**Balak Summons Balaam**

If you follow college football, you probably remember the infamous fumblerooski, a trick play which was banned by the NCAA after the 1992 season. The play calls for an intentional fumble by the quarterback who then tricks the defense into thinking he still has the ball, faking a handoff to a running back. In the confusion, an offensive lineman would pick up the ball and run with it, often scoring. One college coach deemed it to be a dishonorable play used when a team does not have the skill to score without lowering themselves to subterfuge. In our study of Numbers chapter 22 we see a leader of a country who seeks a way to defeat the Israelites without meeting them head on in battle.

The chapter begins with Balak who was a Moabite king in fear of the advancing multitude of Israelites who were camped on the Jordan River across from Jericho. Their reputation preceded them due to their victorious battles against the Amorites and it is likely that no one had ever seen such a large group numbering about 2 million in one assembly. He was no doubt concerned about the strain on the resources of the area that would result from the Israelites setting in the area. Balak summoned Balaam who lived at Pethor which was near the Euphrates River in modern Turkey. Balaam was a rather mysterious man who was known as a diviner. One would normally associate that with the occult, however this man apparently had some sort of relationship with God. Pethor was about 350 miles from Moab, a long journey to undertake. Balak asked Balaam to come to him and put a curse on the Israelites. He could see that they were too powerful for him so he sought some unnatural advantage to help defeat them. Balaam was known as someone whose blessings and curses were effective.

When Balak’s messengers reached Balaam, he asked them to spend the night and told them he would ask God for guidance. God came to Balaam asking who the men were who were visiting him. God of course knew before asking so He probably wanted to see if Balaam would be truthful in his response and he was, repeating that he was asked to curse the Israelites. God forbade him to go to Balak telling him that Israel was blessed. The next morning Balaam sent the messengers away telling them that God would not let him go with them which may have inferred that he wanted to go. Balak sent more messengers, this time offering compensation of any amount Balaam would ask. Although he had previously been told by God not to go, he said that he would see what else God would tell him. God told Balaam to go but do only what He told him.

The next day Balaam left with the messengers but God was angry. Although God had allowed him to go, I believe that God was angry because he knew that Balaam was determined to find a way to curse the Israelites. What follows is an amusing anecdote with a talking donkey. As Balaam went along the road he was met by the angel of the Lord (perhaps a Christophany). Although Balaam did not see the angel, the donkey did and twice left the road, receiving a beating from Balaam. Finally the donkey simply laid down in the road and was once again beaten by Balaam with his staff. God caused the donkey to speak to Balaam asking why he had beaten her. Without pausing to marvel at a talking donkey, Balaam accused the donkey of making a fool of him by failing to obey him (it takes a fool to have a conversation with a donkey). God then allowed Balaam to see what the donkey had seen, the angel of the Lord with a sword who told him that he would have killed him if not for the donkey. Balaam said he did not realize the angel was standing in the road, confessed that he had sinned and offered to return home. The angel told him to proceed but speak only what he was told.

The chapter ends as he reaches Balak telling him that he could only speak what God put in his mouth.

I have not found a satisfactory explanation of just what sort of man Balaam was. Some regard him as a prophet but I note that the Bible does not confer that title on him. He was obviously an evil man (see 2nd Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11, Rev 2:14) yet was on speaking terms with God. I read one commentary comparing him to Melchizedek which is astonishing since Melchizedek was almost certainly the preincarnate Jesus. I would point out that Satan was on speaking terms with God (see Job 1:7-12). Jude refers to Balaam’s error which was pursuing profit at the expense of morals. He ultimately paid a steep price, dying as the Israelites got revenge on the Moabites (see Num. 30:8). It is ironic that Balak sought out Balaam when he could have gone directly to God asking for a treaty with the Israelites.