

What the Donkey Didn't Say

Mike Southern

April 2016

Sometimes we read a Bible story that just sounds ridiculous to us, the kind of story that convinces many people that the Bible is little more than myths and fairy tales. Such is the story of the prophet Balaam and his talking donkey.

Perhaps the most unbelievable part of the tale is when Balaam gets into an argument with his donkey, so furious that he apparently doesn't remember that donkeys aren't supposed to talk. But if you ask me, the donkey probably had more trouble believing how stupid Balaam was!

The story of Balaam takes three chapters—Numbers 22-24—but this tale focuses on chapter 22.

Even before man invented TV evangelism,
there were those who made money selling God's blessing...
and who made even more money if they could guarantee
that God would NOT bless the buyer's enemy.

Balak, the king of Moab, was willing to pay BIG money to stop his enemies!

You see, Moses and the Israelites were marching
from Egypt to the land of Canaan.
They had asked King Sihon for permission to pass through Ammon.
They had promised to stay on the main road and cause no damage;
they wouldn't even take water from the Ammonite wells.
But King Sihon replied by attacking them with his entire army...
so they wiped out the Ammonites and took over the whole country
until they were ready to resume their journey to Canaan.

When Balak heard Moses was headed his way, he sent for Balaam,
a prophet to whom God sometimes spoke.
Balak sent many men—and a lot of money—to ask Balaam for help.
“Stay overnight while I ask God about it,” Balaam said.

But God said no. “I am blessing Israel, so don't you dare curse them!
Send those men home... and you stay here.”
So Balaam did. And that should have been the end of it.

But King Balak wouldn't take no for an answer.
He sent even more men with even more money.
Of course, Balaam simply repeated what God had already told him...
but if Balak's men wanted to stay overnight, he said,
he'd ask God again.

Just to be sure, you know. In case God had changed His mind.

This time God told Balaam he could go with the men
as long as he said only what God told him to say.
But God was furious with Balaam.
The prophet already knew what God wanted
but he thought he could use God to get rich!
So when Balaam left the next morning, riding his favorite donkey,
God had an angel with a sword waiting to kill him.
A prophet who could be bought was of no use to God!

But the donkey saw the angel and tried to protect Balaam.

The first time, she saw the angel blocking the road
so she tried to go around him by running through a field.
Balaam beat her and made her go back to the road.

The second time, she saw the angel standing on the road
between the walls of two vineyards
so she tried to squeeze between the angel and one wall.
But Balaam's foot got crushed against the wall
so he beat her for that, too.

The third time, she saw the angel standing
where the road was too narrow to pass him,
so she just laid down and wouldn't get up.
Infuriated, Balaam beat her yet again.

This time, however, God let the donkey speak: "Why are you beating me?
What have I done to you?"

"You made me look like a fool," Balaam yelled.
"If I had a sword, I'd kill you!"

"Have I ever done anything like this before?" she asked.
"No," he replied.
"Then don't you wonder why I'm doing it now?" she said.

At that point, the Bible tells us that God let Balaam see
the angel with the sword who was sent to kill him,
and that God then told him he was still alive
only because his donkey tried to stop their journey.

Or to put it another way, Balaam's donkey was smarter than Balaam
because she tried to do what God wanted all along.
Balaam was the one who claimed to hear God
but he was too stubborn to obey what he heard.
In some ways, the donkey would have made a better prophet.

But the donkey never berated Balaam for his greed
or even demanded an apology for the way he treated her.
So far as we know, she never said another word.
And perhaps that's just as well...

After all, if Balaam thought
his donkey made him look like a fool before,
imagine how he'd have felt
if God had let *the donkey* deliver His message
to King Balak!