THE DOCTRINE OF BALAAM

What Could Not Be Cursed From Without Was Corrupted From Within

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KEY SCRIPTURES *2 Peter 2:15, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14*

Three times in the New Testament the name of Balaam is set as a warning to the people of God: the way of Balaam (2 Peter 2:15), the error of Balaam (Jude 11) and the teaching of Balaam (Revelation 2:14). These are not three ways of saying the same thing. This study looks at these Scriptures from the wanderings in the wilderness of Moab to the church at Pergamum; The study asks, what light the teaching of Balaam throws upon a church that is promised that it will never be overcome. This is despite the Church finding itself corrupted from within; and it closes by setting Balaam within the threesome of Cain, Balaam and Korah, in which Jude gathers up the whole structure of apostasy. Ultimately the Church will be triumphant though the work and victory of Jesus the Messiah.

The Curse That Failed

Balak king of Moab, became concerned, watching Israel encamped on his border. He sent for Balaam son of Beor to curse them. His logic was clear: Israel was blessed and Balak believed a curse would break the blessing and let Moab prevail. What follows across Numbers 22–24 is one of the strangest passages in the Torah; a pagan diviner hired to curse. His every attempt to curse turns, in his own mouth, into blessing.

“How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I denounce whom Yahweh has not denounced?”

(Numbers 23:8)

Three times Balak builds altars; three times Balaam opens his mouth to curse; three times blessing comes out instead of a curse. The direct attack simply is not permitted to succeed. God overrules Balaam’s attempts to curse and frustrates Balak’s desire to destroy His people. This is the first movement and it must be seen clearly before the second can land: against the direct curse, Israel is protected. No hostile

power, no purchased witchcraft, no enemy can break the blessing of God upon them, without God’s authority.

The rabbinic tradition holds that Balaam was the greatest prophet the nations ever produced - his gift said to rival Moses' own (Sifri to Deuteronomy 34:10; Sanhedrin 106a). Yet the sages insist this was not because he deserved it, but so that the nations could never claim a prophet of their own would have reformed them. He is compared to a royal cook: privy to the palace's secrets, yet never one of the king's ministers. Access without standing. His blessing 'How fair are your tents, O Jacob' (Numbers 24:5) became Mah Tovu in the daily liturgy - so that the arch-villain of the tradition authored the words on Israel's lips each morning. However, it is more likely that Balaam was a heathen soothsayer, (Joshua 13:22) from Mesopotamia, who had the reputation of being able both to bless and curse with great success.

The Seduction That Succeeded

The story does not end with the failed attempt to curse. Israel

would be the author of her own defeat. What Balak could not take by force, was surrendered by invitation. Numbers 25 opens with no mention of Balaam at all; only Israel's collapse:

“While Israel was staying in Shittim, the people began to indulge in sexual immorality with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined itself to Baal of Peor.” (Numbers 25:1–3)

Twenty-four thousand died in the plague that followed. More Israelites fell at Peor to their own sinfulness than to any external enemy in the forty years of wandering. Later. Scripture names the hand behind it. When Moses sends Israel against Midian, he indicts the word that engineered the whole collapse:

“Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the word of Balaam, to act unfaithfully against Yahweh in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of Yahweh.” (Numbers 31:16)

Balaam, the man who could not curse Israel from without, gave the counsel that corrupted them from within. When the curse failed, Balaam did not give up he, changed his method. He had wealth to gain. He reasoned that Israel's God cannot be moved to curse his own people, but Israel can be moved to forfeit their standing themselves. Therefore, he counselled Balak not to fight Israel, but to seduce them: send the daughters of Moab into the camp, spread the feasts of Baal and let Israel open the gate from the inside. What the sword could not do, seduction did. This is how sin can overwhelm, if the person does not master it. See Cain in Genesis 4:7.

This understanding is not an inference - it is fixed in the Jewish sources as *etzat Bil'am*, 'the counsel of Balaam.' Unable to overcome Israel by supernatural means, Balaam is remembered as advising Balak that the God of Israel hates immorality and that the way to bring Israel low was therefore to entice them into it (cf. Sanhedrin 106a; Numbers 31:16 and Rashi).

The lesson the rabbis draw is precise: Israel was invulnerable

to the curse but vulnerable to her own desire and sinfulness. The enemy could only win by persuading Israel to breach the wall herself. Numbers 25 itself does not name Balaam; the link between the seduction and his instruction is made retrospectively, by Numbers 31:16. How true is the Proverb:

"A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls." *(Proverbs 25:28)*

The Church: The Same Promise, The Same Vulnerability

The pattern of Balaam is not only an account out of the wilderness and Israel's wanderings. It is a pattern and the church could follow it. Consider first the promise that was given to the church and how exactly it matches the promise Israel enjoyed against the curse:

"And I also say to you that you are Peter and upon this rock [faith] I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not

overpower it.” (Matthew 16:18)

This is Israel's invulnerability restated for the Church. Against the frontal assault of the demonic powers: persecution, hostile powers, the direct curse. The church is promised she will not be overpowered. And history bears the promise out. From Jesus’ own victory, through James (Acts 12:2). Stephen (Acts 7) and the blood of the martyrs that became the seed of the church. The gates of Hades, the coordinated attack from without, did not overpower her. This reflects the same attempt by Barak to destroy Israel.

Here everything turns. The promise addresses the assault, not the appetite. Israel had God's protection against Balaam's curse and still fell at Peor - because the vulnerability was never the curse. It was the invitation Israel was willing to accept. The promise of Jesus guarantees the Church against being overpowered from without. However, was not a promise to the visible church that she cannot be corrupted from within. What the sword and the curse cannot do, seduction still can. Think of the Corinthian church and Paul’s rebukes. More precisely this is why the risen the addresses the church at

Pergamum not with comfort but with a summons to repent. This was because the teaching of Balaam had already infected her.

“But I have a few things against you, that you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality.” (Revelation 2:14)

Notice two things; the direct comparison with Israel and what the Christ calls it: not the way, not the error, but the teaching of Balaam. This is the active, transmissible word and the LSB's 'teaching' renders it more transparently than the older 'doctrine,' for the Greek *didach?* is simply the noun of the verb 'to teach.'

The Christ then unfolds it as exactly that: Balaam 'kept teaching Balak.' The way of Balaam (Jude 11) is the road of greed he walked; the error of Balaam (2 Peter 2:15) is the wandering into which his love of the wages of

unrighteousness led him. But the teaching of Balaam is neither of those; it is the strategy he taught to others so that they would sin. Way and error describe what Balaam was - teaching describes what Balaam did to others. And the Christ testifies that this teaching did not remain in the wilderness and with Israel. It had migrated into the church and was held there by teachers within the congregation. It was not coming at the church from without but was lodged inside her.

The Doctrine of Balaam and the Gospel of Prosperity

What, precisely, is the teaching of Balaam - the doctrine of Balaam, as it has long been named in Christian theology? Its two named components in Revelation 2:14 are the two elements of Peor: eating what was sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Added to this is Balaam’s desire to be made rich. Structurally, it is the teaching that God's people may invite in the world’s culture. Thereby, the wall between the holy and the profane may be lowered. It teaches that the church may partake of what the world offers and still remains God's church. It is open apostasy. It is syncretism (a fusion of differing systems of belief) sold as freedom. And that is

exactly what makes it a teaching rather than a mere temptation: it arrives with a rationale that legitimises the compromise.

Balaam never told Israel, 'Abandon Yahweh.' He arranged a situation in which they could enjoy Moab's daughters and Moab's feasts while assuming their covenant standing was untouched. The lie was never 'God is false.' The lie was 'God will not mind.' Remember the garden. ‘…did God say?

Set the prosperity gospel against that pattern and the fit is exact. It does not attack the church from outside; it enters through the pulpit. It does not deny the Christ; it teaches the people to sanctify covetousness - to make the pursuit of money and comfort into an act of faith and to measure devotion by material return.

It lowers the wall between the holy and the profane by teaching that mammon and worship are compatible, indeed that God's favour is read off the balance of one's bank account. It is Peor dressed in the vocabulary of blessing - the

daughters of Moab now bearing offering envelopes, with the hope of increase. Exactly as at Peor, the danger is not that an external enemy forces it upon the church, but that the church willingly opens the gate, because appetite has been baptised. Think again of Eve.

'The gates of Hades will not overpower it' iMatthew 16:18 s ultimately a promise concerning the Church universal and eschatological – the Christ will bring her home. This is why the tares and wheat parable is important. It is a parable about the end times, when there will be a final reckoning.

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’ Matthew 13:30

Peor did not end Israel; a remnant went in and possessed the land. Therefore, this parallel is a warning to the visible, local, present church about the real cost of internal corruption - twenty-four thousand dead, a generation scarred. The

prosperity gospel can destroy the true faith of congregations, bringing disappointment when riches do not come. It brings pressure on the poor who can ill afford the demands made on them. It discredits the witness with the world seeing a money grabbing ‘church’. and damns individuals. However, it cannot annul the promise of Jesus the Christ.

The Remedy: Phinehas and the Sword of the Mouth

If the pattern of corruption runs from Peor to Pergamum, so does the pattern of remedy. God always shows a way. At Peor the plague was not stopped by defeating Moab. Israel did not march. It was stopped from within the camp, by one man jealous for the holiness of God's house:

“Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the sons of Israel in My jealousy.” (Numbers 25:11)

The lesson is as pointed as the corruption. Internal corruption is not answered by better defences against the outside world. It is answered by a Phinehas - someone inside the camp who is jealous for the purity of God's house. A great example is Jesus as He clears the Temple. At Peor, the plague stops when the corruption is confronted internally, not when an external enemy is defeated. A church seduced by the doctrine of Balaam will not be healed by railing against the world outside her walls; she will be healed only when someone within that community, is grieved enough for God's honour to name the compromise for what it is.

And the word the Christ speaks to Pergamum matches Peor exactly with a remedy from within, on pain of judgement:

“Therefore repent. But if not, I am coming to you quickly and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.” (Revelation 2:16)

The internal correction is repentance. And observe the final image. The sword which Balaam's donkey saw in the angel's

hand (Numbers 22:31) and which at the last, cut Balaam himself down (Numbers 31:8; Joshua 13:22) This sword now belongs to the Christ and proceeds from His mouth. The very weapon that ended Balaam is the weapon the Christ turns against Balaam's teaching held inside the church. The teaching of Balaam is answered, in the end, by the word of the Christ: the sword of the mouth, with which He will make war on the compromise unless His church first repents.

The Triad: Cain, Balaam and Korah

Balaam does not stand alone in the New Testament's memory. Jude sets him in the middle of a triad and the three names together form a complete anatomy of apostasy:

“Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain and for pay they have poured themselves into the error of Balaam and perished in the rebellion of Korah. (Jude 11)

Jude did not speak blindly into a collection of villains. The

Bible offers many rogues: Ahab, Saul, Haman, Jezebel. Jude just names these three, Cain – Balaam - Korah and names them in this order. There is a progression here and the three prepositional phrases the Scripture preserves and marks its stages: they have gone the way of Cain, poured themselves into the error of Balaam and perished in the rebellion of Korah. A road entered, a self poured out, a rebellion in which one is destroyed. Read together, Cain, Balaam and Korah trace the whole descent of corrupted religion from its first step to its last.

Cain corrupted worship. Cain is the way (*hodos*), a road, a manner of life. Its equivalent in Hebrew can also mean ‘habit’. His sin was not irreligion; he brought an offering. It was worship on his own terms, an approach to God that God had not appointed. As was revealed in other Scriptures, as we have seen, proud and self-seeking. When it was not accepted he would not humble himself but killed the brother whose worship and attitude was accepted. The way of Cain is the beginning: religion retained but bent to the self, worship offered in the manner the worshipper prefers rather than the manner God commands. It is the first loosening of the wall between what God accepts and what a man decides to bring.

Balaam corrupted teaching. Balaam is the error (*plan?*), a straying that draws others after it. If Cain corrupts his own worship, Balaam corrupts the worship of a whole people and does it for pay. He is the fulcrum of the triad, the professional: the man with real access to God who sells his office and whose teaching becomes a method by which others are led into the very sin Cain began. Where Cain corrupted his own approach to God, Balaam builds a doctrine out of the corruption and markets it. This is why the church, not merely the individual, is in view at Pergamum - the error of Balaam is corruption that propagates.

Korah corrupted authority. Korah is the rebellion and the end. His sin (Numbers 16) was to reject the authority God had appointed, gathering a following to say to Moses and Aaron, 'you have gone far enough... why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of Yahweh?' It wears the language of piety - all the congregation is holy - but it is revolt against God's order dressed as zeal for it. And Korah is where the trajectory ends: the earth opened and swallowed him. Cain bent worship; Balaam sold teaching; Korah rose against the very authority that could have called the people back. Jude places him last because open rebellion against

God's appointed order is the terminus of the road - and the point past which only judgement remains.

The rabbinic tradition independently ranks all three among the paradigmatic wicked. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10) lists Balaam among the private individuals who have no share in the World to Come and names the congregation of Korah in the same context as those who will not rise nor stand in judgement (Sanhedrin 10:3). Cain, in the *Aggadah* (narrative, explanatory, and illustrative elements within Jewish tradition), is the archetype of the man who brings the inferior offering and then will not master the sin crouching at his door (cf. Genesis 4:7). That Jewish and Christian tradition, working separately, arrive at the same three as fountainheads of wickedness is itself striking and it underlines that Jude is not inventing a category but naming one already recognised.

Set against the prosperity gospel, the triad is diagnostic. It begins as the way of Cain, that is, worship offered on the worshipper's own terms, God approached as the giver of what one has already decided to want. It matures into the error of Balaam - a teaching, sold for pay, that legitimises the

appetite and leads a whole people into it. And its final form, wherever it is confronted, is the rebellion of Korah - the refusal of correction, the treating of those who name the compromise as the ones who have 'gone far enough.' Jude's ordering is a warning about direction of travel: unrepented, corrupted worship becomes corrupt teaching and corrupt teaching hardens into rebellion against every authority that would call it back.

Therefore, the triad brings clearly into view, the single figure without diluting him. Balaam remains the centre — the teacher whose corruption seeds are scattered. Jude shows the soil he grows from (the self-willed worship and pride of Cain) and the bad fruit he ripens toward (the God-defying rebellion of Korah). The church that would resist the teaching of Balaam must therefore resist at both ends: refusing worship bent to its own appetite and refusing the rebellion that will not be corrected. Between those two lies the ground on which every Phinehas must stand.

Although this is a challenging study, we must hold onto the The Lord Jesus The Christ. Hie is abounding in grace and

merciful to the children of God. It therefore behoves us to ensure we stay in The Way. That we do not get seduced by false doctrine that promises that which the Lord has not promised. When we come to Him in worship we come in humility. In gratitude. In contentment no matter what the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

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