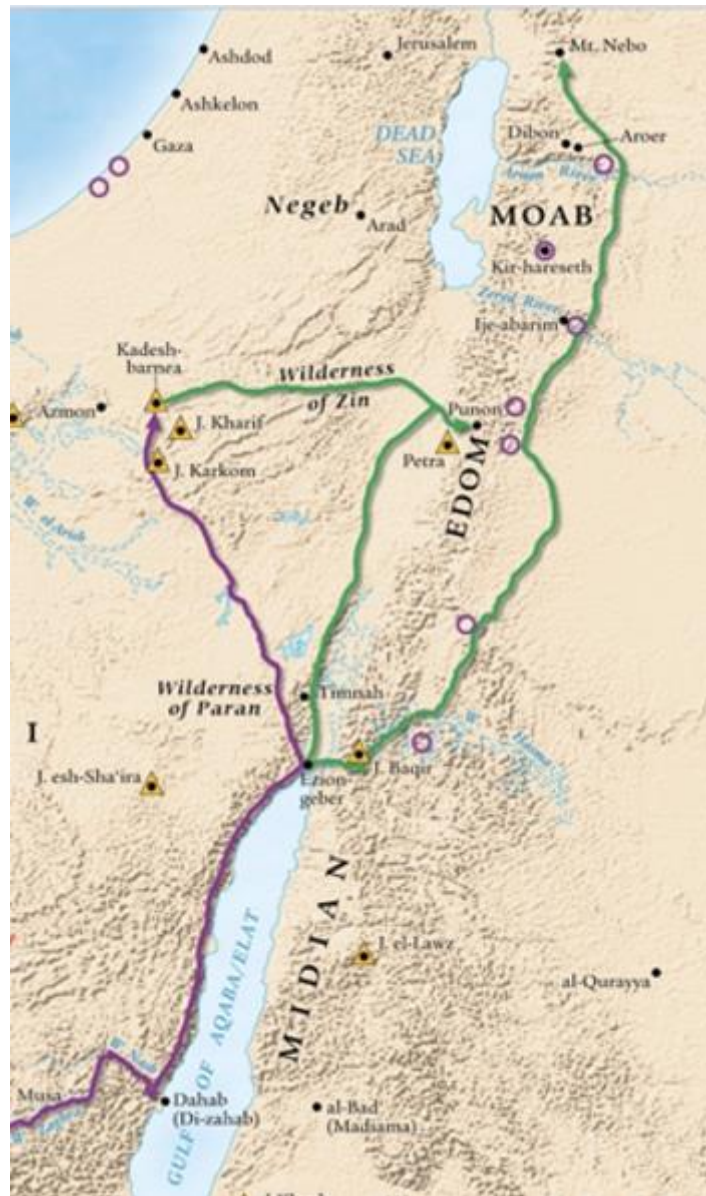


# GOD'S ANGER WITH BALAAM IN NUMBERS 22:22

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2024 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

Toward the end of its forty-year sentence of living in the wilderness, Israel traveled north from the Gulf of Aqaba/Elat, passing to the east of the kingdoms of Edom and Moab. The Lord then gave them victory over two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, as a result of which they controlled the land east of the Jordan River from the middle of the Dead Sea in the south to Mount Hermon in the north, a distance of some 150 miles (Numbers 21; Deut. 4:45-49).<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Map is from Logos Bible Software (2007).

Israel's size, military success, and proximity struck fear in Balak, the king of Moab, the land immediately south of Israel's newly acquired territory. Balak convinced the leaders of Midian that they too were in jeopardy, and he sent elders from Moab and Midian to hire Balaam to put a curse on Israel (Num. 22:1-6).

In 1967 an inscription on a plaster wall dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC was discovered at Deir Alla, Jordan, which is probably the site of ancient Succoth. It was a poetic text written in Aramaic that told a story from centuries earlier. The plaster was pieced back together from over a hundred fragments. Archaeologist Titus Kennedy comments:

The story relates how a man named Balaam, son of Beor, described as a seer or prophet, received a divine message at night from the gods, and specifically from the god El, that darkness and chaos would be coming on the land due to the work of hostile divinities. In this narrative, Balaam went through various religious rituals in an attempt to appease the gods. This section is followed by mention of the underworld. Then, the people apparently rejected, condemned, and banned Balaam and his message, but the text is unclear because of its fragmentary condition.

However, the careful and artistic composition of this text on the wall of a building indicates the importance of the story of Balaam the seer. . . .

The existence of the Balaam Inscription demonstrates that in ancient times Balaam, son of Beor, was known as a famous seer in the area on the east side of the Jordan River where the events recorded in the book of Numbers took place.<sup>2</sup>

At God's instruction, Balaam refused to go with Balak's messengers. When they reported that refusal to Balak, he sent even more messengers of greater social status who urged Balaam to come and curse Israel and told him in essence that he could name his own price (Num. 22:15-17). Numbers 22:18-19 states (ESV): *But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though 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."*<sup>19</sup> *So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me."*

The difficulty is in Num. 22:20-22, which states (ESV):<sup>20</sup> *And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you."*<sup>21</sup> *So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.*<sup>22</sup> *But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.* As translated, it appears that God was angry with Balaam for doing what he had told him to do, which was to go with Balak's emissaries. But that may not be the correct translation.

It is possible that God's anger was not because Balaam went with the messengers but because of some unspecified thing he did along the way. Verse 22 can mean either that God was angry "because [Balaam] went" or that God was angry "as [Balaam] went" (the latter being similar to the NIV's "when [Balaam] went"). Old Testament scholar Timothy Ashley translates 22:22 as: "But God's anger was kindled, *as he was going.*" He writes:

---

<sup>2</sup> Titus Kennedy, *Unearthing the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2020), 65.

The most common question about this verse is the motive for God's anger with Balaam. At the very least it seems capricious for God to tell Balaam to go his way in v. 20 and then to become angry with Balaam because he was going in v. 22. The question is whether the particle *kî* (usually translated "because, since" in this verse) should not have another of its well-attested meanings, viz., "when" or even "as" with the participle. This construction is somewhat rare, but not unknown in biblical Hebrew. If one translates temporally, as above, then God no longer becomes angry with Balaam on the grounds of his going (since God had given him permission to go in v. 20), but *as he was going*, i.e., somewhere on the journey for an unspecified reason. This view admittedly sidesteps the issue of the motive for God's wrath, but, if the translation proposed is correct, so does the text itself.<sup>3</sup>

R. Dennis Cole suggests that the unspecified reason for God's anger "as Balaam was going" may have been a rebellious attitude that was seeking a way to curse Israel despite God's prohibition. He writes:

The rabbinical tradition in the Targumic literature interpreted this sequence as evidence of Balaam's personal rebelliousness in embracing the idea that he might eventually be successful in pronouncing a curse on Israel. Thus taking Ashley and the rabbis in tandem, the verse could refer to God becoming angry with Balaam while he was on the journey because he still thought he might curse the people of Yahweh. That Balaam was lacking spiritual insight at this point in the journey narrative is evident from the context that follows.<sup>4</sup>

Another possibility is presented by Walter Kaiser. He argues that God's permission to Balaam in v. 20 was conditioned on the messengers *returning to Balaam after* he told them in v. 19 to stay for the night. In other words, God told Balaam that *if* the emissaries sought him out again after he had put them off, *then* he could go with them. But without that condition having been met, Balaam took the initiative in v. 21 and rose to go with the emissaries. Kaiser states:

Most commentators acknowledge that the proper force of the Hebrew *im* is "if"; however, they incorrectly reason that the men from Moab had already called and invited Balaam to go, thus there was no reason to suppose that any additional call was anticipated. Consequently, many treat the word *if* as a concessive particle with the meaning "since." What these scholars fail to realize is that Balaam had asked these men to spend the night while he made further investigations from the Lord.

This brief respite gave Balaam one more opportunity to sense God's will through his providential working – in this case, the disgust of the Moabite delegation, which would have packed up and left in the morning had not Balaam been so desirous of taking the job. Instead Balaam took the very initiative God

---

<sup>3</sup> Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 454-455.

<sup>4</sup> R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, NAC (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000), 389.

had left in the hands of the Moabites ("If the men come") and thus evidenced his own disobedient inclinations.<sup>5</sup>

This is in line with the NKJV rendering of v. 20: "If the men come to call you, rise *and* go with them." In this understanding, the conjunction at the beginning of v. 21 (*wə*) is perhaps best rendered "But" instead of "So" or "And" (see, e.g., Gen. 3:3, 4:2).

Balaam may have feared the emissaries would not renew their appeal and was not willing to give up all hope of financial gain in the situation. There are indications that he was torn in that regard. He failed to mention in Num. 22:13 God's reason for refusing to let him go and curse Israel (that Israel was blessed – Num. 22:12) and he continued to press God for permission to go when it had been clearly denied. We know that he later succumbed to the temptation to harm Israel by advising the Moabites to use their women to pull the Israelites into idolatry, specifically the worship of Baal of Peor (Num. 25:1-9; 31:7-8, 15-16; 2 Pet. 2:15; Rev. 2:14).

Despite Balaam's disobedience, God in his mercy did not kill him. Instead, he allowed the donkey to see the angel (Num. 22:22-35). This donkey possessed sounder prophetic vision than the prophet whose moral sense had been perverted by greed or other impure motives. In that encounter, the angel warned Balaam in 22:35 that he must speak only what he was told, and having been chastened, he refused to curse Israel but instead blessed them four times.

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 90-91.