

BIBLE HANGS BAD REPUTATION ON GOOD GUY

Some people get a bad reputation even when they do things right. It even happens in the Bible.

A case in point is a fellow named Balaam. He played the game according to the rules, but later biblical traditions generally saw him as a villain.

You can find his story in the Jewish scriptures at Numbers 22-24. Balaam pops up in the history of the people of Israel shortly before they were due to enter the promised land of Canaan.

After Moses had rescued the Hebrews from their serfdom in Egypt, they spent forty years meandering through the wildernesses of the Sinai Peninsula. A generation of life as nomads toughened the Israelite into a formidable band.

By the time they were ready to migrate through the territories of Trans-Jordan, the local chieftains were understandably alarmed.

So the king of the Moabite people, a man named Balak, decided to do something about the threatening advances of the Israelites. He sent for a hired gun, Balaam, the prophet and soothsayer from the east.

Balak's plan was to pay Balaam a handsome fee, and in return the prophet would curse the Israelites and drive them out.

If Balaam had gone through with the scheme, he would have deserved to go down in history as a rascal. But he didn't. At every turn he consulted with the Lord and resolved to do nothing contrary to God's own plan.

Thus when Balak's agents came with their bribes, Balaam dreamt that God vetoed the proposal, and he set them packing. The agents returned with more money.

This time God permitted Balaam to go with them, but on the way the prophet's own donkey and a sword-wielding angel warned him to speak only what the Lord allowed.

Balak was delighted when Balaam arrived. The king took the prophet to a plateau overlooking the Israelite camp.

They built seven altars and sacrificed a bull and a ram on each. But when it came time for Balaam to curse the invading Israelites, all he could do was pronounce a blessing over them.

You can imagine Balak's consternation at what must have been a revolting turn of events. He'd paid good money and gone through the proper religious ceremonies to get his enemies cursed. But instead his hired prophet insisted on blessing the migrating Hebrews.

He tried it again from a higher plateau, but with the same result. The third time was no charm either. More sacrificial hoopla, but a blessing was issued instead of a curse.

For good measure, Balaam threw in a gratuitous fourth blessing for the Israelites. And in disgust Balak went away and sent the prophet home.

The long and short of it is that Balaam was a good guy, a model prophet. He consistently did what the Lord wanted him to do. He refused to curse God's people, but risked offending his employer just to bless the interloping Israelites. He deserved a medal for a job well done.

What he got instead was a bad reputation. His name isn't mentioned all that often in the subsequent books of the Bible, but without exception the later Jewish writings refer to him in unflattering terms.

It's implied that he was greedy because he was willing to accept Balak's bribe, that he practiced illegal divinations, and that he was the kind of guy who encouraged people to indulge in sexual indecencies and worship false gods.

Balaam didn't get any breaks in the Christian scriptures either. There he's pegged as mercenary and greedy, as a false teacher, and as a promoter of idolatry and immorality. In a word, Balaam became a fall-guy, a villain.

It just goes to how. Some people get a bad reputation even when they do things right. It even happens in the Bible.