



Scenes from the Old Testament

Balaam and the Angel

14 February 2016

William Horbury FBA

Numbers 22: 4b–35 Hebrews 4: 14–end

Painting of Balaam and the Angel from the Via Latina catacomb, Rome¹

*The dumb ass speaking with human voice forbad the madness of the prophet.
// Peter 2: 16*

The words are like a caption for the picture you have in the service-booklet. The writer of the epistle names Balaam as a familiar biblical example of teachers of the people who go astray, and can expect divine rebuke. His vivid summary of the story also, however, attests the deep impression which the Old Testament story of Balaam and the angel, in the twenty-second chapter of Numbers, had made upon the Christian church of the New Testament age. The picture itself shows the same impression made by the story as it was still felt in the church two hundred or more years later, not long after the first Christian emperor, Constantine.

The picture is a wall-painting from the catacomb discovered in 1955 beneath a house on the Via Latina in Rome. It is ascribed to the first half of the fourth century. You see on the right the gigantic bearded figure of the angel, with his dagger-like drawn sword in his hand, as the story has it. He has no wings, but these did not become an invariable attribute of angels in painting and sculpture until later; one early tendency in representation, exemplified here, follows the biblical pattern: in the biblical books angels are more often envisaged as standing than flying. Hence in the bible you can entertain angels unawares (Hebrews 13: 2), as Abraham did.

On the left of the picture is the smaller, mortal figure of Balaam the prophet, mounted upon his sprightly ass, who has stopped suddenly as she perceives the sacred presence of the angel. Her feet are planted firmly, and her long ears are turned down in apprehension and determination. Her hindquarters may give just a sign of sinking down, so that Balaam is in danger of slipping off, as would be the case when she finally fell down under him on the third appearance of the angel. At present, however, the portly, dignified prophet still sits astride her, all unseeing, and his hand is raised to strike her, as in the story, with the staff which you can make out in his hand in the picture. The surrounding trees and foliage recall both the field into which the ass turns aside the first time that she perceives the

¹ <https://earlychurchhistory.org/beliefs-2/balaam-the-star-of-bethlehem/balaam-in-via-latina-catacomb/>

angelic presence, and the vineyards through which she is passing when she becomes aware of this presence for the second time, and in her effort to turn aside in a narrow place crushes Balaam's foot against the wall.

The value attached to this scene by early Christians is further underlined by its depiction also in another chamber of the same catacomb of Via Latina, and on a carved marble sarcophagus of about the same period found in the church of St Sebastian ad Catacumbas, just outside Rome on the Appian Way, with catacombs beneath it. Old Testament scenes are popular in early Christian art, the picturesque quality of this particular story would always make it appeal to hearers as well as artists, and above all the ass and her wise words are memorable; but there are other reasons too why Balaam was remembered.

Thus it is remarkable that Balaam is not an Israelite. He is a gentile seer, from Mesopotamia, called to help the leaders of Moab and Midian, the enemies of Israel; but none the less he is inspired by the true God. In Jewish and Christian tradition he stands in that respect together with the Sibyl, the pagan prophetess whose predictions of wars and a golden age were central in the poetry of Virgil, and were taken by Jews and Christians in the age of Constantine to attest the future expectations outlined in the bible. Both Balaam and the Sibyl were held to prophesy the last times, the kingdom of the saints, and the messiah; but unlike the Sibyl, whose oracles form a large separate apocryphal work in Greek verse, Balaam meets us within the pages of the bible. Our story of his encounter with the angel is followed by his oracles in the form of prophetic poems, on Israel as a people set apart, yet bold and victorious as the lion, and on her great ruler to come.

Within the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible, these oracles of the gentile Balaam in Numbers stand in a prominent place between two great prophecies of Moses, his song sung with Miriam when the Israelites cross the Red Sea, in Exodus, and his last song and blessing, on the future of the twelve tribes, just before his death – at the end of Deuteronomy. Balaam's oracles also provide a thrilling moment in services of Carols and Lessons in Advent: He – Balaam – hath said, he which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall arise out of Israel (Numbers 24: 16–17).

That imminent opening of Balaam's eyes to see afar in prophetic trance can be recalled by the round staring eyes of Balaam in our picture, although perhaps there they mainly allude to his delayed but finally achieved perception of the angel while he is still on his journey. His story at any rate, because it is within scripture but shows the divine inspiration of someone outside the commonwealth of Israel, has helped to form the view that the one God who spoke to Israel has also in some way made himself known to the peoples of the world; as St Paul says at Athens in the Acts of the Apostles, God 'is not far from every one of us'. The spread of both Judaism and Christianity to non-Jews underlined the importance of this point. Near the time of our picture, when the church had spread throughout the Roman empire and beyond, that point of the ability of non-Israelites to understand the biblical traditions of faith and love remained vital; the church of St Sabina in Rome preserves a fifth-century mosaic depicting 'the church of the circumcision' and 'the church of the gentiles' as two stately noblewomen, together.

The church as a collective body spanning time and space, Jew and gentile, is envisaged in the collective 'we' and 'us' of the church's liturgical prayer, including this Evensong. This view, recognizing throughout the world a capacity for appreciating true religion, a capacity represented however imperfectly in the composition of the Christian church from Israelites and the nations of the world, is partly enabled by the biblical story of the genuine prophecy of the gentile Balaam, the prophecy to which his journey, represented in our picture, forms the prelude.

Within that broad collective outlook, however, Lent brings in, on this first Sunday in Lent, the idea of individual temptation, as the second lesson (Hebrews 4: 14–end) reminded us. The tragi-comic figure of Balaam on or off the ass, trying repeatedly to resist the temptation to win honour and emolument at the hands of Balak by means of untruth, of course also readily speaks to this situation. His inability to perceive the angel recognized by his ass – the paradoxical inability of one who is recognized for his spiritual power – recalls only too vividly the way in which in temptation one half-sees, yet with a kind of madness still shuts out, the vision of the right and the good. He did not rise to the level of those early Christian desert fathers who were 'friends of angels and animals'; the ass understood more quickly than he did. Balaam in fact did manage to transmit the true prophecy which he was tempted to betray, but we then simply hear that he was slain by the Israelites with the kings of Midian. It was often therefore held by interpreters, as seems to be the case in II Peter from which we began, that Balaam did definitely succumb to temptation. The full story of Balaam is not told in Numbers, but at least it seems that Balaam did not seek to join himself to Israel. He was not quite like Naaman the Syrian later on, a comparably eminent figure who openly honoured the God of Israel at the Syrian royal court.

We leave Balaam's picture, however, also with attention to the ass and the angel. Her simple eyes remained open when the prophet's far-seeing eyes were shut. She was able to perceive the presence and to try, as a faithful beast, to save herself and her rider. The biblical representations of angels, including the angel which met Balaam as he rode, convey with unequalled force the sense of sacred presence, at all times and in all places. Perhaps the best reaction to the picture is not grief over Balaam, but renewed thankfulness for the divine presence, not far from every one of us.