

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

The Balaam Syndrome

written by Bob DeWaay

“Forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; for a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet.” (2Peter 2:15,16)

Balaam, the mad prophet, serves as a prototype for false teachers who will arise in the last days and trouble the Christian church. The stern warnings of **2Peter 2** are for those who would follow in his path. The false teachers to whom Peter refers are people who are considered Christians by their peers. They are those to whom he refers in **verse 1** of this chapter: **“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies...”** Verse 15 as quoted above indicates that those who follow the way of Balaam have “forsaken the right way.” They will arise among Christians and appear to be Christians. What is the way of madness that will characterize certain apparently Christian teachers in the last days? Let us examine the historical account of Balaam and see how his errors are applicable to situations in the church today.

Every Old and New Testament reference to Balaam subsequent to the historical record of Numbers 22-24 is a condemnation of Balaam or those who listen to or emulate him. These references are: **Numbers 31:8,16; Deuteronomy 23:4,5; Joshua 13:22 & 24:9,10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; 2Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14.** A man who said, “... I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God” (**Numbers 22:18**), blessed Israel (**Numbers 24:3-9**), prophesied under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (**Numbers 24:2**), and prophesied

about the coming Messiah (**Numbers 24:17**) is condemned throughout Scripture! Balaam has been called “enigmatic” and thus he is; yet he serves as an example of the type of false teachers that trouble the church in the end times.

Balaam and Occult Practices

Though there is some debate about the meaning of Balaam's name, it appears to mean “devourer.” Keil and Delitzsch state:

In its true meaning, the name is related to that of his father, Beor. ... to burn, eat off, destroy: so called on account of the destructive power attributed to his curses (*Hengstenberg*). It is very probable, therefore, that Balaam belonged to a family in which the mantic character, or magical art, was hereditary ... he is never called ... a prophet, or ... a seer, but ... the soothsayer (*Josh. xiii. 22*), a title which is never used in connection with the true prophets. (*quotes of Hebrew words omitted with ...*)¹

This introduces one of Balaam's primary problems: **the use of forbidden, occult techniques.** Keil and Delitzsch continue, “For ..., soothsaying, is forbidden to the Israelites in Deut. xviii. 10 sqq., as an abomination in the sight of Jehovah, and is spoken of everywhere not only as a grievous sin (1Sam. xv. 23; Exek. xiii. 23; 2Kings xvii. 17), but as the mark of a false prophet (Exek. xiii.9, xxii. 28, Jer. xiv. 14)...”² According to this evidence presented by Keil & Delitzsch, Balaam was primarily an occultist who was quite adept at the use of the magical arts. He had such a reputation that Balak was willing to pay handsomely for his services. Balaam was able to extract huge fees for his services because of his reputation for success in blessing or cursing (**Numbers 22:6**). Balaam had a good track record and was rewarded accordingly. The ISBE states, “... he was famed for his skill as a diviner (Heb. *qosem*) and for his ability to use enchantments (Heb. *nehasim*).”³

Keil and Delitzsch call Balaam's method “augury.”⁴ This involves looking at omens, chance events, or happenings in nature to divine the future. True prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit and were forbidden to use these heathen practices. Soothsaying, divining, and other such practices were uncertain and dependent on the skill and reputation of the soothsayer. Some were more accurate than others. Balaam evidently had one of the best reputations of his day in the use of enchantments.

God said, “There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer.” (**Deuteronomy 18:10**). Evidently, Balaam did not obey this directive. Even if he were completely accurate (which occultists never are) in his predictions and pronouncements, he is false if these methods are employed (see **Deut. 13:1-3**). True prophets speak from God and thus speak the truth (**Deut. 18:20-22**) because God cannot lie.

So, Balaam was in error because he persisted in the use of forbidden methods. Even after his famous encounter with the donkey and having twice spoken words God put in his mouth (**Num. 23:5-10 & 16-24**) the Scripture says, “When Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek omens...” (**Num. 24:1a**). In his first two encounters with God's word, he had gone out to seek omens or auguries, as was his habit. He was in some sense in contact with the true God, but was also using forbidden techniques. He was looking to nature to divine secret information.

Similar procedures are used to this day. Palm reading, astrology, tea leaf reading, and other occult practices consult nature to divine secret information about people or the future. God created nature and by general revelation shows His existence and certain things about Himself through His creation (**Psalms 8 & Romans 1:18-21**). However, the purpose of general revelation is to lead us to a relationship with God through his specific revelation (**Hebrews 1:1,2**) which requires submission to His Messiah, Jesus Christ and His will revealed in Scripture. The reception of this specific revelation both forbids and makes unnecessary foolish attempts to gain through nature specific revelation about unrevealed matters. Astrology is an example of augury in that secret infor-

mation is sought through nature. Balaam sought to have it both ways: know Jehovah and His revealed will and use augury and divination. He is condemned for doing so.

In this regard, Simon the sorcerer of **Acts 8:9-24** serves as a New Testament example of Balaam's problem. Simon in some sense believed the preaching of Philip about Jesus Christ and submitted to Christian baptism. Yet his interest in making money through amazing crowds with signs and wonders was unabated. He thought he could mix the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit with his magic and be even more successful in his magical arts. Peter told him, "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God" (**Acts 8:21**). Like Balaam, he thought he could have it both ways - that faith in the true God could be mixed with the occultic practices of the pagans. Peter's confrontation and denunciation of Simon Magus was a stand against the incorporation of occultic practices into the church.⁵ The mention of Balaam by Peter and Jude shows that they considered this possibility an ongoing threat to the authenticity of Christianity.

The evidence from the rest of the book of Numbers suggests that after blessing Israel in spite of Balak's protests, Balaam subverted the faith of Israel by enticing them to enter into the practices of those who worshipped Baal of Peor (**Numbers 25:2,3**). **Numbers 31:16** states, "Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord." Israel killed Balaam when they conquered the heathen nation to which he was evidently still allied (**Numbers 31:8**).

Balaam's first and primary error was in mixing some knowledge of the true God with heathen, occult practices. His life showed an unholy mixture of the work of the Holy Spirit (**Numbers 24:2**) and forbidden techniques of divination. **Revelation 2:14** says, "But I have a few things against you, because 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 acts of immorality." Prophets have teachings and Balaam's was that the forbidden practices of Israel's enemies could be incorporated into the community of God's covenant people. Balaam seemed to bridge the gap between the true religion

of Israel and the religions of the surrounding nations. From God's perspective these are incompatible.

Balaam and Money

Though Balaam finally refused Balak's offer of money (**Numbers 22:18**), clearly it was a major motivation in his life. Peter says that he "loved the wages of unrighteousness," and Jude that false teachers have "for pay... rushed headlong into the error of Balaam" (**2Peter 2:15 & Jude 11**). Balaam's initial interest in Balak's "curse Israel" project was aroused by the enticing monetary offer (**Numbers 22:7**). Increasing the ante caused him to reconsider (though with a disclaimer - **22:18,19**) the offer previously refused. Unlike Moses who chose "... to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (**Hebrews 11:25**), Balaam would lend his prophetic arts to the one with the most to offer. His problem was that the Lord God of Israel sovereignly intervened in his plan to curse Israel, and kept him from the rewards of divination.

This underscores another major problem: if Balaam was in direct communication with God, and knew of His choice of Israel to be blessed, why did he fail to join himself to Israel and submit to God's law? Under the Old Covenant, one could not be a true prophet of God and operate independent from God's covenant people. Perhaps success and money was a reason to remain separate. At the time Israel was a despised group of nomads, wandering in the wilderness, living in tents. Though God had given some victories, the outcome was still uncertain to those who did not believe God's promises. Making a commitment to God's people might cause personal deprivation and loss. Moses chose such deprivation. Balaam did not.

To those with no eternal perspective, the world has a lot to offer. Jesus resisted an offer from Satan of temporal benefit through compromise (**Luke 4:5-8**). Throughout church history, the temptation to compromise with the world for the sake of financial reward while still maintaining Christian pretenses has lured many away from the faith. The last 10 years have witnessed many popular and powerful Christian "men and women of God" seduced and scandalized by the lure of money and power. Immorality also enters the equation as a powerful lure of

worldliness and temporal intoxication. The way of Balaam is an unholy mixture of apparently supernatural occult techniques, monetary motivation, and life styles not compatible with Christian discipline.

This second error of Balaam is the motivation of money and power. Balaam loved monetary reward more than he loved God or God's people. He compromised what he knew was right for the sake of financial reward.

Balaam the Spiritual Renegade

As Balaam foolishly pushed his donkey toward the unseen (to Balaam) angel with a drawn sword (**Numbers 22:22-27**), he had obtained permission from God to go. Why did God send an angel to stop him on a journey that God had previously authorized? The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way is contrary to me" (**Numbers 22:32b**). Balaam offered to turn back but was instructed to go and say what God wanted him to say (**Numbers 22:34,35**). Balaam had no desire to do what God wanted, and needed the stern warning of the donkey and the angel to get him to do what was right. His response to the words of the donkey shows his bull-headedness, "If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now" (**Numbers 22:29b**). Most people who witnessed a donkey speaking probably would run away in terror or stand speechless in amazement! Not Balaam, he argued with the beast as if he was more convinced of the rightness of his position than he was surprised that a mute creature spoke. In **verse 30** the donkey's logic prevailed and Balaam had to admit that his loyal burden bearer had never acted in such a manner before.

Balaam's third error was that he did not love the truth. Though knowing that God did not want him to curse Israel, he hoped to somehow still collect the fee for divination. He must have known that Balak was not going to pay to have Israel blessed when he wanted them cursed. Balaam was going with no intention of doing God's will when he got there. The angel was placed there by God to stop him from carrying out his plan of cursing Israel. It is one thing to say "yes" to God under compulsion; it is another to love the truth and to desire submission to God's

revealed will.

The Judgment of Hardening

The Bible contains other examples of persons who grudgingly said “yes” to God. Pharaoh gave into God's will several times out of discomfort with the plagues; but he never had a heart to do God's will. He finally perished as an enemy of the kingdom of God, as did Balaam (**Numbers 31:8**). True conversion involves a supernatural change of heart so that the purpose of one's life becomes a love for God, His Word, and His will. God will judge those who are willingly harden their hearts in the face of God's revealed will. **2Thessalonians 2:9-12** says of the lawless one who will arise at the end of the age,

That is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

God can and does judge those who have known the truth but not loved it by sending delusion upon them. The same thought is expressed in **Romans 1:18-24**. The judgment of hardening comes upon those who knew God and the truth but chose not to follow it. One major aspect of the error of Balaam is a lack of love for the truth.

Jesus did the same miracles and gave the same teachings to many people in Judea, yet only a few committed themselves to Him as the true Messiah. “Jesus therefore answered them, and said, `My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself” (**John 7:16,17**). The soldiers who witnessed the resurrection knew the truth but took money to lie about it (**Matthew 28:11-15**). The truth only sets free those who make a commitment to the changes that the that the knowledge of the truth requires. Peter and John knew that Christ was raised as did the soldiers; but they served their resurrected Lord while the soldiers preferred money. Balaam was also more motivated by money than by

truth.

It seemed that Balaam trusted too much in his spiritual experiences. God spoke to him, an angel spoke to him, he at times prophesied correctly, the Holy Spirit came upon him, he was very adept at spiritual things and had a good reputation in these matters. The situation described by Jesus in Matthew 7 is similar:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. (**Matthew 7:21-24**)

The contrast is between those who call Jesus “Lord,” do miracles and prophesy and those who do the will of God. The one building on the rock is the one who “hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them.” The words of Jesus are written for us in Scripture, and the one practicing the truth as revealed in the Bible is the one who is building on the solid rock. Balaam called God, “the LORD my God.” (**Numbers 22:18**). He prophesied in His name and did mighty works and wonders; yet he serves as an example of the type of false teacher who will arise during the period between Pentecost and bodily return of our Lord and mislead many. These teachers will have spiritual power but will not love the truth.

Balaam and Today's Church

The passages in 2Peter, Jude, and Revelation that refer to Balaam are scriptural warnings to the saints about real dangers they will face in the end times. Many who study these passages fail to apply them accurately to the current situation. Most of us assume that our group or our movement is immune to such things. We think that 2Peter 2 only applies to weird cultists or strange sects that we would have nothing to do with. Yet Peter (like Paul in **Acts 20:29**) predicts that the false teachers will arise “among you.” We fail to identify them because they come from Christian groups. We assume

that anyone who says “Lord, Lord” to Jesus is harmless. If they are able to perform powerful spiritual signs, they are given even more credence. If the Spirit of God obviously uses them in certain circumstances, they are enthusiastically endorsed and those who doubt or criticize their teaching are warned not to “touch God's anointed prophets.” By these standards, Balaam would be accepted today as a true prophet of God. However, Israel was rebuked for listening to him as was the church in Pergamum for listening to those who held Balaam's teaching many centuries later.

How serious is the problem? The first major failing of Balaam was occult practices. I have spoken to Christians who were eyewitnesses to Christian meetings in which people were amazed by prophets who could describe the contents of a person's pocket to him (ESP), see spiritual truths and specific predictions revealed in the accidental occurrences of nature (augury - soothsaying), determine one's spiritual ministry by touching or examining hands, palms or fingers (palm reading), learn special or secret things about a person through examining metaphysical “colors,” unapparent to others that they claim surround the individual (aura reading), and make claims of soul travel in both time and space. Those who have made the decision that these practices are permissible for Christians become very upset and defensive if anyone questions them.

Some who practice such things say, “Methods are neutral, God can use anything.” It is true that God can use what he chooses. God used Pharaoh, God used the witch of Endor, and God will use the lawless one to bring judgment upon those who do not love the truth. God in His wisdom and providence allowed His Son to be “nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put to death” (**Acts 2:23**). God used Balaam. The fact that God uses such persons does not justify the persons so used nor justify anyone following their evil example.

The magi were evidently astrologers and were used of God; but astrology is condemned (**Isaiah 47:13**). Though a woman with a spirit of divination endorsed Paul and his message (**Acts 16:17**), neither divination nor the evil spirit by which she spoke are thus justified. If any method or practice for determining secret or supernatural information is permissible, then Christians could seek guidance through ouija boards, assuming

that God might use them. Scripture condemns certain methods, making them impermissible. To mix Christianity and occult methods is to fall into the error of Balaam.

Balaam's Electronic Protégés

Balaam's problem with money also has modern counterparts. There has been ample documentation of this problem with some Christian television preachers in America. Several major scandals have rocked the Christian world and caused shame and reproach to come upon the gospel in the eyes of the unbelieving. Amazingly, even after overwhelming evidence of immorality and greed has been shown in their lives, popular Christian teachers still enjoy the financial and moral support of millions of followers.

Some who recently have been found lusting after ill-gotten riches continue to teach and preach, refusing even to discuss the issue with anyone. They claim the right to live opulent lifestyles off the sacrificial giving of the poor. Jesus said of those in the first century, "you devour widow's houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers" (**Matthew 23:14**). Balaam and his modern protégés never seem to lack an audience or devoted supporters. Perhaps 1990's American Christians should reread 2Peter 2 with the idea that this chapter may apply particularly to some who we thought were God's true teachers and prophets.

The third problem with Balaam, the lack of love for the truth, is probably the most prevalent. It lies at the very heart of the sin nature that is endemic to mankind. Satan started the plunge to spiritual bondage and death with "the lie" and continues promote falsehood in his attempt to subvert the work of God. It is no surprise that the "liar and father of **the lie**" (**John 8:44**) continues to mislead many. In order to remain free from spiritual bondage, one must be committed to the truth. Jesus prayed for us, "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth" (**John 17:17**).

Once a popular teacher has published and broadcast certain teachings, it is very difficult to admit it if there are serious errors in the message. If one is receiving money, prestige, and accolades from the multitudes, why rock the boat? Many pop doctrines that are patently unbiblical have been taught and subsequently exposed as erroneous by credible Christians who have examined the Biblical evidence.

The response has often been that: 1) unity is more important than truth, 2) their followers and power prove that they are "God's anointed prophets," and immune from criticism, 3) the Bible has many interpretations anyway and that no one can claim that they know what it means, 4) doctrine is unimportant and will cause the church to be spiritually dead, 5) those who do not accept the "prophets" are guilty of "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" and face certain judgment, 6) no one has the right to question their published teachings without asking their permission (which is never granted), and 7) we ought just to submit to the spiritual authorities (themselves) and let God take care of these matters later.

Some of these issues will be individually dealt with in later editions of Critical Issues Commentary. They apply to Balaam in that they tempt Christians not to use the discernment necessary to keep themselves from being misled.

Search the Scripture!

Some have refused to look at any Biblical evidence that their teachings are in error. They discourage their followers from learning proper Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), reading commentaries, or obtaining any help in understanding the Scripture. This lack of love for the truth was the fatal flaw in Balaam's approach to being a prophet. He thought that his own spiritual experiences and expertise would suffice and remained a spiritual renegade.

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." Balaam should have submitted himself to what God had spoken to the fathers under the Old Covenant. He did not. What God "**has spoken**," to us in His Son is written for us in the Scripture. To refuse to submit to this because of one's trust in his own revelatory abilities is to follow in Balaam's foolish path.

The New Testament warns us about Balaam's error. **His three errors are: To mix worldly occult techniques with the work of the Holy Spirit, to be motivated by money and unrighteousness, and to fail to love the truth that has been revealed by God once for all.** To fall into them is to be a part of the Balaam syn-

drome. To fail on one of these points and not the others is not good enough. Any one of these errors can undermine whatever good could have been done through the ministry of the person in question. Scripture warns the saints not to follow those who are of the way of Balaam. **We must search the Scripture** to determine the validity of the ideas being presented to us by claimed people of God. It is not true that sincerity alone vindicates a person. Sincerely following someone in error can cause terrible consequences. The love for the truth and holding to the Biblical doctrines of the authority of Scripture and the priesthood of every believer will keep us from following the modern Balaams who traffic in the spiritual arena in these last days.

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End Notes

1. Commentary on the Old Testament, C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Eerdmans, 1986 printing (10 Volumes); Vol 1 - part 3, pages 159, 160.
2. *ibid.* page 160.
3. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans, 1979, fully revised, Vol. 1, page 405.
4. *ibid.*
5. see The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts, F.F. Bruce, Eerdmans, 1988; page 171, esp. ft. nt. 47.

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