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God's Action: A Christian Reflection on the Old Testament
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"The search for God is not the search for comfort or tranquillity, but for truth, for justice, faithfulness, integrity; these, as the prophets tirelessly reiterated, are the forms of God's appearance in the world" (Nicholas Lash, "Creation, courtesy and contemplation" in his *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (CUP: 1996), 179).

"We must now go back a bit and explain what the whole scene had looked like from Uncle Andrew's point of view. It had not made at all the same impression on him as on the Cabby and the children. For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are" (The narrator in C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (Penguin: 1963), 116).

ON WATCHING ONE'S LANGUAGE

Important to clarify and define terms.

- 1) "Miracle" is not a Hebrew word, and the common conceptuality attached to the word is not characteristic of the OT. Prime term is "sign" (Heb. *ōth*, compare "signs", Gk. *sēmeia*, in John's Gospel), and sometimes also "wonder" (Heb. *mōphēth*). These draw attention to the potential of certain events to open one's eyes, often in awe, to discern God at work.
- 2) Neither "nature" nor "the supernatural" are Hebrew terms, and their conceptuality can easily skew the OT's own concerns to depict a world that is God's world:

Until the seventeenth century this term [sc. 'supernatural']... had only been used adjectivally or adverbially, to indicate the difference that is made when someone is enabled to behave in ways above their ordinary station. You come across a rabbit playing Mozart? That rabbit is performing supernaturally, is the beneficiary of supernatural gifts. So also (things being the way they are since we were barred from paradise) is the human being whom one finds behaving generously, justly, truthfully. (And, of course, it is only God to whom the term 'supernatural' could never be applied: who graces God? Who elevates the nature of divinity?)

In the seventeenth century, for the first time, 'supernatural', the substantive, began to connote a realm of being, a territory of existence, 'outside' the world we know. With 'nature' now deemed single, homogeneous and self-contained, we labelled 'supernatural' that 'other' world inhabited (some said) by ghosts and poltergeists, by demons, angels and suchlike extraterrestrials – and by God.

It is, I think, almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the massive shift in language and imagination that took place, in Europe, in the seventeenth century... One aspect of this shift was a transformation of the way in which relations with the Holy One, Creator and Redeemer of the world, were understood... By the end of the seventeenth century, 'believing in God', which, for Augustine and Aquinas, had been a matter of setting as our heart's desire the holy mystery disclosed in Christ towards whose blinding presence we walk in company on pilgrimage, had become a matter of supposing that there is, outside the world we know, a large and powerful entity called 'God'. (Lash, "Creation, courtesy and contemplation", 168-69).

ON RECOGNIZING WHICH ARE, AND ARE NOT, GOOD QUESTIONS

Numbers 22: Famous story; impossible to date precisely. Important to read with *total imaginative seriousness* (as much as one's favourite soap opera!) – which standard biblical introductions and commentaries often disable rather than enable. Decide about genre in the light of close reading.

Suggested question: "What should one make of the 'miracle of the talking donkey'?"

vv.1-6: The problem. Balak, king of Moab, is fearful of Israel; he summons assistance in the form of a religious hit-man, whose ability to pronounce blessings and curses (and so disadvantage or disable the opposition) is, in Balak's view, definitive (v.6).

vv.7-14. Balaam, when summoned, consults God, who refuses to let him go with Balak's men for a principled, axiomatic reason: Israel "are blessed" (v.12). Although Balaam is not an Israelite, he is portrayed as truly knowing the LORD and as a "prophet/seer".

vv.15-17. When does "no" really mean "no"? Balak thinks Balaam is playing hard to get, and so ups the offer to 'name your price'.

vv.18-22a. Balaam's response sounds OK. But is it a pious-sounding smokescreen for a desire to corrupt his vocation by accepting Balak's offer? The principle of v.12 would still stand, so is Balaam wanting to circumvent it? God's permission then would be ironic – telling Balaam what he wants to hear, though it will not mean what he wants it to mean. If Balaam is succumbing to greed, God wants to teach him a lesson.

vv.22b-27. A remarkable, and drily humorous, sequence. Three times the deadly angel appears, each time harder to circumvent. a) The ass, proverbially dull, can see what the Top Man cannot see; Balaam has become blind to the divine presence. b) Blind Balaam's threefold urging of seeing ass anticipates blind Balak's threefold urging of seeing Balaam (in Num. 23-24).

vv.28-30. The ass's second question gets to the point. Her unusual behaviour, entirely unprecedented, had an obvious significance which Balaam had failed to see: *something must be wrong*. Even the simplest act of seeing/comprehending has become too much for Balaam.

vv.31-35. Angel opens Balaam's eyes, so that he does see what is going on. Angel does not say why Balaam's course was wrong (he knows why), and the angel's words achieve their purpose: Balaam is "convicted of sin", and becomes willing to renounce the enterprise that is causing offence. But what was a deadly error when undertaken self-seekingly becomes fruitful if done in obedience to God.

Conclusion: Why could not Balaam see the angel? Calvin comments: "Whence came such blindness, but from the greed by which he had been rendered so senseless, that he preferred filthy lucre to the holy calling of God?" (*Harmony on Pentateuch: Numbers*). Moral failure induces spiritual blindness. Avaricious self-seeking obscures the reality of the Other. The impure in heart fail to see God.

THE QUESTION OF DIVINE ACTION, "MIRACLE", AND APPROPRIATE DISCERNMENT

What about the donkey? If Balaam were to ask the donkey "How are you talking?" – also presumably as unprecedented as the recent behaviour – the unusual things that matters in the story (angel with deadly sword; donkey's unprecedented behaviour) would be obscured by the unusual thing ("miracle" of animal talking) that does not matter.

Compare St Augustine: "Nothing here indeed appears more wondrous (*mirabilis*) than that when the ass speaks he is not terrified but rather, as though accustomed to such portents (*monstris*), he continues to reply angrily to it" (*Questions on the Heptateuch: Numbers* 48), with the same point made by Robert Alter in a contemporary register: "The wonderful absurdity of this response is that Balaam doesn't miss a beat. Confronted with the articulated speech of his ass's eminently justified complaint, he answers irascibly as though he were thoroughly accustomed to conducting debates with his beast" (*The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W.W.Norton & Co: 2004), 800).

The "miraculous" appearance of the angel with the sword: the angel is *there*, i.e. "given", "objective", yet can only be seen with discerning eyes, i.e. "appropriate subjectivity". Moreover the remarkable and unusual form of the divine anger (why not e.g. a deadly lion? cf. 1 Kgs. 13:24, 20:36) – it can

initially be circumvented, but as Balaam proceeds further along his way it reappears, each time harder to avoid – suggests that the form of the divine anger is symbolically related to the nature of Balaam's sin. The meaning is that a journey motivated by corrupt self-seeking is not immediately disastrous, yet its end is not gain but destruction, and the destruction looms larger and less escapable the further one goes.

Readers of the story can be easily sidetracked. This surely tells us something both about the genre of the story, and about the need to discern what are good questions about divine action.