

God's Plans

GOD CAN USE ANY MEANS HE CHOOSES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.

From time to time in the news there will be stories of people trying to hire hitmen to eliminate spouses, rivals, business partners, or even a parent or a child. Sometimes these attempts succeed, and the person is convicted of murder. Other times, the plot is discovered before the actual deed is carried out, and the person is convicted of conspiracy to commit murder or murder-for-hire charges. Murdering another person is a sad way to deal with relationship problems. In today's study, we see a similar approach as King Barak of Moab sought to hire a "hitman" to bring a curse on the Israelites whom he perceived to be a threat to his kingdom.



Numbers 22:2–25:18

Today's study focuses on a story that takes place at the end of the third cycle of rebellion of Israel during the exodus event. (The third cycle of rebellion in the book of Numbers covers 20:2–25:18.) This extended incident featuring the prophet/diviner Balaam ended in a terrible act of idolatry, immorality, and rebellion of the men of Israel. This rebellion resulted in 24,000 deaths (25:1-9).

The years of wandering in the wilderness were now behind the nation of Israel, and they were approaching the moment when they would enter the promised land of Canaan. Much had changed. Both Miriam and Aaron, sister and brother of Moses, were dead. God had informed Moses of his own impending death. The nation found themselves moving up the eastern edge of Canaan skirting around the Dead Sea and traveling through the eastern side of the Jordan River Valley. As they traveled north in preparation for entering Canaan near the city of Jericho,

they encountered several small tribal kingdoms such as Arad (21:1-3) and the Amorites under King Sihon (vv. 21-31). In addition, the forces of Israel had conquered the kingdom of Bashan and its king, Og (vv. 33-35). Their next encounter was with the Moabites under Balak, the tribal chieftain or king.

Balak came to rule over the Moabites after his predecessor had suffered defeat under Sihon and his Amorite armies (21:26). Sihon had taken control of much of the land of Moab. When Sihon and his forces were defeated by Israel, this would have allowed Balak and his forces to assert themselves in the area. Only one thing was in Balak's way of dominating the region—the Israelites. Here was a nation of over 600,000 people moving into his tribal territory (26:51). Balak was frightened and realized that he didn't have the manpower to ward off this mass of people. Nor were his gods effective. In his mind, there had to be a better way to fend off Israel than a direct military confrontation.

Enter a prophet and diviner with a great reputation by the name of Balaam. Balaam was from an area of Mesopotamia called Pethor (22:5), thought to be the city Pitru, which was thirteen miles south of Carchemish on the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates River. Balaam appears to have been an "expert" in various religions including the religion of Israel. Balak sought to enlist Balaam to cast a curse on Israel so that they might be defeated and run out of Moab. Gathering a number of officials of Moab and Midian, Balak sent them to Balaam. This trip was not a short trek; Pethor was approximately 420 miles from Moab and the journey would have taken up to twenty-five days.

Through his emissaries, Balak let Balaam know of the situation. He also sent a hefty reward to persuade Balaam to come and curse the Israelite nation. Casting a spell on one's enemy using various rituals and incantations was a common practice in ancient times. Balaam heard the requests of the emissaries but put them off while he consulted God (vv. 7-8). Balaam used the sacred name of God, Yahweh, in addressing these officials. While he would consult with Yahweh, the Israelite God was just one of several gods that he served.

Initially, Balaam was instructed by God to decline the invitation (vv. 9-13). More than a month later, new and more dignified emissaries came from Balak with a greater reward. Again, Balaam consulted God overnight. This time he announced that God would permit him to travel with them to the Plains of Moab (vv. 15-21).

The trip to Moab was not without excitement as will be seen in today's study. When Balaam arrived, God did not allow him to curse Israel. Instead, God called on Balaam to actually bless the nation. As Balak

showed him various views of the nation scattered across the Plains of Moab, Balaam pronounced God's blessing on the people (23:1-24:25).

Balak failed in defeating Israel through casting a curse on them. The Moabite and Midianite people, however, would inflict disaster on the Israelites later when they lured Israel into idolatry and immorality in pagan worship to their god Baal (chap. 25). The result was under God's command, those guilty of these actions were killed by the leaders of Israel (25:4-5). Later, God would command Moses to slaughter the Midianites for their part in leading Israel into idolatry and immorality (31:1-18). During that annihilation of the people of Midian, Balaam the prophet was also killed (v. 8). The nation of Israel was to rid themselves of anything that might bring them to abandon their faithfulness to God.



Obstacles Met (Num. 22:22-27)

Having continued toward Canaan, the Israelites reached the Plains of Moab and camped east of the promised land. The Moabite king, Balak, sought to employ Balaam to put a curse on the Israelites while they were in his land (22:1-6). Balaam set out on his donkey to meet with Balak. Unseen by Balaam, an angel of the Lord blocked the donkey's path causing her first to turn off the path, then wedge against a wall, and finally, to crouch down to the ground. Each time, Balaam hit the donkey with a stick attempting to get her moving along the path.

VERSE 22

But God was incensed that Balaam was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand on the path to oppose him. Balaam was riding his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

The main action in the Balaam story occurred in the Plains of Moab which were located in the southern section of the east side of the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. This quite fertile plain was on the other side of the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. This area would serve as the location for the nation throughout the remainder of the book of Numbers and throughout all the messages given in the book of Deuteronomy. From here the children of Israel would cross the Jordan

River and begin the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 1-3). About fifteen miles east of the Jordan River and rising above the Plains of Moab was Mount Nebo from which Moses would view the promised land before his death on the mountain (Deut. 34:1-7).

Balaam had refused to go with the emissaries of Balak the first time they tried to hire him. Balaam had informed them that the Lord God had refused to let him go (Num. 22:7-13). On the second inquiry from messengers from Balak, God gave permission for Balaam to go (vv. 15-20). Why? God allowed Balaam to go, not so that he might curse Israel but so that God could use him for His purposes in blessing the children of Israel.

Why, then, would God have been incensed that Balaam was going? God knows the human heart. While on the outside Balaam was obeying the Lord God, inside he probably was hoping that he still might be able to curse Israel and receive the reward from Balak (see v. 7). When he was presented with the greater reward when the officials came a second time (vv. 15-19), he had told them, “Please stay here overnight as the others did, so that I may find out what else the LORD has to tell me.” Balaam was trying to push the boundaries with God to see what he might get away with. Maybe he thought he could influence God in some way so that he might have the reward. Somehow Balaam thought he still might be able to curse Israel.¹

A key truth here is that Balaam was no follower of the Lord God of Israel. His subsequent action of leading Israel into an idolatrous and immoral situation proved that truth. In fact, the Bible states plainly that it was under the influence of Balaam that the Moabites and Midianites were able to lure Israel into idolatry and immorality (see Num. 31:16). From this point on, the name *Balaam* was synonymous with immorality in the history of Israel and Christianity (see 2 Pet. 2:15-16; Rev. 2:14).

Despite his hidden motives of desiring to curse Israel and reap the rewards for his words, God was going to use Balaam for His purposes. First, God was going to teach him a lesson through his donkey. Then, ironically, God was going to use him to bless Israel. God positioned **the angel of the LORD** in the path ahead of Balaam and his donkey. Throughout the Old Testament this term *the angel of the LORD* often is used in relation to what is called a “theophany.” By definition a *theophany* is a physical appearance of the Lord God to a person. Many scholars understand these physical manifestations of the Lord God to be an Old Testament appearance of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. In this instance, whether this was a theophany or one of God’s messenger angels is much debated. Needless to say, the angel was God’s way of arresting the progress of Balaam’s donkey and gaining the attention of Balaam.

The phrase **to oppose him** in the Hebrew language is the term for “adversary” and is sometimes used as the name of Satan. Here, however, the word simply points to the one who opposed Balaam and his donkey.

VERSE 23

When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing on the path with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the path and went into the field. So Balaam hit her to return her to the path.

The donkey clearly saw **the angel of the LORD** and reacted out of fear. Balaam, on the other hand, was oblivious to what was going on. Balaam struck the donkey to make it return to the path so that his journey might continue.

VERSES 24-25

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow passage between the vineyards, with a stone wall on either side. The donkey saw the angel of the LORD and pressed herself against the wall, squeezing Balaam’s foot against it. So he hit her once again.

For a second time **the angel of the LORD** blocked the path. This time Balaam and his donkey were traveling in a **narrow passage** between vineyards. These stone walls were used to mark boundaries. They also were used to prevent soil from eroding during rainstorms. The donkey reacted to the angel’s presence by pressing against one of the rock walls which pressed Balaam’s foot against the wall. Balaam reacted again by striking the donkey. He was still oblivious to the fact that something was amiss. Balaam was spiritually blind to what God was doing.

VERSES 26-27

The angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn to the right or the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she crouched down under Balaam. So he became furious and beat the donkey with his stick.

A third, and final encounter with **the angel of the LORD** occurred as the donkey entered a **narrow place** in the path. With nowhere to go because of the angel of the LORD, the donkey folded her legs and rested her belly on the ground under Balaam. Balaam responded in anger by beating the donkey a third time.



Explore Further

Read the article “Theophany” on pages 1560–1561 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. A theophany was an occasion when there is an actual physical manifestation of God. Read about three of these incidences in Genesis 18:1-33; Exodus 3:1–4:17; and 24:9-11. In your own life, what are some ways that you have encountered God?

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Attention Gained (Num. 22:28-31)

The Lord “opened the donkey’s mouth” (v. 28) to question Balaam. A conversation ensued between Balaam and his donkey. Finally, the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes so he could see the angel of the Lord on the path. Seeing the angel, Balaam bowed in worship.

VERSE 28

Then the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth, and she asked Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?”

Balaam was so preoccupied with his own plans and the possibility of a reward that God used an amazing miracle to get his attention. God had already told Balaam that the Israelites were blessed, and Balaam must not curse those the Lord God had blessed (v. 12). Now God allowed the donkey to speak to express her displeasure at being beaten by Balaam. The donkey asked in protest: **“What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?”**

The LORD opened the donkey’s mouth and gave her words. This was a supernatural act of God. God can do whatever He chooses to do because He is the all-powerful Sovereign Lord who created and sustains everything! As such He has the right and ability to act outside of the laws of nature which He established whenever He so chooses.

VERSE 29

Balaam answered the donkey, “You made me look like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, I’d kill you now!”

While **the donkey** speaking is an amazing miracle, perhaps even more amazing is the fact that **Balaam** answered back to the beast! Instead of reacting in amazement, Balaam responded to the question of the donkey. Remember, all of this occurred in the presence of two servants and probably the emissaries from Balak. Balaam expressed embarrassment at the actions of his donkey: **“You made me look like a fool.”** In response to the complaint of his donkey, Balaam threatened to kill the beast. He was furious. In fact, the apostle Peter described the anger of Balaam as “madness” (2 Pet. 2:15-16). In this entire dialogue, the donkey was closer to being the wise man and Balaam was closer to being a stubborn mule. Balaam still failed to grasp the situation in which he was involved.

VERSES 30-31

But the donkey said, “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” “No,” he replied. Then the LORD opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam knelt low and bowed in worship on his face.

Once again, **the donkey** spoke, pointing out her faithfulness to Balaam over all the years. The implication was that Balaam should have sensed something different was going on. He should have recognized that the donkey was acting strange, and he should have sought an answer to her behavior. Balaam answered the donkey by acknowledging the faithfulness of the animal.

Finally, **the LORD** allowed Balaam to see what the donkey had seen. God had opened the donkey’s mouth (v. 28). Now God **opened Balaam’s eyes**. The Hebrew term for *opened* means to reveal something or uncover an object. The picture might be that of an artist pulling a drape from a statue or a painting to reveal their finished work of art.

When the blinders were removed from Balaam’s eyes, he realized the reason for his donkey’s strange behavior. There, blocking the donkey’s way forward, stood **the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand**. The phrase **knelt low and bowed in worship on his face** speaks of the response of a lesser person to someone who is greater. Balaam’s reaction of kneeling and bowing in worship were likely an indication of confession on his part rather than reverence to the Lord God. Remember, Balaam was not wholly devoted to the Lord God of Israel. He spoke for and served many different gods. Of interest, though, is the fact that God used the pagan prophet Balaam as an instrument in His plan of the conquest of Canaan by the nation of Israel.



Explore Further

Read the article “Balaam” on pages 166–167 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Balaam is referenced in Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 13:22; 24:9-10; Nehemiah 13:2; and Micah 6:5. What does this indicate about the importance of Balaam and this incident? What else could you conclude about Balaam and his importance in the history of the early church from 2 Peter 2:12-16; Jude 10-11; and Revelation 2:13-16? What are some ways you can ensure that you are not led astray by a modern-day Balaam?

God’s Plan (Num. 22:32-35)

The angel of the Lord explained that he was there to oppose Balaam, declaring his plan of going to Balak to be “evil” (v. 32). The donkey, by turning away from the angel several times, had saved Balaam’s life. Balaam relented and offered to turn back. The angel instructed him to continue with the plan to meet with Balak, but he should only communicate to him what the angel would tell him to say. Balaam continued on his journey to meet with Balak.

VERSE 32

The angel of the LORD asked him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Look, I came out to oppose you, because I consider what you are doing to be evil.”

The angel of the LORD echoed the question of the donkey: “**Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?**” This no doubt was to call further attention to the irrationality of Balaam’s actions against the animal. Balaam acted out of selfishness by striking his donkey. He gave no thought to his confrontation with the Lord God or the Lord God’s instructions regarding speaking only what God told him. Instead, he was undoubtedly focused on the riches promised by King Balak of Moab.

The angel of the LORD quickly informed Balaam that instead of the donkey being killed (v. 29), Balaam was the candidate for death. Balaam thought the donkey was opposing him; in reality God’s opposition to Balaam was the larger issue at hand. Outwardly, Balaam appeared to be obedient to the Lord God (v. 20). The reality, however, was the opposite.

The angel of the LORD further replied, **“I consider what you are doing to be evil.”** God knew Balaam’s heart and knew of the greed he was harboring within. Note that with God, the intent of Balaam’s heart was the same as *“doing . . . evil.”* God makes little differentiation between the thoughts of the heart and the actions of people. In fact, Scripture is plain that evil actions arise out of the darkness of the heart (Jer. 17:9-10; Matt. 15:18-19).

VERSES 33-34

“The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and let her live.” Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, **“I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the path to confront me. And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back.”**

Three times the donkey had sought to turn away from the danger ahead. The angel of the LORD indicated to Balaam that the actions of his donkey had saved his life. The Lord God was out to kill Balaam for the disobedient attitude in his heart. Had it not been for the fear of the animal toward the angel brandishing the sword in its path, Balaam’s story would have ended right there.

Quickly, Balaam exclaimed, **“I have sinned.”** In what way had Balaam sinned? Was this a genuine confession or was he simply sorry he got caught with greed in his heart? Through the angel of the LORD, God had said, **“I consider what you are doing to be evil”** (v. 32). Notice the response of Balaam which cast doubt on God’s indictment. **“And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back.”** That is, I will stop.

VERSE 35

Then the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but you are to say only what I tell you.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials.

The angel of the LORD repeated the words of the Lord God from verse 20. Some take this as further evidence that this is a theophany of God, that *the angel of the LORD* here is an appearance of the Lord God Himself. They suggest that the repetition of the instructions indicates both are from the same person. Another suggestion is that *the angel of the LORD* was God’s angelic messenger to carry God’s word to Balaam.

While Balaam had volunteered to stop his journey and return home (v. 34), that didn’t serve the purpose of God. The angel emphasized that

Balaam must speak, but only speak what God wanted declared. This is the second time that Balaam had been told this (see v. 20). Balaam went with the men under the condition that he would speak only what God wanted him to speak. This encounter with God so impressed Balaam that when he finally met Balak, the first thing out of his mouth was that he would only speak what the Lord God allowed him to speak (v. 38).

What follows then are two chapters (chap. 23–24) where Balak continually pressed the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelite nation. In fact, he took Balaam to three different mountain overlooks so that Balaam could have three different perspectives of the vast nation of people. Each time, however, from these overlooks Balaam blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them. He spoke only what God told him to speak.

While Balaam was obedient in blessing the nation of Israel, his subsequent actions contributed to another incident of rebellion by Israel (Num. 25:1-3; see Rev. 2:14). Through the advice of Balaam, the women of Moab enticed the people of Israel into idolatry and immorality. As a result, Balaam established his place in the history of Israel as an evil-hearted pagan prophet.

With the conclusion of the Balaam story, the third cycle of Israel's rebellion comes to an end. The entire account showcases God's ability to work for the good of His people in spite of their rebellion and lack of faithfulness. In addition, God chose to use a pagan prophet to bless His people. God is sovereign and will accomplish His purposes using whatever methods He chooses.



Explore Further

The account of Balaam illustrates that outward obedience does not always translate to obedience in the heart. We must obey God with both our hearts *and* actions. How is your heart obedience? Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands” (John 14:15), and “The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me” (v. 21). Spend some time in prayer asking God to search your heart and show you areas in your life where you lack obedience to Him. Thank God for His forgiveness and ask Him to strengthen you so that you can bring those areas of your life into obedience to Him.

1. For the background on this perspective, see R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 388–89.