



Numbers - Chapter Twenty Two

Summary of Chapter Twenty Two

This chapter commences the story of Balaam, a prophet and sage who is hired by king Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites so they will fail in battle against Moab. Balak sends representatives to Balaam to accompany them back to Balak. Balaam first enquires of God, who tells him not to go so the representatives are sent back to their king.

A second group of even more eminent men offering an even greater financial incentive are then sent to Balaam who refuses their offer because God had told him before not to go, but this time God tells him he can go with them.

Balaam sets out and on the way his donkey sees the angel of the Lord standing in their path with his sword drawn and the donkey tries to take avoiding action. Three times the donkey tries to do this and three times Balaam beats his donkey, threatening it with death. God then enables the donkey to speak to Balaam, who then realises it is the Lord.

Balaam arrives in Moab, where Balak chastises him for not coming sooner, then makes an offering to his god Baal, sending some of the offering to Balaam. The next day he takes Balaam to a place where he can see the Israelite nation.

V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab

These chapters tell of Israel's lengthy encampment in the plains of Moab at the northern end of the Dead Sea. Here they prepared to cross the Jordan and enter Canaan proper. The events here match to some extent those at the other long encampments at Sinai and Kadesh: there is law-giving (Chapters 28-36), a major apostasy (Chapter 25), a census (Chapter 26), and a battle (Chapter 31).

However, these familiar features are preceded and followed by a very positive affirmation of the promise of the land. The prophecies of Balaam reaffirm

Israel's destiny in a surprising and emphatic way (Chapters 23-24), whereas the last word of God through Moses in 36:9 is: <<*for each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance*>>. In this way the promise made to Abraham that the land of Canaan would be Israel's everlasting possession in Genesis 17:8 is reaffirmed. This theme will be strongly emphasised in the Book of Deuteronomy.

V.a Numbers 22:1-24:25 - Balak, Balaam, and Israel

This witty and amusing tale makes a serious point, namely, that the one true God is on Israel's side and therefore no human power can prevail against them. Even a pagan seer like Balaam can see this. Because Balaam is said to speak God's word, and even sounds pious, it is easy to suppose that the narrator views Balaam as a saint. However, it seems more likely that the narrator's remarks about fees indicate that Balaam was indirectly asking for more, and that he was out to obtain as much as he could for his services; God certainly opposed Balaam: <<*These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the Lord*>> (Numbers 31:16), and: <<*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you)*>> (Deuteronomy 23:3-5).

Balaam's request to the second group of messengers to remain overnight was probably another expression of hoping for more; this account certainly presents Balaam as one who loved gain from wrongdoing: <<*They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong*>> (2 Peter 2:15). It may seem surprising that God can use such a corrupt character to deliver his word, but he can even make a donkey speak!

V.a.i Numbers 22:1-21 - Balak Summons Balaam to Curse Israel

The Israelites arrived in the region of Moab and fear entered its king, Balak. So he sent emissaries to a man called Balaam who lived near the Euphrates and offered to pay him to curse the Israelites so that Balak could defeat them in battle. Balaam sought God who forbade him to go to Moab and so he sent the emissaries back to their master. Balak sent even more representatives to Balaam and offered him an even greater payment but Balaam refused because God had told him not to go. Yet on this occasion God told him he should go, with the command that he spoke only what God told him to.

V.a.i.1 Numbers 22:1-6 - Balak Summons Balaam

Although Israel had not attacked Moab and had skirted their territory, the Moabite king Balak was so scared by their defeat of Sihon and Og that he summoned Balaam, a man with an international reputation for blessing and cursing, to defeat Israel by cursing them, so they could be defeated by Moab in battle.



Regional Map also showing the later divided kingdom of Israel

¹ The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. ² Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³ Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were so numerous; 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 an ox licks up the grass of the field.' Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time.

Numbers 22:1-4

The Israelites set out. Israel was, at this point, on the move. They had essentially finished their thirty eight year exile in the wilderness, and then progressed towards the Promised Land. They continued further towards the Promised Land than the previous generation of unbelief had. They also had the blessing of victory, God preparing them to fight the mighty Canaanites by a series of battles against lesser peoples: the southern Canaanites (Numbers 21:1-3), the Amorites (Numbers 21:23-24), and the Bashanites (Numbers 21:33-35).

Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. As Israel advanced towards Moab, Balak, the king of Moab was exceedingly afraid. This was because of the size of Israel and because they had defeated neighbouring nations.

Moab said to the elders of Midian. Moab formed an alliance with the Midianites probably to strengthen their armies when they would face the Israelites in battle. Moses had lived peacefully with the Midianites after fleeing Egypt the first time and his wife was from that people. Midian was also related to Israel as their patriarch was the son of Abraham through Keturah; refer to Genesis 25:2. However, Midian had been defeated in battle by Husham who then became the king of the Midianites and thus the direct link to Israel was broken; refer to Genesis 36:35.

This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field. Grass is a consumable commodity, and the lives of people are likened to it: <<*While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant*>> (Job 8:12), <<*for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb*>> (Psalm 37:2), <<*A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass*>> (Isaiah 40:6-7), and: <<*But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*>> (Matthew 6:30). In one sense, Balak's fear was completely logical. On the other hand, if he had only known and believed God's Word, he would have had nothing to fear. God commanded Israel to not harass Moab, because he did not intend to give Israel the

land of the Moabites: <<the Lord said to me: ‘Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot’>> (Deuteronomy 2:9).

The question posed here is why were the Moabites so fearful of the Israelites? Yes, they were a numerous, they had their powerful God with them and they had recently defeated the Amorites. However, it is clear that the king of Moab knew quite a lot about the Israelites so it poses the questions as to whether he remembered that they were related to this people as Moabites were descended from Lot, Abraham’s nephew: <<Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day>> (Genesis 19:36-37), and God had issued the command that Israel should not harm the Moabites through Moses: <<When we had headed out along the route of the wilderness of Moab, the Lord said to me: ‘Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot’>> (Deuteronomy 2:8b-9). According to the Song of Moses, Moab had become fearful of Israel because of their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea: <<Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away>> (Exodus 15:15). Yet, when the Israelites camped on the border of Moab, the king did not do the rational thing, i.e. make peace with Israel: <<Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace>> (Luke 14:31-32).

Another possibility is that the language of v.4 suggests that the reason for Moab’s fear might have been economic as they may have thought the vast flocks and herds of the Israelites would make the land unsustainable for their own livestock. This was seen when Abram and Lot were together; refer to Genesis 13:2-12.

⁵ He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him, saying, ‘A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. ⁶ Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed.’

Numbers 22:5-6

He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor. A man named Balaam suddenly appears in the Book of Numbers. It is not known how he came to be known as a prophet or a man with spiritual powers, but Balak certainly knew his reputation. As the account continues, it will be clear that Balaam has knowledge of the true God, the God of Israel, not of some vague, demonic spiritual connection, but clearly known as the specific mention of the Lord in v.8 reveals. How he came to know the true God is unclear; he is, in this regard, like Melchizedek the priest and king of Salem (Genesis 14:18) and Jethro (Exodus Chapter 18), men who were not Israelites, but came to some knowledge of the true God.

An 8th Century BC inscription found at the site of Deir Alla in Jordan begins with, “Inscription of Balaam the son of Beor, the man who was a seer of the gods.” This is certainly the same person spoken of in Numbers. The two key figures in this account are well remembered: *<<O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord>>* (Micah 6:5), *<<But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication>>* (Revelation 2:14).

Pethor is in northern Syria near the River Euphrates, which is some 400 miles or 644 km by road north of Moab. The return journeys would have taken several weeks to complete.

Amaw is in the same area and is probably mentioned in non-biblical texts.

Come now, curse this people for me. Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel, to cripple them spiritually so they could be defeated in battle. Balak seemed to know the strength of Israel was spiritually rooted, and they had to be cut off from their source of power if they were to be conquered. Balaam was known as a mighty man in spiritual things. As far as Balak was concerned, when Balaam cursed or blessed a man or a people, it came to pass.

V.a.i.2 Numbers 22:7-14 - Balaam Turns Down Balak’s First Invitation

Although Balaam says God refused him permission to go, when Balak subsequently increases his offer, it suggests that the original messengers had reported to Balak that it might be a matter of the size of the payment.

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 He said to them, ‘Stay here tonight, and I will bring

back word to you, just as the Lord speaks to me’; so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam.

Numbers 22:7-8

The elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. The diviner’s fee suggests a standard fee for the work of a prophet. They took this standard fee in hand and approached Balaam.

Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the Lord speaks to me. Balaam’s first compromise was evident when he invited the men to lodge overnight so he could hear from God regarding their offer. It was clearly wrong, then and now, to be a prophet for hire. Balaam essentially said, “Let me seek God about this” regarding a matter that was clearly sin and God’s will was clear. He appears to have cared far more about the diviner’s fee than about God’s will. Immediately the heart of Balaam was revealed. Although he was obviously a man with significant spiritual gifts, he was not a man with a genuine heart after God. He was ‘seeking God’s will’ regarding something that was plainly not his will. Balaam began on a dangerous course, entertaining, planning, setting his heart on something he knew to be sin, and looked for a spiritual excuse to pursue the sin. Because of his apparent love for money, Balaam essentially tried to manipulate God into granting him a special exception.

⁹ God came to Balaam and said, ‘Who are these men with you?’

¹⁰ Balaam said to God, ‘King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: ¹¹ “A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over 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.’

Numbers 22:9-12

God came to Balaam. It seems most likely that God gave his instructions to Balaam in the form of a dream. God had no obligation to respond to an obviously self-seeking heart like Balaam’s. However, in mercy he did respond, warning Balaam to have nothing to do with these men. God had come in a similar way to other pagans in the Bible, for example warning Abimelech not to sleep with Sarah in Genesis 20:3, and warning Laban not to speak harshly to Jacob in Genesis 31:24.

Who are these men with you? God knew the answer to this question and he asked it because Balaam did not know. Yet Balaam did know these were evil men come for an evil purpose but he did not act accordingly.

You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed. This specific word from God to Balaam is crystal clear. He said, “Balaam, do not go and do not curse, for these are my people and they are blessed by me.” This blessing was in line with God’s promise to Abram: <<*Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’*>> (Genesis 12:1-3).

It is interesting that Balak should use language in respect of Balaam that is in line with the description of God in Genesis and elsewhere in Scripture. He is the one who can bless and curse, not Balaam.

¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, ‘Go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you.’ ¹⁴ So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, ‘Balaam refuses to come with us.’

Numbers 22:13-14

The Lord has refused to let me go with you. This carries the sense that Balaam wanted to go but God would not let him. One can easily picture Balaam saying it just this way to the messengers from Balak, “I would really like to go with you but God will not let me.” It was as if Balaam is saying, “God does not want me to do this but I can be persuaded.” Balak would exploit this invitation.

V.a.i.3 Numbers 22:15-21 - Balaam Accepts Balak’s Second Invitation

The question of money figures much more prominently here (vv.15-18), but again Balaam awaits God’s permission. Happily for Balaam’s pocket God agrees on condition that he only does and says what he is told (v.20).

¹⁵ Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. ¹⁶ They came to Balaam and said to him, ‘Thus says Balak son of Zippor: “Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will surely do you great honour, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me.”’

Numbers 22:15-17

Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. It is clear this is the understanding Balak’s messengers took back to their king, because he sent more honourable, and more wealthy men, no doubt, to persuade Balaam.

I will surely do you great honour. No longer did they merely carry with them the diviner's fee of v.7; now they also brought a promise of great riches and status. However, Balak would eventually not honour Balaam and he would blame God for this failure: <<*Now be off with you! Go home! I said, "I will reward you richly", but the Lord has denied you any reward*>> (Numbers 24:11).

Come, curse this people for me. Balaam refused to decisively put away a temptation the first time it came. Now the temptation came back to him stronger than it was before. How could he refuse? Quite simply because God had already spoken to him on the matter.

¹⁸ But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Although 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 You remain here, as the others did, so that I may learn what more the Lord may say to me.'

Numbers 22:18-19

Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold. When he said this Balaam's tone of voice and expression can only be imagined. He probably wistfully suggested a bigger offer from these richer messengers of Balak.

I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God, to do less or more. Yet Balaam knew the character of true prophecy: <<*But Micaiah said, 'As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak'*>> (1 Kings 22:14), and: <<*The prophet Jeremiah said to them, 'Very well: I am going to pray to the Lord your God as you request, and whatever the Lord answers you I will tell you; I will keep nothing back from you'*>> (Jeremiah 42:4). It did not come by his own initiative but from the Lord. Even though he wanted to do what they asked, he could not because he genuinely feared God, whom he rightly refers to as my God. Balaam recognises God and even calls him by his covenant name Yahweh but that does not mean that he obeyed his every command or that he worshipped him as he should have.

You remain here, as the others did. This is proof that Balaam continued to entertain this sin. There was no need to seek God again, when the will of God was clear both from his moral conscience, which rightly troubled him from the beginning, and from the clear revelation of God spoken in v.12.

So that I may learn what more the Lord may say to me. It is hard to think that there was some part of v.12 that Balaam did not understand. It is likely that he wanted the money and the honour that Balak offered (v.17); this is confirmed by 2 Peter 2:15.

²⁰ That night God came to Balaam and said to him, ‘If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do.’ ²¹ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

Numbers 22:20-21

Get up and go with them. God did not change his mind. Balaam would not now be in the will of God if he went with Balak’s messengers.

It could be said that God did not change his will, although there are times when he does appear to change his mind on an issue: <<*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it*>> (Jonah 3:10). He had clearly declared his will and Balaam had decisively rejected it. Now God prepared Balaam for judgement, to both test and reveal the wickedness of Balaam’s heart. It is also known that sometimes God says ‘no’ to the prayers of his people because he loves them. But also sometimes God says ‘yes’ to the desires of the wicked because he will judge them.

Balaam got up in the morning. No doubt he woke up at the break of dawn. He could not wait to do the wrong his heart desired and he is so happy God is ‘blessing’ him by allowing him to go! One can imagine Balaam as being sullen and depressed when God said ‘no’ through both conscience and clear word. Then he was happy and excited, believing he had convinced God to say ‘yes’ with no idea what God was really doing.

V.a.ii Numbers 22:22-40 - Balaam, the Donkey, and the angel

Balaam travels to Moab but the angel of the Lord stands in his way. He does not see the angel but his donkey does and tries to avoid him, getting punished for his efforts. On arrival, Balak is displeased that Balaam did not respond to the first request. Balaam simply responds by stating that he cannot just say what he likes.

V.a.ii.1 Numbers 22:22-35 - The Donkey and the angel

This is a hilarious put-down of Balaam’s pretensions. The international expert on magic cannot see the angel but his donkey can; and the angel rebukes him for his temper and cruelty. The whole episode reinforces the message that Balaam must <<*speak only what I tell you to speak*>> (v.35).

²² God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand;

so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it 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, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

Numbers 22:22-27

God's anger was kindled apparently because God knew that Balaam's heart was set on the money in spite of God's strict instructions. Some might think this was unfair, seeing that God told Balaam to go and then was angry because he went. However, Balaam only went because he had first rejected God's voice, both in conscience and clear command, and God should be angry about that.

God's anger can be kindled even by those who are good but who do not respond immediately to his call, instead looking for excuses as to why he should choose someone else, for example: <<Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, 'What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad'>> (Exodus 4:14).

The donkey saw the angel of the Lord. The donkey was more spiritually perceptive than the prophet. The donkey had no spiritual gifts but at least acknowledged his creator. The prophet had wonderful spiritual gifts but also a disobedient heart and walk before he Lord.

The donkey turned off the road. The donkey, responding to the angel of the Lord, turned one way, then another, then finally sat down to avoid judgement. The disobedient prophet suffered along the way and also made the donkey suffer. The donkey is a perfect picture of a simple, unspectacular, yet obedient follower of God, sensitive to God's direction, a thorn to the disobedient, and a victim of the wrath of the disobedient.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam. The unusually difficult circumstances of this journey might have suggested to Balaam that his trip was not of God. Yet Balaam probably took it all as being an attack from the enemy and used the circumstances to strengthen his hope that God wanted him to work as a prophet for hire. This shows the great difficulty of judging God's will by circumstances. Many circumstances can be interpreted two

ways, if not more, and are often interpreted according to the heart of man and not of God.

Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Whereas God's anger is always righteous, Balaam's was kindled out of spite. This is not how a person of God should be: <<*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger*>> (James 1:19).

²⁸ Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' ²⁹ Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!' ³⁰ But the donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?' And he said, 'No.'

Numbers 22:28-30

Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey. God miraculously give the donkey the ability to speak and she did; and she rebuked the prophet for his ungodly punishment of her (What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?). The actual mechanism by which God gave the donkey the apparent mind and voice to speak remains unknown but it was certainly within the capability of the creator. What appears most likely is that it is the voice of the Lord through his angel appearing to come from the donkey.

Many people doubt the authenticity of this account. After all, how could a dumb animal like a donkey be given the power of speech? Yet there are few who believe in the creation account who do not readily accept a talking serpent, attributing him as Satan with the power to present himself in such a form with the ability to communicate and reason: <<*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'>> (Genesis 3:1).*

Balaam said to the donkey. Balaam was so irrational and angry that he answered back without hesitation. He seemed to be unimpressed by a donkey that carries on an intelligent conversation with him. His words, like his actions, were unkind: <<*The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel*>> (Proverbs 12:10), and: <<*For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come*>> (Mark 7:21a).

I would kill you right now! These were cruel words from a wicked prophet. They are a chilling reminder of what the wicked have often done to true prophets who might hinder their evil ways.

And he said, 'No.' Balaam admitted that the donkey got the best of him in this conversation. Balaam had to humble himself before the donkey, admitting that she had not been this way before, so perhaps there was good reason for her to be this way now.

³¹ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. ³² The angel of the Lord said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.'

Numbers 22:31-33

Balaam saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand. This made the will of God pretty clear in this matter. God told Balaam, about as loud and clear as it could be said, "Do not go, turn back now." But Balaam would not listen.

Your way is perverse before me. The angel of the Lord rebuked Balaam for his mistreatment of his donkey but especially because Balaam's way was perverse. The word perverse carries the idea of 'going the wrong way in a rash manner.' This was exactly Balaam's problem. Since this is the angel of the Lord, and that the angel of the Lord tells Balaam that his sin is against him personally (your way is perverse before me), some believe it indicates this to be a theophany, an OT appearance of God the Son, the second member of the Trinity, Jesus, before his incarnation as a baby in Bethlehem. Jesus temporarily appeared in some sort of human form for a specific divine purpose. Joshua would have a similar encounter after they had entered the Promised Land: <<*Once when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?' He replied, 'Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.'* And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and he said to him, 'What do you command your servant, my lord?'>> (Joshua 5:13-14).

³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.' ³⁵ The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

Numbers 22:34-35

I have sinned. This sounds humble enough, but it was obvious and easy to say when the angel of the Lord stood before Balaam with a drawn sword in his hand.

If it is displeasing to you or if it is evil in your sight. In view of the overall portrait of Balaam, this apparent submission is probably to be taken as insincere, or at least a temporary response due to the fear of the moment. Despite the clear statement both of God (v.12) and of the angel of the Lord in v.32, Balaam continues to seek a way to get the money and honour that Balak had promised him in v.17. Even though he had just been told that this was perverse (v.32), he implicitly questions the veracity of this statement by saying 'if it is displeasing'.

Balaam seemed undecided as to whether he really was displeasing God or not. He asked, 'if it displeases you.' God made his will clear to Balaam many times, yet Balaam still fished for the answer he wanted from God and Balaam made it evident he did not want what God had already clearly revealed. The apostle shows exactly where Balaam's heart was at: <<*They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness*>> (2 Peter 2:15-16). The root of Balaam's sin was a love for money. Jude calls it <<*Balaam's error for the sake of gain*>> (Jude 11b). It is sobering to understand there is no sin that men will not commit just for the sake of money: <<*The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity*>> (Ecclesiastes 5:10), and: <<*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains*>> (1 Timothy 6:10).

Go with the men. In response to Balaam's hard heart, God gave Balaam over to his sinful desire: <<*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen*>> (Romans 1:24-25). Again, God did not change his mind. Because of Balaam's hard heart, God sent Balaam on a path of judgement.

Verse 21 indicates that Balaam was travelling with Balak's dignitaries who had come to make him the second offer and yet there is no mention as to whether they witnessed the scenes described above. Did they hear the donkey speak? Did they see the angel of the Lord or hear Balaam's conversation with him? When Paul encountered the Lord on the Damascus Road, they heard the sounds and saw the light but could not understand what was said. All they knew was

that Paul had fallen off his horse and had ended up blind as a result of the light; refer to Acts 9:3-8.

V.a.ii.2 Numbers 22:36-40 - Balak Greets Balaam

Balaam reasserts his intention to say only what God allows him to say (v.38), despite the fee he has been offered.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. ³⁷ Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you?' ³⁸ Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.' ³⁹ Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. ⁴⁰ Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent them to Balaam and to the officials who were with him.

Numbers 22:36-40

Ir-moab is located by the Arnon, which formed the northern border of Moab: <<*From there they set out, and camped on the other side of the Arnon, in the wilderness that extends from the boundary of the Amorites; for the Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites*>> (Numbers 21:13).

At the farthest point of the boundary. By meeting him as soon as he entered Moabite territory Balak showed his respect for Balaam.

Am I not able to honour you? Here, two kindred hearts met. Balak's warm promise of reward must have sounded like music in Balaam's ears.

The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say. Balaam again protested that this was not in his hands. Perhaps he really believed and understood this, or perhaps this was his way of protecting himself in case he failed. Then he could say that it was God's fault and not his.

The location of Kiriath-huzoth is unknown.

V.a.iii Numbers 22:41-24:14 - Balaam blesses Israel three times

The first three attempts to persuade Balaam to curse Israel follow a similar pattern although there are some significant deviations in the third. First, Balak takes Balaam to various high points in order to view Israel: Bamoth-baal (v.41), Pisgah (23:14), and Peor (23:28). Second, seven altars are built and seven bulls and rams are sacrificed at each place (23:1-2, 23:14 and 23:29-30). Third, Balaam tells Balak to stay by the altars while he goes elsewhere to meet the Lord (23:3-5 and 23:15-

16), but on the third occasion the Spirit of God descends on him there and then (24:1-2). Fourth, Balaam pronounces a long, three-part blessing on Israel: the first two address Israel's wilderness situation, but the third looks forward to an Israelite king (23:7-10, 23:18-24 and 24:3-9). Fifth, Balak reacts angrily to the blessing (23:11, 23:25 and 24:10-11). Sixth, Balaam reasserts that he only has said what the Lord has told him to say (23:12, 23:26 and 24:12-13). This pattern reinforces the point that Balaam's words, which are the opposite of what he was hired to say, are inspired by God and therefore must be reliable.

V.a.iii.1 Numbers 22:41-23:12 - Balaam's First Oracle

Balaam's first oracle or blessing (23:7-10) reflects on why he has been summoned: to curse Israel. In the biblical worldview, a curse can have a real effect on those denounced; it is not merely empty words. Aram is the region of Syria where Balaam came from. It is mentioned often in the OT and other ancient texts.

⁴¹ On the next day Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal; and from there he could see part of the people of Israel.

Numbers 22:41

Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal. After offering sacrifice to his own gods, Balak then called upon Balaam to do what he hired him to do: to curse Israel in order to rob them of their spiritual strength so they could be defeated in battle. Bamoth-baal likely means 'the high places of Baal,' the place where they offered sacrifices to their own pagan god.