

Numbers 22:1 ¶ And the children of Israel set forward, and pitched in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan *by* Jericho.

Numbers 22:2 And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

Numbers 22:3 And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they *were* many: and Moab was distressed because of the children of Israel.

Numbers 22:4 And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this company lick up all *that are* round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak the son of Zippor *was* king of the Moabites at that time.

This chapter records one of the most intriguing events contained in the book of Numbers—Balaam has a conversation with his donkey and is confronted by the angel of the LORD. The question arises, “How did Moses know about these events?” Those types of questions always irritate me. The powers that be always seem to want to demand personal experience of the writer to affirm his contribution to scripture. I believe that they are belittling the LORD’s inspiration when they do so. Just as prophets received revelations of things to come, and the Holy Spirit gifts one with a word of knowledge, so too could He inspire the revelation of these events through the pen of Moses without human aid.

The Israelites are encamped “in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan by Jericho.” Balak, son of Zippor, king of the Moabites, knows all about how the Israelites had destroyed the Amorites. That victory had provoked fear in the Moabites besides the fact that the Israelites numbered so many. Balak compared Israel to an ox eating up the grass in a field in reference to its size and strength.

Balak decided to confer with the neighboring Midianites as to mounting a joint defense against the people of Israel. They reasoned that if they didn’t do something, they would be destroyed just as surely as had the Amorites.

If only Balak had known that they had no reason to fear.

Deuteronomy 2:9 “And the LORD said unto me, Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle: for I will not give thee of their land for a possession; because I have given Ar unto the children of Lot for a possession.”

The New Bible Commentary notes that the Israelites are probably in the last five months of the 40th year out of Egypt.

Numbers 22:5 He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me:

Numbers 22:6 Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, *that* we may smite them, and *that* I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.

Balak decided to send messengers to Balaam, the son of Beor, in Pethor asking

him to come and curse these people that were threatening his kingdom. He noted that they had come out from Egypt and that “they cover the face of the earth”—in other words, they were great in number. He admits that he can’t defeat them militarily, but that he thinks he can drive them out of the land with Balaam’s help. Evidently, Balaam has a strong reputation testifying to the fact that those he blesses are blessed, and those he curses are cursed.

Numbers 22:7 And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand; and they came unto Balaam, and spake unto him the words of Balak.

Numbers 22:8 And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the LORD shall speak unto me: and the princes of Moab abode with Balaam.

So the delegation from Balak, including leaders from Moab and Midian, left to seek Balaam, bringing “the rewards of divination in their hand”—money to pay for his services. Upon finding Balaam, they gave him the message from Balak.

Balaam is going to prove to be a complicated character. He first identifies himself as being under the LORD’s authority. He answers the delegation by telling them that he will answer them the next morning according to the LORD’s instructions to him. It stands out to me that Balaam was confident of getting instruction from the LORD.

I noticed that some commentaries do not credit Balaam with knowing the LORD, but the Hebrew is clear that he used the title “YHWH,” the name by which the LORD was specifically known to the people of Israel.

Numbers 22:9 And God came unto Balaam, and said, What men *are* these with thee?

Numbers 22:10 And Balaam said unto God, Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, hath sent unto me, *saying*,

Numbers 22:11 Behold, *there is* a people come out of Egypt, which covereth the face of the earth: come now, curse me them; peradventure I shall be able to overcome them, and drive them out.

Numbers 22:12 And God said unto Balaam, Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they *are* blessed.

We know that God already knows what is happening, but he spoke with Balaam in some way and asked him who the men were that were staying with him. Balaam answers by telling God that Balak had sent them to ask him to come and curse a great multitude of people that had come out of Egypt that were threatening his borders. He admitted that the king thought Balaam could get rid of them.

God immediately told Balaam that he could not go with them nor could he curse the people because they are a blessed people—implied, blessed by Me.

Numbers 22:13 And Balaam rose up in the morning, and said unto the princes

of Balak, Get you into your land: for the LORD refuseth to give me leave to go with you.

Numbers 22:14 And the princes of Moab rose up, and they went unto Balak, and said, Balaam refuseth to come with us.

The next morning Balaam told the king's delegation to go home because the LORD refused to let him go with them. So they returned home and informed Balak that Balaam would not come.

I liked the way Guzik phrased it: "This carries the sense that Balaam *wanted* to go, but God wouldn't let him. We can easily picture Balaam saying it just this way to the messengers from Balak. 'I would *really* like to go with you, but God won't let me.'"

Numbers 22:15 ¶ And Balak sent yet again princes, more, and more honourable than they.

Numbers 22:16 And they came to Balaam, and said to him, Thus saith Balak the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me:

Numbers 22:17 For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people.

Balak wouldn't take "no" for an answer and decided to send an even more impressive delegation to plead with Balaam. Through them he promised Balaam very great honor; in fact, he could name his price if he would just come and curse this people.

Numbers 22:18 And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more.

Numbers 22:19 Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what the LORD will say unto me more.

Numbers 22:20 And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, rise up, *and* go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do.

Balaam stuck to his guns. He said that it didn't matter if Balak promised to give him his house full of silver and gold; he could not disobey the word of the LORD "my God." Still, he told them to stay the night and he would talk to the LORD again.

God came again that night to speak to Balaam in some way and told him that he could go with the men if they came to call on him again. Even so, he could only speak according to what He gave Balaam to speak.

Numbers 22:21 And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

It's interesting to note that Balaam insisted that he could only speak as the LORD

spoke to him, even as he thought he could get away with ignoring the LORD's instruction about going with the men. Moses tells us that Balaam got up the next morning and saddled his ass and went with the princes of Moab. He didn't even wait to give the men a chance to come to him; he acted in accordance with what he wanted to hear—not what he was actually told.

How often do we do the same?

Numbers 22:22 ¶ And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the LORD stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants *were* with him.

God was very angry with Balaam for going, and the angel of the LORD stood in the way to stop him. It is noted that he was riding his ass (female donkey) and accompanied by two servants. It seems he wasn't traveling in the immediate company of the delegation from Balak.

Coffman provides a thought to consider: "The repeated warning indicates that Balaam had decided in his heart that he would comply with Balak's request and 'curse' Israel. This triggered the anger of God. 'Because he went' therefore has the meaning of 'went with the intention of disobeying God.'"

A reference to "the angel of the LORD" in the Old Testament is usually a reference to the preincarnate Jesus.

Numbers 22:23 And the ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way.

Numbers 22:24 But the angel of the LORD stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall *being* on this side, and a wall on that side.

Numbers 22:25 And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall: and he smote her again.

Numbers 22:26 And the angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place, where *was* no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

Numbers 22:27 And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.

It seems that the LORD allowed the donkey to see His angel blocking their path, standing with sword in hand. Instead of stopping, the donkey turned out of the way into the field. Balaam began hitting the donkey to get back on the path.

Evidently, the path wound through the vineyards that were walled on both sides. Once again the donkey saw the angel of the LORD and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall as it tried to get past the angel. Again, Balaam beat the donkey. The angel of the LORD took up a position a bit further down the path and stood in a narrow place that prevented a turn in either direction. This time when the donkey saw the angel, she fell down under Balaam, making him really angry;

and he beat the animal once again with his staff.

Numbers 22:28 And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

Numbers 22:29 And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

At this point the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she asked Balaam why he had beaten her these three times. Amazing to me, Balaam didn't seem to be phased by the fact that he was talking to a donkey. He immediately answered that it was because she had "made a fool of me" (NIV). He went on to add that he would have killed her if he'd had a sword in his hand.

Numbers 22:30 And the ass said unto Balaam, *Am* not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since *I was* thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

The donkey proceeds to reason with Balaam. My paraphrase: Have I ever been anything except a good, obedient donkey since the very day you became my master until now? Balaam had to acknowledge that the donkey was right.

Numbers 22:31 Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

Numbers 22:32 And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because *thy* way is perverse before me:

Numbers 22:33 And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive.

Finally, the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam so that he could see the angel of the LORD with drawn sword standing in the path. He immediately fell on his face before the angel.

I liked the application Guzik made between the donkey and a true follower of Jesus as one who is "sensitive to God's direction, a thorn to the disobedient, and a victim of the wrath of the disobedient."

The angel of the LORD then asked Balaam why he had beaten his donkey. He declared that he had come to block Balaam's path because he was so rashly determined to disobey Him. He went on to say that the donkey had saved his life because if she hadn't turned aside, He would have killed Balaam and spared the animal.

The language makes it clear to me that the angel is divine and is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus.

There are some that do not believe that the LORD really spoke to Balaam through the donkey; but Peter, as inspired by the Spirit, declares it to be fact.

2 Peter 2:15–16 “Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet.”

Numbers 22:34 And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.

Numbers 22:35 And the angel of the LORD said unto Balaam, Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

Balaam quickly admitted that he had sinned. He went on to say that he did not realize that the angel was blocking his path and would turn around and go back home if that was what the angel wanted.

Interestingly, the angel of the LORD told Balaam to go ahead and proceed, but he could only speak the word that “I shall speak unto thee”—again, an affirmation that Balaam was talking to the LORD.

So Balaam continued to follow the princes of Balak. One can’t help but wonder if the two servants traveling with Balaam witnessed any of this.

Numbers 22:36 ¶ And when Balak heard that Balaam was come, he went out to meet him unto a city of Moab, which *is* in the border of Arnon, which *is* in the utmost coast.

Numbers 22:37 And Balak said unto Balaam, Did I not earnestly send unto thee to call thee? wherefore camest thou not unto me? am I not able indeed to promote thee to honour?

When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him in a Moabite city on the furthest border of the Arnon. Balak immediately questioned Balaam as to why he did not come the first time he sent for him. Didn’t he realize that Balak could richly reward him?

Numbers 22:38 And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.

Numbers 22:39 And Balaam went with Balak, and they came unto Kirjathhuzoth.

Numbers 22:40 And Balak offered oxen and sheep, and sent to Balaam, and to the princes that *were* with him.

Numbers 22:41 And it came to pass on the morrow, that Balak took Balaam, and brought him up into the high places of Baal, that thence he might see the utmost *part* of the people.

Balaam told Balak that though he had come, he could not say anything other than what the LORD put in his mouth to say. Balaam continued on with Balak to Kirjathuzoth, a place not far from the camp of Israel. Balak then presented presents of oxen and sheep to Balaam and the princes that had formed his delegation.

On the next day Balak took Balaam up to one of the high places where Baal was worshipped so he could see the great size of the camp of the Israel.