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Balaam's Three Encounters with God

22: 2-40

Numbers 22:2-7 sets the stage, **King Balak** of **Mo'ab** was **very much afraid of the Israelites** because he saw **all that Isra'el had done to the Amorites**, and because **there were so many of them (22:2-3)**. **Mo'ab** tells the **leaders of Midian** that **this horde of Israelites will lick up everything around us, the way an ox licks up grass in the field (22:4a)**. However, the **Moabites** and the **Midianites** would eventually learn that the devouring and mighty **ox** was not **Isra'el itself**, but the **God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** who stood behind **Isra'el**. "**God, who brought them out of Egypt, gives them the strength of a wild ox. They will devour the nations opposing them, breaking their bones, and piercing them with arrows**" (24:8). The mention of **Mo'ab** and **Midian** together in **22:4** and again in **22:7** suggests that the two nations were equals, although **Mo'ab** had overwhelmed **Midian** in battle; thus, **Mo'ab** was the sovereign and **Midian** the vassal state. These facts prepare us for the involvement of both nations in the story (**to see link click [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)**).

The first encounter: Convinced of **Mo'ab** military weakness before **Isra'el**, **King Balak** resorted to unconventional warfare. **He** sends **princes** to **Balaam**, asking **him** to come and curse **Isra'el**, because **they are stronger than I am (22:6a)**. As the story unfolds, the irony of **Balak's** final words in **his** message will come back to haunt **the king**, "**. . . for I know that whoever you bless is in fact blessed, and whoever you curse is in fact cursed**" (22:6b). **Princes from Mo'ab and Midian** were sent with **the payment for sorcery** in hand to hire **the sorcerer**. They assumed that paying **him** for **his** services would guarantee that **he** would say only what **they** wanted **him** to say, namely, to put a **curse** on **their** supposed enemy **Isra'el**. **Balaam** asked **the** money-toting **princes** to spend **the night** and promised a response in the morning. That night, **ADONAI** came to **Balaam**, saying: **You are not to go with them; you are not to curse those people, because they are blessed**. The next day, **Balaam** reported to **Balak's** **princes**, "**ADONAI refuses to give me permission to go with you**" (22:12-13). When **the princes** reported back to **King Balak**, they mention nothing of **ADONAI's** refusal, only saying: **Balaam refuses to come** (see **[Dp - Balaam's First Encounter with God](#)**).

The second encounter: **Balak** assumed everyone could be bought for a price. **He** must

have thought that **Balaam's** first refusal was merely a negotiating tactic. So, **Balak** sent another group of **rulers, more numerous and more distinguished than the first group** with payment in the form of a blank check: **Whatever you say to me I will do (2:17)**. But **Balaam** replies that even **Balak's own palace filled with silver and gold** would dissuade **him** from speaking only what **ADONAI** commands. **Balaam** again tells **the rulers of Balak** to stay the night while **he** consults with **the LORD**. In this second encounter with **YHVH** and **Balaam**, **God** tells **him** to go with **the rulers**, but warns **him**, **"Do only what I tell you"** (22:20). At this point, the reader begins to wonder why **Ha'Shem** has relented and allowed **Balaam** to go after first saying no (see [Dq - Balaam's Second Encounter with God](#)). The mystery grows even deeper as we move to the third encounter between **Balaam** and **God**, who appears as **the Second Person of the Trinity, the Angel of ADONAI**.



The third encounter: Numbers 22a

introduces a jarring note immediately after we hear that **God** commanded **Balaam** to go to **Balak**, **"But God was very angry because he went, and the Angel of ADONAI stationed Himself on the path to block his way."** **The LORD** had already given **Balaam** permission to go (22:20), so **His anger** was not against **his going**, but against **the sorcerers** unspoken motive, that despite **God's** command that **he speak only the words given to him by YHVH**, **Balaam** was still intent on putting **a curse on Isra'el** and thus earning **his** financial reward from **Balak** (see the commentary on [Jude Aq - They Have Taken the Way of Cain, Rushed into Balaam's Error](#)). The plot of this encounter thickens as **Balaam's donkey** begins to see things that the famous **"seer"** could not see (see [Dr - Balaam and the Donkey](#)). In case **Balaam** had any thoughts that **he** could make an end run around **God**, **the Angel of ADONAI** taught **Balaam** that **he** must lay down **his** own initiative in **cursing Isra'el** and allow **YHVH** to use **him** as **He** saw fit. **Balaam** confessed **his sin** and offered to return home. **But the Angel of ADONAI said to Balaam, "No, go on with the men; but you are to say only what I tell you to say"** (22:35a).

Balaam eventually reached **Mo'ab** where **he** found **King Balak** anxiously waiting **at the border**. **Balaam** repeats what **he** had surely learned even more emphatically along **his** journey: **I have no power of my own to say anything. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth (22:38)**. **Balak**, even more determined to the contrary, sent **sacrifices** to **Balaam** in preparation for **the sorcery** that **the king** hoped would end in **Isra'el** being **cursed (22:40)**.⁴⁵³