

heed to Paul's words to the Thessalonians and to the Romans:

"But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the

day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness" (1 Thess. 5:4,5);

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light" (Rom. 13:12).

Exposition

Moses: earth's meekest man

33. The oracles

John Mitchell

The rapid success of the Israelites alarmed the Moabites, who hired Balaam to curse Israel. However, God's purpose to bless Israel was not thwarted, but declared in detail by the prophet, despite his intense desire to please the king of Moab.

WITH THE TOTAL defeat of the Amorites east of Jordan, the crossing of the children of Israel into the Promised Land might have proceeded unhindered had it not been for the unexpected animosity of Moab expressed in a peculiar form. Hitherto, Balak king of the Moabites had been neutral towards Israel, and no doubt happy to see the destruction of the Amorites, who had stolen some of his northern territory. But when he saw the extent of the Israelite camp opposite Jericho he was filled with dread of them, and consulted with his allies, the Midianites. Through his elders Balak said to their elders, "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field".* Militarily the Moabites could not prevail, so Balak devised another approach, that of divination, by spiritual duplicity.

He had heard of a prophet in Mesopotamia who was accredited to Yahweh, the God of Israel, and who, for a fee, would engage in effective divination against an enemy—or so Balak believed. So he sent a deputation of princes to Balaam the prophet, saying, "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. 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 country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed".

The deputation came to Balaam with the appropriate fee, and he told them to stay the night while he sought an answer from the Lord—which he duly received. "Do not go with them", said Yahweh. "You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed".

A more tempting offer

Accordingly, Balaam sent the princes away, saying, "Go back to your own country, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you". Sensing from his reply that it was Yahweh rather than Balaam who was being negative, Balak sent a more distinguished deputation to Balaam, saying, "Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me".

But Balaam answered them self-righteously, "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God". And with that he could have sent the Moabites away. But he did not. He told them to stay the night while he found out what else the Lord would tell him—hoping, no doubt, that it might be something different!

From that point the Lord decided to use Balaam in his duplicity as the instrument of the most sublime expression of His own power and purpose with Israel. That night God came to Balaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon

* Quotations as part of the narrative from Numbers 22–24 are from the NIV.

you, go with them, but do only what I tell you". Balaam lost no time in obeying. Next morning he saddled his donkey and, without waiting for further orders, went with the princes of Moab.

Angered by Balaam's precipitation, Yahweh sent an angel, who stood in the road to oppose him. The donkey could see the angel and halted; Balaam could not. Despite repeated beatings, the animal refused to budge, and, in the end, crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. "You have made a fool of me!", cried Balaam. "If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now". Whereupon, to the amazement of its master, the donkey retorted, "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", replied Balaam. God then opened the prophet's eyes, and he heard the angel say, "I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before Me". If the donkey, having seen the angel, had not halted, the angel would have killed Balaam with the sword.

Balaam arrives in Moab

Balaam acknowledged he had sinned, and offered to go back, but the angel repeated the command that he should go with the deputation. However, he must speak only what the angel told him to say. Met by an anxious Balak, who came out to meet him with further promise of reward, Balaam explained he could pronounce only what God would put into his mouth.

Nevertheless, having surveyed part of the Israel host from a viewpoint on a hill dedicated to Baal, Balaam instructed Balak to erect seven altars, and to prepare seven bulls and seven rams, which they then sacrificed. Naïvely, Balaam told Balak to wait while he went aside to a desolate place to see whether Yahweh would meet with him, adding, "Whatever He reveals to me I will tell you". God did meet with him, and Balaam referred to the altars and the burnt offerings he had made as if they were his own acceptable sacrifices. Whereupon the Lord put a message for Balak in Balaam's mouth that he could not fail to utter.

Balak was standing beside his offering with all the princes of Moab when Balaam returned with an oracle that was the very opposite of what he had intended. He said:

"Balak the king of Moab has brought me
from Aram,
From the mountains of the east.
'Come, curse Jacob for me,

And come, denounce Israel!
How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?
And how shall I denounce whom the LORD
has not denounced?

For from the top of the rocks I see him,
And from the hills I behold him;
There! A people dwelling alone,
Not reckoning itself among the nations.
Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number one-fourth of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous,
And let my end be like his!"

(23:7-10, NKJV).

Balak, aghast at what he heard, exclaimed, "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!" "Must I not speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?", said Balaam, explaining God's control over him.

More inspired oracles

Perhaps, thought Balak, the unfavourable message had something to do with its launching site, so he asked Balaam to go with him to a more elevated position at the top of Pisgah, there to offer more burnt sacrifices on seven more altars. Balaam acceded, and then sought another meeting with Yahweh's angel, who once more put words in his mouth to deliver to Balak. The burden of it this time was:

"Rise up, Balak, and hear!
Listen to me, son of Zippor!
God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent.
Has He said, and will He not do?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it
good?
Behold, I have received a command to bless;
He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.
He has not observed iniquity in Jacob,
Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel.
The LORD his God is with him,
And the shout of a King is among them.
God brings them out of Egypt;
He has strength like a wild ox.
For there is no sorcery against Jacob,
Nor any divination against Israel.
It now must be said of Jacob
And of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!
Look, a people rises like a lioness,
And lifts itself up like a lion;
It shall not lie down until it devours the prey,
And drinks the blood of the slain"

(vv. 18-24, NKJV).

Nevertheless Balak urged Balaam to try again, despite Balaam's reminder that he must do as the Lord directed. This time Balak built his altars and offered his sacrifices on Peor, the national shrine on the very summit of Pisgah, from which Moses soon after reviewed the Promised Land. Here Balaam had to acknowledge that the enchantments he had hitherto used were of no avail when God was pleased to bless Israel. And when he raised his eyes and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes the Spirit of God came upon him, and he uttered a third oracle:

"The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor,
 The utterance of the man whose eyes are
 opened,
 The utterance of him who hears the words
 of God,
 Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
 Who falls down, with eyes wide open:
 How lovely are your tents, O Jacob!
 Your dwellings, O Israel!
 Like valleys that stretch out,
 Like gardens by the riverside,
 Like aloes planted by the LORD,
 Like cedars beside the waters.
 He shall pour water from his buckets,
 And his seed shall be in many waters.
 His king shall be higher than Agag,
 And his kingdom shall be exalted.
 God brings him out of Egypt;
 He has strength like a wild ox;
 He shall consume the nations, his enemies;
 He shall break their bones
 And pierce them with his arrows.
 'He bows down, he lies down as a lion;
 And as a lion, who shall rouse him?'
 Blessed is he who blesses you,
 And cursed is he who curses you"

(24:3-9, NKJV).

In furious anger Balak struck his hands together and demanded of Balaam, "Leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the LORD has kept you from being rewarded".

But Balaam had one more oracle about Israel to give. This time there was no building of altars to offer sacrifice. He simply turned to Balak and said, "Let me warn you of what this people will do to your people in days to come". Then he uttered this oracle:

[\(To be continued\)](#)

"The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor,
 And the utterance of the man whose eyes
 are opened;
 The utterance of him who hears the words
 of God,
 And has the knowledge of the Most High,
 Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
 Who falls down, with eyes wide open:
 I see him, but not now;
 I behold him, but not near;
 A Star shall come out of Jacob;
 A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel,
 And batter the brow of Moab,
 And destroy all the sons of tumult.
 And Edom shall be a possession;
 Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession,
 While Israel does valiantly.
 Out of Jacob one shall have dominion,
 And destroy the remains of the city"

(vv. 15-19, NKJV).

Parting company

Thus did the inviolate purpose of God stream from the lips of a false prophet who, greedy of gain, had sought to turn aside Yahweh's eternal intention. Hoping to destroy Israel, Balaam instead reiterated only the sublime, and sealed his own doom.

He had yet to utter his final oracles against the enemies of Israel:

- against the Amalekites, who would come to ruin at last;
- against the Kenites, who felt safe among the rocky defiles of Engedi, but whom the Assyrians would take captive; and
- against the Assyrians, who were Balaam's own people, but who, nevertheless, would perish forever.

In all these encounters between the Almighty on the one hand and the double-minded Balaam on the other, Moses does not feature at all, though he recorded the details. Balak, utterly frustrated, broke away from Balaam, while the latter "went his own way" to somewhere in the vicinity, to exercise a more baleful influence among the children of Israel than he had been able to do from the surrounding heights. To eradicate its effects became the final task Yahweh placed upon the shoulders of His faithful servant Moses.