for all other delights are cheats and imitations.

Balaam is provided to you as a case study – as a warning – not to find your delight elsewhere!

**c. “Come, Curse This People for Me”: Balak Renews His Offer (v15-21)**

<sup>15</sup> Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these. <sup>16</sup> And they came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: ‘Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, <sup>17</sup> for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.’” <sup>18</sup> But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more. <sup>19</sup> So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.” <sup>20</sup> And God came to Balaam at night and said to

him, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you.” <sup>21</sup> So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

And so, when Balak sends more princes with a second request,  
Balaam does what any self-respecting prophet would do:  
he inquires again.  
After all, just because God said “do not go” the last time,  
does not mean “do not go” this time!

Again, Balaam always speaks of “Yahweh my God” –  
as though he is “in” with Yahweh – he has “clout” with Yahweh.  
And again, the narrator says “Elohim” came to Balaam.  
And this time, Elohim gives a different answer.

I don’t think that Balaam realizes that Yahweh is the deity who is speaking.  
He is used to communicating with the gods.  
Everything is going according to plan.  
Balaam has both things that *he* wanted:  
Balak will pay a higher price for his services,  
and Balak is convinced that Balaam can control Yahweh.

But the LORD sits in the heavens and laughs.

## 2. Listen to Your Donkey! (22:22-35)

### a. “Is It My Habit to Treat You This Way?” The Wisdom of the Ass (v22-30)

<sup>22</sup> *But God's anger was kindled because he went,*

Whoa!

God just told Balaam to go.  
But God is then angry with Balaam because he went!  
What’s going on?

Again, the Fathers help us.

Origen suggests that Balaam was trying to manipulate God.  
He *said* that he would do whatever Yahweh told him –  
but he *really* just wanted the money from Balak.

So, when God told Balaam to go,  
what God meant was, “Okay, fine, if you want to go – go.  
But don’t think for a moment that you are going to get what you want.”

Indeed, if Balaam actually intended on speaking whatever the LORD told him,  
then the whole episode with the donkey would have been pointless.  
Balaam wants the money.

And so if he goes to Moab,  
then he *will* curse Israel.  
After all, Balaam knows how to manipulate the gods.  
Just because the Elohim has told him not to curse doesn't mean anything to him!

And the LORD knows this!

But *unlike* the elohim of the nations, Yahweh cannot be manipulated!

*and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.* <sup>23</sup> *And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road.* <sup>24</sup> *Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side.* <sup>25</sup> *And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again.* <sup>26</sup> *Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.* <sup>27</sup> *When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.* <sup>28</sup> *Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"* <sup>29</sup> *And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you."* <sup>30</sup> *And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."*

Balaam is described as a "seer" – a prophet who "sees" the future.

Notice verses 23, 25, and 27.

Balaam cannot see.

But his donkey "saw the angel of the LORD" (verse 23),  
"saw the angel of the LORD" (verse 25),  
and "saw the angel of the LORD" (verse 27).

Three times, the donkey sees the angel of the LORD –  
and at first, she swerves to avoid the angel.

The third time, she stopped and lay down in the road.

And three times Balaam strikes his donkey with his staff

(and this is an entirely unrelated word to the word used for Aaron's rod).

And the third time *his anger* is kindled against his donkey.

The anger of the LORD was kindled against Balaam –  
and now the anger of Balaam is kindled against his donkey.

And so the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey –  
the seer cannot see – but the donkey can talk –

and there are three questions that the donkey asked,  
“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”  
“Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day?  
Is it my habit to treat you this way?”  
The donkey does not explain “there is an angel standing there!”  
The donkey simply asks him questions.

You need to listen to your donkey.  
If you ignore the ordinary signs around you,  
then you will not see what God is doing.  
If your donkey refuses to walk down the path,  
maybe you should stop beating your donkey,  
and ask *why* the donkey refuses to walk!

Some people think that the story of a talking donkey is so absurd that it cannot possibly be true.  
Some even argue for the mythical nature of the story based on the fact  
that Balaam does not appear to be surprised by a talking donkey.

But Balaam is a seer – a diviner – who is used to dreams and visions of the supernatural.  
He probably never had an animal speak to him so plainly before –  
but it would never cross his mind that this was “impossible”!  
Rather, it would have convinced him that he was involved in a very important event.  
All of the great stories of the ancient world involved talking animals –  
so if my donkey is talking, this must mean that something big is about to happen!

You see, the LORD understood the way that Balaam’s mind worked,  
and he chose a mode of communication that would impress a pagan prophet.

**b. “Speak only the Word That I Tell You”: the Command of the LORD (v31-35)**

*<sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. <sup>32</sup> And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse<sup>[b]</sup> before me. <sup>33</sup> The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.” <sup>34</sup> Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.” <sup>35</sup> And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.*

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam – and he saw the angel of the LORD!  
Now the seer sees!  
“When I heard the donkey talk, I knew I was somebody important –  
but I’m used to seeing visions in the night,

not live angels with drawn swords in the middle of the day!  
I may be somebody important – but not as important as you are!”  
And so Balaam winds up flat on his face before the angel of the LORD.

And the angel of the LORD tells Balaam that the donkey has saved his life!

Balaam now recognizes that his journey is in vain.  
He is used to manipulating the gods to get what he wants.  
But when your donkey starts talking to you,  
and you start seeing angels with drawn swords,  
you quickly realize that you are dealing with powers beyond your control!  
And so Balaam admits,  
“I have sinned” – and he offers to turn back.  
But the angel of the LORD tells him to go on.

It is important for us to take Balaam’s confession of sin seriously.  
It is true that at the end of the story, Balaam will apostatize,  
but at the moment, he is a repentant follower of Yahweh.  
He recognizes when he has encountered a power greater than that which he possesses!

In this way, Balaam is very much like Simon Magus.  
Simon converts in Acts 8 – but apostatizes and is condemned.  
The difference is that we know a *lot* about the few days where Balaam was following God  
but we know very little about the few days after Simon Magus’s conversion.

### **3. The Power of the Word (22:36-23:12)**

#### **a. “Am I Not Able to Honor You?” Balak’s Power and Piety (22:36-23:4)**

<sup>36</sup> *When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border.* <sup>37</sup> *And Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?”*

<sup>38</sup> *Balaam said to Balak, “Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.”* <sup>39</sup> *Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.* <sup>40</sup> *And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him.*

In verse 37 we are reminded of the wealth and honor that Balak has promised to Balaam.

I have referred to these verses (22:36-23:4) as Balak’s power and piety  
because Balak – following standard near eastern protocols –  
seeks to propitiate the gods and make them favorable to his pleas.  
He sacrifices sheep and oxen in an attempt to manipulate the gods.

**(Read v41)**

<sup>41</sup> *And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people.*



23 And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.”<sup>2</sup> Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram.<sup>3</sup> And Balaam said to Balak, “Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.” And he went to a bare height,<sup>4</sup> and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, “I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.”

And so Balaam tells him how to prepare his offering  
in a way that will have the best chance of success.  
Seven altars – seven bulls – seven rams.

But verse 3 reveals a chastened Balaam.

Balaam had said confidently in 22:8 –

“I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me.”

And again in verse 19,

“stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.”

But now, Balaam says, “Perhaps Yahweh will come to meet me.”

I rather suspect that Balaam was *hoping* that Yahweh wouldn’t show!

Because he knew – after the donkey and the angel –

that his life depended on saying whatever Yahweh shows him.

It would be awfully convenient if Yahweh didn’t show up!

#### **b. “How Can I Curse Whom God Has Not Cursed”: The Blessing of Balaam (23:5-12)**

<sup>5</sup> And the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.”<sup>6</sup> And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering.

Many commentators want to take Balaam as insincere.

But I don’t see any reason to think that Balaam does not mean it

when he says that he must only speak what the LORD tells him.

Certainly, it would have taken great courage to return to the king of Moab with these words:

<sup>7</sup> And Balaam took up his discourse and said,

“From Aram Balak has brought me,

the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:

‘Come, curse Jacob for me,

and come, denounce Israel!’

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

How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?

Balaam recognizes that the God of Israel is not like the gods of the nations.  
If I can't manipulate Yahweh, then you have no chance!

And Balaam's words come down through the ages for Israel – and for us – to remember.

I want you to think about this for a moment.

Because the lesson that Balaam has just learned is at the heart of who God is.  
God is *impassable*.

God has *affections*,  
but he has no *passions*.

Affections refer to the active side of the emotions (God loves, God rejoices, God hates).  
Passions refer to the passive side of the emotions.

When we say that God has no passions,  
we mean that no one can say or do anything that can manipulate God.  
You cannot do something to God that will alter him.  
When you sin, what do you do to him? (cf. Job 35:6)

Israel will keep forgetting this.

When God establishes his temple,  
Israel will begin to think like the nations –  
and they start trying to manipulate God through sacrifices.

You see this in the late medieval church as well.

Luther and Calvin objected strenuously to the practice of “indulgences” –  
which sought to buy the blessings of God.

But Protestants cannot claim to be immune to the temptations of Balaam!

How often have you thought “if I just do X, Y, or Z, then God will bless me!”?  
If I just do this with my children, then they'll turn out fine.  
If I just pray harder, then I'll get what I want!

God's blessing cannot be obtained by people “trying harder” or “doing more”!  
God's blessing was obtained by the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

God cannot be manipulated!

And so Balaam says,  
How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

And then, in verses 9-10, Balaam sees (notice again, the language of the seer):

<sup>9</sup> *For from the top of the crags I see him,  
from the hills I behold him;*

*behold, a people dwelling alone,  
and not counting itself among the nations!  
<sup>10</sup> Who can count the dust of Jacob  
or number the fourth part<sup>[a]</sup> of Israel?  
Let me die the death of the upright,  
and let my end be like his!”*

“A people dwelling alone” means “a people dwelling in safety” –  
and plainly this is because of Israel’s God.  
If God is for us, who can be against us?

Israel is a people not counting itself among the nations.  
This is a unique people – unlike the Gentiles.  
And Balaam states his desire to die with Israel, and be numbered with God’s people.  
This is a profound statement –  
and a tragic one, in light of Balaam’s end.  
Numbers 31:8 says that Israel killed Balaam  
because of his evil counsel that he gave to the Moabites.

But Balak is horrified to hear this:

*<sup>11</sup> And Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.” <sup>12</sup> And he answered and said, “Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?”*

Balaam understands that when divine blessing is upon a people,  
it is impossible to overturn that blessing.  
Balaam is a powerful seer.  
But he is – in his own way – an honest seer.  
Israel belongs to Yahweh –  
and Yahweh has made it clear that he will not curse his people.

Yes, *words* are powerful.  
Words can be used to manipulate.  
Or words can be used to edify.

This is why the prophetic office of Christ is so important.  
We often focus on Christ as king – ruling over us and defeating our enemies –  
or Christ as priest – offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins –  
but we sometimes overlook his office of prophet –  
where he *speaks* to us for God, and *speaks* to God for us.  
In Christ, the *Word* became flesh and dwelt among us.