

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 22

### *Balak Summons Balaam*

Then the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho.<sup>2</sup> Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites,<sup>3</sup> and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> The Moabites said to the elders of Midian, “This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time,<sup>5</sup> sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land. Balak said: “A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me.<sup>6</sup> Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed.”<sup>7</sup> The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. When they came to Balaam, they told him what Balak had said.<sup>8</sup> “Spend the night here,” Balaam said to them, “and I will bring you back the answer the LORD gives me.” So the Moabite princes stayed with him.<sup>9</sup> God came to Balaam and asked, “Who are these men with you?”<sup>10</sup> Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message:<sup>11</sup> ‘A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.’ ”<sup>12</sup> But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”<sup>13</sup> The next morning Balaam got up and said to Balak’s princes, “Go back to your own country, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.”<sup>14</sup> So the Moabite princes returned to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”<sup>15</sup> Then Balak sent other princes, more numerous and more distinguished than the first.<sup>16</sup> They came to Balaam and said: “This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me,<sup>17</sup> because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me.”<sup>18</sup> But Balaam answered them, “Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God.<sup>19</sup> Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the LORD will tell me.”<sup>20</sup> That night God came to Balaam and said, “Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.”

**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 terrified*. 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)

*as an ox licks up the grass of the field*. A proverbial simile particularly fitting for a pastoral people. (CSB)

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

**22:5** *summon 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** *the answer 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 (see note on Ge 12:2–3). (CSB)

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

**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)

### *Balaam's Donkey*

<sup>21</sup> Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. <sup>22</sup> But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road. <sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. <sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her again. <sup>26</sup> Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff. <sup>28</sup> Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" <sup>29</sup> Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." <sup>30</sup> The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said. <sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. <sup>32</sup> The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. <sup>33</sup> The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her." <sup>34</sup> Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back." <sup>35</sup> The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak. <sup>36</sup> When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the Moabite town on the Arnon border, at the edge of his territory. <sup>37</sup> Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?" <sup>38</sup> "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth." <sup>39</sup> Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath Huzoth. <sup>40</sup> Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep, and gave some to Balaam and the princes who were with him. <sup>41</sup> The next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he saw part of the people.

**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)

**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 Balaam’s eyes*. 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.

**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. See note, 21:29. *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).

**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)