

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 22

### *Balak Summons Balaam*

Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. 2 And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. 3 And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. 4 And Moab said to the elders of Midian, "This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field." So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, 5 sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. 6 Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." 7 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. 8 And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. 9 And God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" 10 And Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, 11 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" 12 God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." 13 So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you." 14 So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us." 15 Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these. 16 And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: 'Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, 17 for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.'" 18 But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more. 19 So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me." 20 And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you." 21 So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

**22:1** *plains of Moab.* Israel now marched back to their staging area east of the Jordan and just north of the Dead Sea. From this point they would launch their attack on Canaan, beginning with the ancient city of Jericho. Moab did not trust Israel's intentions, however. Moab's fear leads to a remarkable interval in the story of Israel: the account of Balak and Balaam (chs. 22–24). (CSB)

In obedience to God's command, the Israelites did not harass the Edomites and the Moabites (Dt 2:9). (TLSB)

**22:2** *Balak.* Possibly a Midianite. If so, he would have been "king of Moab at that time" (v 4) because he had seized control of former Moabite holdings as the Amorites had done in other territories (21:26). (TLSB)

**22:3** *Moab was in great dread.* Balak king of Moab did not know that Israel had no plans against him. He saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. (CSB)

Balak “was overcome with fear” (v 3), lest the same fate was in store for him that had befallen the Amorite kings Sihon and Og (ch 21). (TLSB)

**22:4** *said to the elders of Midian.* Balak made an alliance with the Midianites to oppose Israel (see v. 7). (CSB)

Descendants of Abraham and Keturah, the nomadic Midianites moved about in various desert areas, also those east of Moab and Edom (cf Gn 25:1–4; 37:25). (TLSB)

*this horde will now lick up all that is around us.* A proverbial simile particularly fitting for a pastoral people. (CSB)

As effortlessly and casually as a cow wanders and grazes. (TLSB)

**22:5** *sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor.* Since Balak believed that there was no military way to withstand Israel, he sought to oppose them through pagan divination (vv. 6–7), sending for a diviner with an international reputation. (One of Balaam’s non-Biblical prophecies is preserved in an Aramaic text from Deir Alla in the Jordan Valley dating to c. 700 B.C.) (CSB)

Mysterious and complex character. His nationality cannot definitely be determined. Archaeologists discovered an ink inscription written on plaster c 700 BC at a temple in biblical Succoth (modern Deir ‘Allah. It includes the sayings of Balaam, son of Beor, and is written in a unique west Semitic dialect. Both red and black inks were used. Similar Israelite plaster texts were found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in northern Sinai. Cf Dt 27:2–3. (TLSB)

*Pethor.* Near the Euphrates, far to the north in Aram, south of Carchemish. (TLSB)

*people of Amaw.* Mentioned by Assyrian records among place-names in that area. Moses does not record that Pethor was Balaam’s original home. Possibly, he visited Pethor because his services had been sought there. When later he “went back to his place” (24:25), he apparently did not return to the distant north because he remained active among the Midianites and eventually died there (31:8, 16). (TLSB)

**22:8–9** Balaam anticipates that he can manipulate Israel’s God and turn Him against them. (TLSB)

*the LORD speaks to me ... God came to Balaam.* In the account of Balaam’s confrontation with Israel’s Protector, the general term “God” (vv 9, 12, 20, 38; 23:4) and His proper name “LORD” (vv 8, 13, 18; 23:3, 5) frequently occur side by side, often in successive verses, even in the same verse. (TLSB)

**22:8** *bring back word...as the LORD gives me.* The language here and in v. 18 (“the LORD my God”) has led some to believe that Balaam was a believer in Yahweh (“the LORD”), God of Israel. Based on the subsequent narrative, however, it seems best to take Balaam’s words as claiming to be the spokesman for any god. Balaam is universally condemned in Scripture for moral, ethical and religious faults (see 31:7–8, 15–16; Dt 23:3–6; Jos 13:22; 24:9–10; Ne 13:1–3; Mic 6:5; 2Pe 2:15–16; Jude 11; Rev 2:14). (CSB)

**22:9** *God came to Balaam.* The author shows his aversion to the pagan prophet Balaam by using “God” instead of “the LORD” (Yahweh), as Balaam does (e.g., in v. 8). By this subtle device, the narrator distances himself from Balaam’s outrageous claims. That God spoke to Balaam is not to be denied, but Balaam did not yet realize that the God of Israel was unlike the supposed deities that he usually schemed against. (CSB)

God alerts Balaam that He knew the wicked purpose of the Moabite delegation. (TLSB)

**22:12** *they are blessed.* Israel was under the Lord's blessing promised to Abraham. (CSB)

**22:14** *went to Balak.* C 350 mi; development of these events happened over weeks, illustrating the persistence of everyone involved. (CSB)

**22:18** *LORD my God.* Balaam's religious convictions are even more mystifying. He acknowledged and obeyed Israel's Lord (v 8; 24:4), but he also persisted in heathen practices. Despite his professed recognition of the true God, he succumbed to his greed and repeatedly sought a way to comply with his royal benefactor's evil request. The tension between his self-determination and God's will is a good example of the complexity of human perversity (2Pt 2:12–16). But when Balaam attempted to ply his trade as a soothsayer, God put true words of prophecy on his lips (v 6; cf Jn 11:49–51). The NT refers to the story of Balaam as a warning against the sins of greed and idolatry (2Pt 2:15; Jude 11; Rv 2:14). Iren: "Balaam ... is certainly not then to be counted as a prophet, but as a soothsayer" (ANF 1:572). (TLSB)

**22:19** *that I may know.* The offer of greater reward for Balaam's services induced him to pretend that he did not already know what "the command of the LORD" was (v 18). God permitted the greedy soothsayer to accompany Balak's emissaries to teach Balaam a lesson. At the same time, He made it clear that the expedition served only His purpose. Balaam is not an isolated example of God's dealing with people who ignore His will in their quest for material gain. He may let them attain their coveted objective and make it a means of breaking their rebellious self-will. (Cf 11:33; Ps 106:13–15; Is 10:12–14.) (TLSB)

**22:20** *go with them.* There appears to be a contradiction between the permission God grants Balaam here and the prohibition he had given earlier (v. 12), and then the anger the Lord displayed against Balaam on his journey (v. 22). The difficulty is best understood as lying in the contrary character of Balaam. God had forbidden him to go to curse Israel. He then allowed Balaam to go, but only if he would follow the Lord's direction. But Balaam's real intentions were known to the Lord, and so with severe displeasure he confronted the pagan prophet. (CSB)

**22:1–21** Fearful Balak summons the soothsayer Balaam to curse the Israelites. God works with the situation by emphasizing the importance of His Word, which must be fulfilled. God cannot be manipulated, and His Word must not be twisted for sinful purposes. Receive the Word with an open heart, and rejoice in the blessings it contains for you, especially the salvation promised in Jesus. • Lord, how magnificently You provide protection for those You love. Have mercy on us poor sinners, through Christ, the Living Word. Amen. (TLSB)

#### *Balaam's Donkey and the Angel*

**22** But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. **23** And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. **24** Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. **25** And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. **26** Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. **27** When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. **28** Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" **29** And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have

made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you.” 30 And the donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?” And he said, “No.” 31 Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. 32 And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse[c] before me. 33 The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.” 34 Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.” 35 And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. 36 When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border. 37 And Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?” 38 Balaam said to Balak, “Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.” 39 Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. 40 And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him. 41 And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people.

22:22 *anger was kindled*. Lit, “nose grew hot,” describing red-faced rage. To convince Balaam that his impure motives were known to God, He manifested His anger in a most dramatic way.(TLSB)

*angel of the LORD*. Identified with the Lord (v 35). Sav: “Before the ass stood an angel with a sword. This is Christ” (WGS, p 101). (TLSB)

22:23 *the donkey saw the angel of the LORD*. The internationally known seer is blind to spiritual reality, but his proverbially dumb beast is able to see the angel of the Lord on the path. As a pagan prophet, Balaam was a specialist in animal divination, but his animal saw what he was blind to observe. (CSB)

Only Balaam’s beast of burden was at first enabled to see the heavenly vision. “The princes of Moab” (v 21) and the “two servants” (v 22) apparently remained unaware of it. Cf 2Ki 6:17; Jn 12:28–29; Ac 9:1–7. (TLSB)

*Balaam struck*. Moses begins to build the irony of the fact that the donkey knows better than her master. (TLSB)

22:28 *the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey*. Note the humor! (TLSB)

*she said to Balaam*. By nature, animals cannot speak rationally with humans. But there can be no doubt that the Creator, who brought them to life from the mute earth (Gn 1:24), can empower them to utter His message to people when it serves His purpose. (TLSB)

22:29 Balaam engages in an argument with his donkey as though nothing strange were taking place. So great is his rage he cannot see his foolishness. (TLSB)

*If I had a sword*. A ridiculous picture of the hapless Balaam. A sword was nearby (see vv. 23, 31–33), but its victim was not going to be the donkey. (CSB)

Ironic, as an angel stands by with a sword (vv 23, 31). (TLSB)

**22:30** The donkey, speaking rationally, begins to win the argument! (TLSB)

**22:31** *Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam's.* The language follows the same structure as the opening words of v. 28. In some ways, the opening of the eyes of the pagan prophet to see the reality of the angel was the greater miracle. (CSB)

**22:32** *your way is perverse.* Balaam pretended to listen to God but rushed to oppose Him. (TLSB)

**22:34** *I have sinned.* Balaam confessed that the Lord, who “test[s] the minds and hearts” (Ps 7:9), knew that he intended to use the Lord’s permission to “go with them” (v 20) to gratify his lust for wealth. Cf Jer 11:20; Rv 2:23. (TLSB)

**22:35** *speak only what I tell you.* The one great gain was that Balaam was now more aware of the seriousness of the task before him; he would not be able to change the word the Lord would give him (see 23:12, 20, 26). (CSB)

At the end of Balaam’s journey, he was to transmit a genuine word of prophecy. Balak’s plot was to be frustrated by the very agent whom he had chosen to carry it out. (TLSB)

**22:37** *Did I not send you an urgent summons?* The comic element of the story is seen not only in the hapless Balaam but also in the frustrated Balak (see 23:11, 25; 24:10). (CSB)

*honor.* Cf v 17. Balaam’s sin likely included prideful lust for recognition. (TLSB)

**22:40** *Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep.* Not sacrifices to the Lord. The pieces given to Balaam would have included the livers, for, as a pagan diviner, Balaam was a specialist in liver divination. Balaam subsequently gave up his acts of sorcery as the power of the Lord’s word came upon him (24:1). (CSB)

*Kiriath-huzoth.* Lit, “city of streets”; site mentioned only here. (CSB)

**22:40** In Balaam’s honor, Balak gave a banquet, for which oxen and sheep were slaughtered. (TLSB)

*sacrificed.* Hbr does not always denote the killing of animals for ritual purposes (Dt 12:15, 21; 1Sm 28:24; 2Ch 18:2). (TLSB)

**22:41** *Bamoth-baal.* Lit, “the high places of baal.” Actual god involved may be Chemosh, rather than the Phoenician Baal, since “Baal” is used for Chemosh among the nearby Ammonites. (CSB)

*saw a fraction.* Superstitious technique seemed to require that the curse be uttered from a place where the soothsayer saw his victims. When the attempt failed at this otherwise unknown height, Balak took Balaam to “the top of Pisgah” (23:13–14) and finally to “the top of Peor” (23:28). (CSB)

**22:22–41** As Balaam mocked the Lord by ignoring His Word, the Lord now comically mocks Balaam. So great is God’s Word, it can make a donkey speak! Treasure the Word. Share it confidently, because the Word is God’s power for working repentance and forgiving sins. • Speak, O Lord; Your servant is listening. Amen. (TLSB)