

-Save This Page as a PDF-

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