

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, IV: A HOARSE HORSE
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—NUMBERS 22, SELECTED VERSES
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Talking animals, of course, are a staple in every culture's mythology. There's Aesop and Tolkien and *The Golden Compass* and C.S. Lewis' Narnia. The other day I saw Disney's version of *Prince Caspian* and was reminded that when Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy return to Narnia for the first time after a long absence, the children are surprised to learn that some of the animals *can't* talk; in the brutality of a totalitarian state, they've *lost* the gift of speech they once had, so the surprise is not that they can *talk*, but that they *can't*.

The Bible too is a book of myth and legend and magic and mystery and miracle, so the scarcity of talking animals in the Bible might come as something of a surprise. In the whole Bible there are only two talking animals, Eden's crafty snake and Balaam's loquacious donkey.

Subsequent legend has definitively reversed the Bible's scarcity of talking animals. Balaam's ass, it turns out, is so famous and so important he's spawned a long and rich legacy of chatty equines. Can you think of a few? Shakespeare gives us Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay," he says. Winnie the Pooh has Eeyore, who lives in The Gloomy Place, Rather Boggy and Sad. And of course Shrek has a donkey who sounds just like Eddie Murphy, and loves waffles and parfaits. And if you're about my age, you will know where my sermon title comes from:

A horse is a horse,
of course, of course,
[but] this one'll talk 'til his voice is hoarse.
You never heard of a talking horse?
Well listen to this,
I am Mister Ed!

Clearly, Balaam's chatty donkey started something magnificent, but what exactly did he do? This is the story: After centuries of slavery in Egypt, a narrow escape from Pharaoh's snarling troops across the Red Sea, and forty years of wandering in a barren wilderness, the Hebrews are at Canaan's edge, on the brink of settling down in the Promised Land. Unfortunately, of course, the Promised Land is already occupied, and when the Hebrews, who have unaccountably thrived and multiplied in the wilderness, come knocking at Canaan's door in swarming millions, the residents are terrified.

King Balak of Moab, next door to Canaan just east of the Dead Sea, calls a cabinet meeting to figure out how to hold them off. "These Hebrew hordes will chew up every last blade of grass in the kingdom," he tells his Secretary of Defense. To Balak the Hebrews look like nothing so much as a swarm of locusts.

Exponentially outnumbered, Balak knows he can never defeat them militarily, so he adopts the curious strategy of defeating them magically or linguistically, with curses and incantations. He can never win a war of swords, so he tries to win a war of words.

For King Balak knows a cunning clairvoyant with a silver tongue and an uncommon connection to the nether world of gods and demons. His name is Balaam. That's the Greek form of his name; in Hebrew it's Bilaam, so that's how the Jews pronounce his name even today. If Bilaam curses you, you stay cursed, and if Bilaam blesses you, you stay blessed. Somehow, magically, mysteriously, Bilaam's word becomes inexorable fact.

Since King Balak's armies are clearly not up to the task, Balak subs out the job of homeland

security to a private, for-profit security firm; Balaam is the ancient equivalent of Blackwater Worldwide, Eric Prince in a bathrobe with no Smith and Wesson Magnum but a formidable tongue. “Curse these infernal Hebrew hordes,” Balak tells Balaam, “and I will make you richer than God.” At first Balaam is reluctant to accept this lucrative contract; he’s not sure he wants to mess with Yahweh, but after some feeble protests, Balaam agrees to a meeting with Balak at the Moabite palace.

I’m not sure why he thinks he needs the money. Balaam is already rich; he must have built a profitable career out of his mercenary cursing and blessing, his uncannily capable incantations. Business is good. We know Balaam is rich, you see, because Balaam has a donkey, which, it turns out, is the ancient equivalent of a luxury car with leather interior, Surround-Sound, and personal DVD players. For ancient Canaanites, a donkey is a status symbol, like a Lexus or a BMW. Horses, on the other hand, are so rare they’re like Bentley’s or stretch limos; only kings and generals can afford horses. The very rich have horses; the rich have donkeys; everybody else walks. So Balaam sets off astride his valiant steed to Balak’s palace to see if these Hebrew hordes can be cursed into submission, starvation, disease, and infertility. Somebody’s got to stop these illegal aliens; they breed like rabbits.

But things do not go well for Balaam en route to the king’s palace. The donkey unaccountably veers off the road into a field as if she wants to snack on the clover. Balaam lashes her flank with the reins. Back on the road, Balaam and his mount pass a narrow stretch between walled vineyards and she lurches so far left of center like a drunk driver she crushes Balaam’s tender ankle against the rough stone wall. He pops her upside the head. They go on for a while but then the donkey just seems to have had enough of this and lies down in the middle of the road with Balaam still astride and refuses to take another step. Balaam wallops her with his walking stick.

And here’s where the story gets really interesting. The donkey, seriously aggrieved, turns around and lets Balaam have it. With words. “What have I done to you that you’ve walloped me upside the head three times?” she complains. Balaam seems to see nothing strange about this and replies as if a talking donkey is the most natural thing in the world. “Because you’ve made a fool of me,” he whines. “If I had a sword, I’d run you through right now.” Unfortunately for Balaam, and fortunately for the donkey, the only sword in close proximity is in the hands of the flaming angel the donkey has seen all along but Balaam, all-seeing clairvoyant that he is supposed to be, hasn’t noticed yet. But then God opens the prophet’s eyes and he realizes that she has saved his life three times. “If that donkey hadn’t turned aside,” the angel tells Balaam, “I would have killed *you* and let *her* live.”

I’ll come back to talking donkeys in a moment, but just to finish the story quickly. Stubborn mules notwithstanding, Balaam eventually reaches his destination at the palace and agrees to curse the Hebrew hordes, but when he finally gets around to the edge of the Hebrew encampment, the only words he can find are rich with blessing and benediction. With four long and eloquent incantations, Balaam ensures the Hebrews’ prosperous future with God-given promises of health, wealth, and large families of chattering babies. If Balaam cursed you, remember, you stayed curse, and if Balaam blessed you, you stayed blessed.

Poor King Balak of Moab: foiled again. Blackwater Worldwide, or Balaam, Inc., is a crashing failure. You should never sub out the job of homeland security to a private, for-profit security firm.

Where the word ‘donkey’ came from is uncertain, but it might be an affectionate diminutive of the name ‘Duncan,’ commonly given to friendly horses, not to mention friendly dogs. The older and more vulgar word for donkey is ‘ass,’ of course, from the formal Latin label *equus asinus*, which spawned, among other things, a whole

sorry raft of *Jack-Ass* movies. I thought about calling this sermon *What a Jack-Ass!*, but I didn't want that up on the sign all week, and besides, she's not a jack, she's a jenny.

The donkey, of course, is the Rodney Dangerfield of the equine family. Humble of reputation and awkward of physique, "with monstrous head and sickening cry and ears like errant wings, the devil's walking parody of all four-footed things," as Chesterton put it,¹ the donkey is actually quite an amazing animal—powerful, sure-footed, and perfectly adapted to survival in a rocky, barren wilderness. He is low-maintenance; you barely have to feed him; the jack-ass will find his own forage. The donkey appears one hundred times in the Bible, most famously at Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, carrying the Messiah.

Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that donkeys are quite anti-social really. Horses crave the company of fellow equines and herd up closely together, but donkeys like their space and privacy; they spread out across the landscape, when they can. Thus God gave the donkey big ears to hear at a distance, and a loud, abrasive bray, a 'sickening cry' to Chesterton, which can be heard at a distance of three kilometers, or all the way down to Belle Haven. Can you hear the donkey braying at Balaam?

Well, so what's the point, right? Why am I wasting your time with tales of Eeyore, Eddie Murphy, Mr. Ed, and Balaam's famous ass, foolish if fabulous fables every one? Well, I'm glad you asked! I want to talk to you about a blocked path, a flaming sword, and a stealthy providence.

Point #1: A blocked path and a flaming sword. Put yourself in Balaam's saddle for a moment. Blocked paths, flaming swords, and balky donkeys might actually turn out to be gifts from God.

¹G. K. Chesterton, "The Donkey," in *The Wild Knight*, quoted by Peter L. Berger, in *Redeeming Laughter* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), p. 217.

The next time your conveyance of choice lies down in the middle of the road with you still astride and refuses to go a step further, the next time your ten-year-old Corolla breaks down on your way to the job interview, the next time you fail the crucial test, the next time your husband of twenty years walks out on you with two kids in college and \$80,000 worth of tuition payments, the next time you get laid off from Bear Stearns, the next time you're the runner-up (again) for that coveted job, you might consider that the balky, garrulous donkey is diverting you from curses and leading you straight to God's rich four-fold blessing. Closed doors, shuttered windows, blocked paths, scary angels with flaming swords, stubborn mules with keen eyesight, abject failure at what you thought you wanted to do with your life, these all might be God's clandestine benediction, flashing arrows pointing you a different but a better way.

At the bottom of Jackie Robinson's elementary school transcript a teacher wrote a curt note about Jackie's future prospects: "Gardener, probably" wrote the helpful teacher.² A few years later Branch Rickey comes calling, the gardener plants himself at second base, plows furrows along the base-paths at Ebbets Field, and transforms baseball and America. Well, as they say, the minute God blocks up one path with a scary angel and a flaming sword, God'll blaze a new trail in a different direction.

Or Point #2: A stealthy providence. This time you're not Balaam, but the unsuspecting Hebrews. You see, here's the thing about this Balaam story. It's one of the strangest stories in the whole Bible, not just because the donkey talks, but also because no one knows where this Balaam comes from. He's not a Jew, you see. He's not a Moabite. He lives in an obscure town on the banks of the Euphrates River, but that's all we know about him. He's a non-Jewish prophet; he's never met Moses or Joshua, but somehow he knows God's

²Paul Gray, "Busting the Color Line," *Time* Magazine, October 20, 1997, p. 107.

name. All through this story, Balaam calls God ‘Yahweh,’ the private, Jewish name for God, revealed to Moses in the burning bush and locked up tight for Jewish lips alone. How does Balaam know God’s name? Nobody knows. Balaam is not a Jew and does not love the Jews and does not care about the Jews, but he knows God’s name, and he is the guardian of all these powerful incantations, and he is on his way to curse the Jews because somebody has paid him a million dollars to do so, but in the end he can’t let loose with his curses.

Did you notice this? The Jews are nowhere to be seen in this story. This is the only story in the Jewish Bible I can think of that doesn’t have a Jew in it. King Balak and Prophet Balaam and Balaam’s loquacious ass act out this whole vivid drama on the edge of the Jewish encampment and the Jews don’t even know it’s happening. Unbeknownst to the Jews God is diverting curses from their doorstep with scary angels and flaming swords and balky donkeys.

Perhaps what it means for us today is there is a stealthy providence at work in your life too. Someone is coming to curse you and you didn’t even know it. Unbeknownst to you, an unseen providence is making his donkey lie down in the middle of the road with him still astride. Someone is coming to curse you, but you didn’t even know it, because his otherwise reliable BMW just broke down in the center lane of the Lincoln Tunnel. Some rich clairvoyant with powerful incantations is being paid a million dollars to curse you, but when he finally gets to your house, a stealthy providence twists his obscenities into rich blessings for a prosperous future. Someone has just fallen asleep at the wheel and is drifting across the yellow line to strike you, but you didn’t even know it, because an invisible hand slaps his face just in time. Viruses lurk and malignancies wait and terrorists stalk, but you didn’t even know it, because they have not come nigh you to harm. How many close calls have we all survived and how many times have we been carried to blessing

on the wings of an unseen providence? We will never know.

Life is a game of inches and seconds. You stay at the bar for one last drink and in walks the stranger with whom you will forge a prosperous lifelong business partnership. You are a slow learner, indifferent and distracted and dyslexic, but then the computer arbitrarily assigns you to Miss Barnes’ seventh-grade math class, she turns you on to algebra, and the rest of your academic career is a snap. The computer might have put you in dull Mr. Bunson’s class, which means maybe you might be out on parole by now. By mistake you leave a semester’s worth of notes in the classroom, walk clear across campus to the next class before you realize your mistake, turn around for the bootless ten-minute walk to retrieve them—there seems to be an angel with a flaming sword in your path—but then there she is, your first sight of the woman of your dreams, the love of your life, an accidental meeting at the end of a detour. Accidental? Perhaps we use the words ‘accident’ and ‘coincidence’ too frequently.

Someone is coming to curse you, but you didn’t even know it, because there is a flaming sword before him and a stubborn mule beneath him, and when he finally arrives, the only words he can think of are brimming with promise and blessing and benediction. Four times he’ll bless you, this unknown but powerful prophet. Four times!

As Frederick Buechner puts it, “The next time the old mare looks up from her grazing and lets loose with an exultant whinny at the empty horizon, you might do well to consider that the horizon is not as empty as you think.”³

³Slightly adapted from Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), p. 13.