


# Parashat Balak

Sharon Rimon





## An Angel of God With Its Sword Drawn

- Why does God agree to Balaam's request to join Balak's ministers after previously forbidding it?
- Why does God become angry at Balaam for joining them after He permits him to go?
- Why does the angel appear to Balaam?
- Why is Balaam unable to see the angel at first?
- Where else in the Bible does an angel of God appear with its sword drawn?

The story of Balaam, who comes to curse the Israelites and ultimately blesses them, raises a number of questions. A particularly interesting element in the story is the appearance of an angel of God:

And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of God placed himself in the way as an adversary against him. (Num. 22:22)

וַיַּחַר אַף אֱלֹהִים בִּי הוֹלֵךְ  
הוּא, וַיִּתְנַצֵּב מִלְּאַךְ ה'  
בְּדֶרֶךְ לְשׂוֹן לוֹ.  
בַּמְדַּבֵּר כ"ב, כב

Why is God angry at Balaam if Balaam only went with Balak's ministers once God gave him permission?<sup>1</sup>  
Why does the angel appear in Balaam's path?<sup>2</sup>

1 See the commentary of Rabbi Isaac ben Asher Halevi (Riva), which discusses this question. See also Rashi and Rashbam ad loc.

2 See Rashi ad loc.

In order to better understand the encounter between Balaam and the angel, we must consider the narrative from the beginning.

#### THE FIRST ENCOUNTER – BALAAM AND THE MINISTERS OF BALAK

**Balaam –  
Faithful  
to God’s  
Word**

Balak’s ministers visit Balaam and ask him to curse the Israelites. Balaam does not answer them immediately; instead, he asks them to wait until he receives an answer from God. God reveals Himself to Balaam and states, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the nation, for it is blessed.” Balaam does not argue with God’s response. He answers the ministers that God will not allow him to join them. Balaam appears to be completely faithful to God’s word.

**Omitting  
the Prohi-  
bition to  
Curse the  
Israelites**

Balak sends additional messengers to Balaam. Why? Apparently, Balaam did not state clearly or unequivocally enough that he refused to curse the Israelites. God says to Balaam, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the nation, for it is blessed.” However, Balaam responds to Balak’s ministers, “God has refused to allow me to go with you.” He tells the ministers that God had forbidden him from joining them, but neglects to mention that God had also forbidden him from cursing the Israelites.

Balak may not even realize that Balaam had been prohibited to curse the Israelites. He may attribute Balaam’s refusal to incidental factors: perhaps the ministers Balak sent were not important enough,

or perhaps Balaam is unsatisfied with the payment (honor or money<sup>3</sup>) that had been offered to him.

Therefore, Balak sends another larger contingent of more prominent messengers: “And yet again Balak sent ministers, more, and more honorable than those.” These ministers make another offer, “For I shall honor you with great honor, and everything you say to me, I will do.”

Apparently, Balak attempts to convince Balaam a second time because Balaam had not told Balak that God had forbidden him from cursing the Israelites. Why does Balaam omit half of God’s answer? Why doesn’t he tell Balak that he had been forbidden to curse the nation?

This is no accident. Balaam omits this part of God’s response – “You shall not curse the nation, for it is blessed” – because he himself is unwilling to accept God’s absolute opposition to cursing the Israelites.

#### THE SECOND ENCOUNTER: BALAAM AND THE MINISTERS OF BALAK

“I could not transgress the word of the Lord”

When the second contingent of ministers arrives, Balaam says to them:

If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of the Lord, my God, to do anything small or great. (Num. 22:18)

אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו  
כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבר  
את פי ה' אלקי לעשות  
קטנה או גדולה. שם, יח

3 See Rashi on Num. 22:13.

Here Balaam corrects the misimpression left by his previous response. He clarifies to Balak's ministers that he is not interested in money or honor – he is bound to God's command.

Once  
Again –  
Omitting  
the Prohi-  
bition to  
Curse the  
Israelites

In fact, though, Balaam does not correct this impression at all. While he does tell the ministers that he cannot disobey God's command, he does not mention that this includes a prohibition against cursing the nation of Israel. They continue to think that it is possible to convince Balaam to change his mind; however, they understand that he must ask for God's permission first.

Balaam  
Refuses to  
Accept the  
Prohibi-  
tion

Once again, Balaam addresses God and asks for permission to curse the Israelites. The first time God responds unequivocally: "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the nation, for it is blessed." Balaam should have responded in a similarly unequivocal manner to Balak's ministers when they made their second request: *Haven't I already told you that God has forbidden me from going with you and cursing the nation?* Why does Balaam ask God again? Does he believe that God could have changed His mind?

If Balaam truly accepts God's response that it is absolutely forbidden to curse the Israelites, he would not ask for God's permission a second time. The fact that he does so reflects his unwillingness to accept God's explicit opposition.

This is the reason for God's anger at Balaam: Balaam truly wants to curse the Israelites and believes that asking God again might change His mind. He fails to

grasp that “the Glory of Israel will not lie nor regret; for He is not a man, that He should regret” (I Sam. 15:29).

Balaam seems to be perfectly faithful to God – he does not act without asking first for His permission – but when he is unsatisfied with God’s response, he attempts to change His mind.<sup>4</sup>

4 Ramban writes (Num. 22:20-22):

והנה היה על בלעם להגיד כן לשרי בלק ולאמר, הנה הרשה השם אותי להיות קרוא לכם בלבד, אבל על מנת שלא לקלל את העם ועל מנת שאם יצוה אותי לברך שאברכם, ואם לא יתמצו בכך יהיו מניחים אותי, כי גם בפעם הזאת השנית אמר בלק (פסוק י'): "ולכה נא קבה לי את העם הזה", לא יחפוץ בו להודיעו עתידות ולא לדבר אחר זולתי לקוב את העם. והנה בלעם מרוב חפצו ללכת לא הודיעם זה ולא אמר להם כלום, ויקם בבקר ויחבוש את אתונו וילך עמהם כרוצה להשלים חפצם, על כן חרה אף ה' כי הולך הוא שאילו הודיעם לא היה הולך.

ועוד, שהיה בזה חלול ה', כי בלכתי עמהם סתם והוא ברשות השם, חשבו שנתן לו רשות לקלל להם את העם, והנה חזר בו ממה שאמר תחלה: "לא תאור את העם כי ברוך הוא" כפי מה שהגיד להם, וכאשר יראו עוד שלא יקללם, יאמרו כי אחרי כן נמלך עוד, או יהתל בהם כהתל באנוש, חלילה לה' מעשות כדבר הזה כי נצח ישראל לא ינחם.

And behold, Balaam should have said so to the ministers of Balak and say to them: “Behold, God has permitted me to only be called upon for you, but not in order to curse the nation and in order that if He commands me to bless them I will bless them.” And if they would not have been satisfied with this, they would have left him alone, for the second time Balak states: “And now, please go and curse this nation for me” (Num. 22:17); he did not wish for [Balaam] to tell him the future nor anything else except curse the nation. And behold, Balaam, in his great desire to go, did not tell them this and did not say anything to them, “And he got up in the morning and saddled his donkey, and he went with the ministers of Moab” (Num. 22:20), as one who wished to carry out their will. For this reason God was angry at him, that he went with them, for if he had told them he would not have gone.

And furthermore, there was a desecration of God’s name in this, for when he went with them without specifying a purpose and he was under God’s command, they thought that [God] had given him permission to curse the nation for them and reconsidered what He had said at first: “You shall not

## “GO WITH THE PEOPLE”

**Why does  
God Allow  
Balaam to  
Go?**

Surprisingly, after Balaam asks God for permission a second time, God allows him to join Balak’s ministers. Why doesn’t He stand by His prohibition against Balaam joining them? Could God have changed His mind, thus justifying Balaam’s tactics?

Later in the narrative it becomes clear that God has not changed His mind; He never permits Balaam to curse the Israelites. Still, why does He cause Balaam to misunderstand the situation by telling him to join Balak’s ministers, when God does not actually want him to do so?

**Does God  
Give in to  
Stubborn-  
ness?**

According to Ibn Ezra, when Balaam comes to ask God’s permission a second time, God allows him to do as he wishes; however, God gives His consent out of anger, not willingly (see Ibn Ezra on Num. 22:19). God is angry – “And God’s anger was kindled because he went” – not only because Balaam goes with Balak’s ministers, but because Balaam asks Him to go with them in the first place (even though He does ultimately give Balaam permission to go).<sup>5</sup>

Ramban (Num. 22:20) challenges this explanation:

---

curse the nation, for it is blessed,” as [Balaam] had told them. And when they would see that he would not curse [the nation], they would say, “Later on [God] changed his mind again, or He tricked us, as humans do.” However, God would certainly not do so, as “The Glory of Israel will not lie nor regret” (I Sam. 15:29).

5 Ibn Ezra’s interpretation is based on the Talmud (*Makkot* 10b and *Sanhedrin* 105a), and is quoted in Rashi’s commentary on Num. 22:35: “A person is led down the path he wishes to take.”



And what Rabbi Abraham [Ibn Ezra] said is incorrect, that God had reconsidered and withdrew His response due to the petitioner's stubbornness... And God does not punish a person for something that He had permitted to him.

ומה שאמר ר' אברהם איננו נכון, שינחם האלוקים וישיב דברו אחר בעבור עקשות השואל... ולא יעניש האלוקים בדבר אשר יתן רשות בו.

Ramban argues that God may have surrendered to Balaam's pressure and changed His mind. In fact, a closer reading of God's response reveals that He not only allows Balaam to do as he wishes – He actually commands and urges Balaam to go: “Get up and go with them.” Why does God command Balaam to go with Balak's ministers, contrary to His initial response?

**The Central Prohibition Remains**

It is important to note that God does not retract His initial command entirely. The first time Balaam asks, God says to him, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the nation, for it is blessed.” The second time, He responds, “Get up and go with them; but only the word that I speak to you, you shall do.” While God cancels His prohibition against Balaam joining Balak's ministers, He does not retract the prohibition against cursing the Israelites. In fact, He explicitly states that Balaam is only allowed to go on the condition that he does not disobey God's word.<sup>6</sup>

6 See Ramban's commentary on Num. 22:20 for a lengthy discussion of this point.

**Balaam's  
Choice**

Had Balaam paid closer attention to God's response and honestly attempted to understand His will, he would have understood the connection the two things God says to him. Balaam would have realized that "the word that I speak to you" is: "You shall not curse the nation." God does not state this explicitly, thus allowing Balaam the choice between understanding this on his own or willfully misunderstanding and attempting to curse the nation. Balaam is unwilling to accept God's prohibition against cursing the Israelites and tries to ignore it even when God states it explicitly. Unsurprisingly, he continues to ignore this commandment now that God has given him the option of "misinterpreting" it.

**Why does  
God Com-  
mand  
Balaam to  
Go?**

Still, why does God **command** Balaam to go with Balak's ministers?

Ramban explains that God wants Balaam to go so that the Israelites will ultimately be blessed by a non-Jewish prophet.<sup>7</sup>

---

7 Other medieval commentators answer this question differently. Seforno (Num. 22:20) explains that God allowed Balaam to join Balak's ministers only **in an advisory capacity**:

אם להועץ עמך בלבד, כענין "קראוי העדה" (במדבר א', טז) וכענין "ואקראה לך להודיעני מה אעשה" (שמואל א ב"ח, טז) – קום לך אתם, להזהירם שלא יחטאו.

"To call upon you" – If they wish only to consult with you, similar to [the word "call" in the verses]: "those called upon from the nation" (Num. 1:16) and "And I have called upon you" (I Sam. 28:15) – then get up and go with them, to warn them not to sin.

Riva (Num. 22:20) suggests a similar explanation. In addition, Rabbenu Bahya writes:

ויש מפרשים כי מזה שאמר "לא תלך עמהם" ביאורו על מגת לקלל, ואחר כך אמר "אם לקרוא

Or *HaChaim* explains that God allows Balaam to go so that **it will not be said that God was afraid of Balaam** and therefore prevented him from going. However, God does forbid him to go at first in order to demonstrate that Balaam is truly subject to God's will.

Going to  
Carry out  
God's Will

This explanation is compatible with the simple reading of God's response. As mentioned above, God does not only allow Balaam to go – He actually commands him to go in order to fulfill His will. **God wants Balaam to go so that he can express His will in practice.** It is specifically because Balaam wants to curse the Israelites that God commands him to go and fulfill His will – to bless the Israelites. Thus **God's total control over Balaam** is revealed – even when Balaam seeks to curse the nation, he ultimately fulfills God's will and blesses them.

While Balaam refuses to accept that he is unable

---

לך באו האנשים" לקריאה בלבד, שתלך עמם – "קום לך אתם", על מנת שלא לקלל.  
And some explain that what He said: "You shall not go with them" – this means [going] in order to curse [the Israelites], and later He said: "If these people have come to call upon you" – only to call upon you, that you should go with them – [then] "Get up and go with them," not in order to curse [the nation].

Hizkuni explains that God's commandment to Balaam was primarily to **convey a message to the elders of Moab and Midian:**

"אם לקרא לך" – אם כל כך הם שוטים שבאו לקרוא לך פעם שנייה אחרי שאמרתי לך לא תלך עמם, קום לך אתם ויראו שלא יועיל להם.  
"To call upon you" – if they are so foolish that they came to call upon you a second time after I told you that you shall not go with them – get up and go with them, and they will see that it will not benefit them.

to curse the nation, he should still recognize that his words and actions are dictated by God's will. He should realize that in the end he will inevitably fulfill God's will, regardless of what his intentions are.

**Balaam Attempts to Oppose God's Will**

But Balaam does not understand this. He joins Balak's ministers without telling them that he cannot curse the Israelites, leaving them under the impression he will be able to do so. In fact, Balaam seems to have convinced even himself that he will be able to harm the Israelites against God's will.

When he joins Balak's ministers, Balaam does not view himself as a servant going to fulfill his master's will.<sup>8</sup> This is the reason for God's anger at Balaam. God is not angry that Balaam goes along – He Himself commanded him to go. God's anger is focused on Balaam's intentions: God wants Balaam to go in order to fulfill His word; Balaam, however, intends to act upon his own will even though it clashes with the will of God.

### THE THIRD ENCOUNTER – BALAAM AND THE ANGEL

And an angel of God placed himself in the way as an adversary against him; and he was riding upon his donkey, and his two servants were with him. And the donkey saw the

וַיִּתְנַצֵּב מִלְּאֲךָ ה' בַּדֶּרֶךְ  
לְשׂוֹן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל  
אֲתוֹנוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו עִמּוֹ:  
וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֲתוֹן אֶת מִלְּאֲךָ ה'  
נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה  
בְּיָדוֹ, וַתִּטַּט אֲתוֹן מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ

8 See Rashi on Num. 22:20: “The word that I speak to you, you shall do’ – and even so, ‘And Balaam went,’ and he said [to himself]: Perhaps I will persuade Him, and He will consent.”

angel of God standing in the path with its sword drawn in its hand, and the donkey turned aside from the path and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey to turn it onto the path. And the angel of God stood in a pathway between the vineyards – a fence on this side, and a fence on that side. And the donkey saw the angel of God and pressed itself against the wall, and crushed Balaam’s foot against the wall, and he struck it again. And the angel of God went further, and it stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn aside to the right or left. And the donkey saw the angel of God, and it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. (Num. 22:22-27)

וַתֵּלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה, וַיִּדְרֹךְ בַּלָּעַם  
אֶת הָאֱתוֹן לְהַטִּיחָהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ:  
וַיַּעֲמֵד מִלְּאֲךָ ה' בְּמִשְׁעוֹל  
הַכְּרָמִים, גָּדַר מִזֶּה וּגְדַר  
מִזֶּה: וַתִּרְאֵהוּ הָאֱתוֹן אֶת  
מִלְּאֲךָ ה' וַתִּלְחֹץ אֶל הַקִּיר  
וַתִּלְחֹץ אֶת רֶגְלָהּ בַּלָּעַם אֶל  
הַקִּיר וַיִּסֹּף לְהַכְתִּיחָהּ: וַיֹּסֶף  
מִלְּאֲךָ ה' עָבֹר, וַיַּעֲמֵד  
בְּמִקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין דֶּרֶךְ  
לְנִטוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל:  
וַתִּרְאֵהוּ הָאֱתוֹן אֶת מִלְּאֲךָ ה'  
וַתִּרְבֵּץ תַּחַת בַּלָּעַם, וַיַּחַר  
אֵף בַּלָּעַם וַיִּדְרֹךְ אֶת הָאֱתוֹן  
בַּמַּקֵּל.

במדבר כ"ב, כב-כז

**Why does  
the Angel  
Appear?**

The angel appears in Balaam’s path “as an adversary against him,” with “its sword drawn in its hand.” This threatening image creates the impression that the angel intends to harm Balaam, to punish him – or at least attempt to stop him from going with Balak’s ministers.

In this case, why doesn't Balaam see the angel? If God sought to stop Balaam, why doesn't He allow Balaam to see the angel for himself?

This encounter raises another question: what is the angel's mission? Ultimately, it does not harm Balaam or even cause him to return home.

At first, the encounter with the angel seems superfluous. Its words to Balaam – “Go with the people, and only the word that I shall speak to you, you shall speak” – repeat nearly verbatim God's speech to Balaam before he leaves his home: “Get up and go with them; but only the word that I speak to you, you shall do.” The appearance of the angel does not seem to add anything new to the narrative. Why does it appear at all?

**Obstacles  
along the  
Way**

The angel appears to Balaam after it causes three delays. First, it causes Balaam's donkey to turn off the path. Then it causes the donkey to crush Balaam's leg against a wall. Finally, it makes the donkey collapse under Balaam and refuse to move. Balaam does not see the angel during any of these incidents, attributing them to the donkey's stubbornness. In the end, God allows Balaam to see the angel and he realizes the reason for his donkey's behavior. The angel then rebukes Balaam for joining Balak's ministers.

Why can the donkey see the angel when Balaam cannot? Why does the angel first cause a number of disturbances, and why does the Torah describe them in such detail? Are they meant to humiliate Balaam

and show him his own insignificance? Are these delays an essential part of the angel's mission, or are they merely means of rebuking Balaam?

It seems that these obstacles are part of the angel's mission and that it purposely remains invisible to Balaam at first. The purpose of this is to make Balaam wonder whether these delays are coincidental – if the donkey happens to be uncooperative today – or if a higher power is directing them. As discussed above, God was angered by Balaam's hidden intentions. Therefore, the obstacles God places before Balaam are also hidden, and are meant to make Balaam consider his true intentions in going with Balak's ministers. Some reflection on the nature of the delays would bring Balaam to realize that God told him not to curse the Israelites and that He disapproves of his actions. This should lead him to the conclusion that he must either return home or continue to Balak with the intention of fulfilling God's will.<sup>9</sup>

**Balaam  
Disregards  
the Angel  
and God's  
Will**

This encounter may have another symbolic meaning. The angel of God is a reflection of God's will. **Balaam's inability to see the angel symbolizes his disregard for God's will.** The angel's clash with Balaam reflects the conflict between God's will and Balaam's. The donkey senses this conflict, senses

9 Seforno writes (Num. 22:22):

והנה המלאך יצא להתנגד לבלעם שיהיה דרכו בלתי נכון לפניו, אולי ינחש כמנהגו ולא ידחוק את השעה, וזה למען לא יחטא ויאבד.

And behold, the angel came out to oppose Balaam, so that his way would not be smooth before him; perhaps he might divine, as was his custom, and not press the issue. This was so that he would not sin and be lost.

the will of God blocking its way,<sup>10</sup> and steps aside in deference to God's will. Balaam's donkey, loyal to its master, attempts unsuccessfully to circumvent these obstacles. Ultimately the donkey understands – as Balaam eventually does – that one cannot oppose God's will, and it collapses beneath him.

Just as Balaam refuses to accept that there is no way he could manage to curse the Israelites and that God only commands him to go in order to fulfill His will – so too, he is now unable to correctly interpret the obstacles in his path. God does not make His angel invisible to Balaam – Balaam himself refuses to open his eyes and understand God's will.

**The Inevitable Revelation**

Had Balaam understood for himself the message conveyed by the obstacles in his path, the angel may not have revealed itself to Balak at all. God does not want to explicitly tell Balaam the right thing to do; He wants Balaam to come to this conclusion for himself. Only when Balaam fails to do so does the angel appear:

And God opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of God standing on the path with its sword drawn in its hand. (Num. 22:31)

וַיִּגַּל ה' אֶת עֵינָיו בְּלֵעָם וַיֵּרָא  
אֶת מַלְאָךְ ה' נֹצֵב בְּדַרְכּוֹ  
וְחֶרְבוֹ שְׁלֻפָּה בְיָדוֹ.  
בַּמְדַּבֵּר כ"ב, לֹא

<sup>10</sup> Ramban explains that the donkey could not actually see the angel, but that it “felt the thing that frightened her from passing...” (Ramban on Num. 22:23).



**The An-  
gel's Expla-  
nation**

Yet even after the angel has been revealed to him, Balaam still fails to understand the implications. He immediately bows before the angel, but does not yet understand the purpose of its presence; he must be told explicitly. The angel explains what Balaam was meant to have understood for himself:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| And the angel of God said to him:  | וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי מְלָאכֵךְ ה' –  |
| 1. Why have you struck your donkey these three times?                                  | (1) עַל מָה הִכִּיתָ אֶת אֲתוֹנְךָ<br>זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ רָגָלִים                                     |
| 2. Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because [your] way is distorted before me. | (2) הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי יֹצֵאתִי לְשׁוֹטָן<br>כִּי יָרַט הַדֶּרֶךְ לְפָנָי:                          |
| 3. And the donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times,                 | (3) וַתִּרְאֵנִי הָאֲתוֹן וַתִּט<br>לְפָנַי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רָגָלִים                                |
| 4. Unless she had turned aside before me, I would have killed you... (Num. 22:32-33)   | (4) אוֹלֵי נִטְתָּה מִפְּנֵי כִי<br>עָתָה גַם אֶהְיֶה הַרְגָתִי...<br>בַּמַּדְבָּר כ"ב, לַב-לֶג |

The delays were not coincidental, and were not the donkey's fault.

The delays were caused by the angel. God's will was what stood in Balaam's way.

The donkey sensed God's will and turned aside in deference to it, while Balaam himself could not see the angel.

Had the donkey not sensed the angel's presence either and continued on the path, Balaam would have collided directly with the angel and died.

God makes it clear to Balaam that his actions are contrary to His will, and that His will is now physically blocking Balaam's path.

Only after this explanation does Balaam realize what he failed to understand before:

<p>And Balaam said to the angel of God: I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood on the path before you; and now, if it displeases you, I shall return. (Num. 22:34)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעָם אֶל מַלְאָךְ ה' – הֲטִיאתִי, כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה נֹצֵב לְקִרְאָתִי בַדֶּרֶךְ, וְעַתָּה אִם רָע בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲשׁוּבָה לִי. במדבר כ"ב, לד</p>
--	---

Until this point, Balaam refused to see that he was acting contrary to God's will and thought he would be able to bypass God. Now, once he has been explicitly rebuked, he suggests returning to his home.

**God's Control over Balaam and Other Events**

At this point, though, the angel does not want Balaam to return.

<p>And the angel of God said to Balaam: Go with the people, and only the word that I shall speak to you, you shall speak. (Num. 22:35)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר מַלְאָךְ ה' אֶל בְּלָעָם – לֶךְ עִם הָאֲנָשִׁים, וְאָמַסְ אֵת הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תִּדְבָּר. במדבר כ"ב, לה</p>
--	--

The angel repeats God's commandment to go with Balak's ministers so that Balaam, who sought to curse the Israelites, **would surrender his will before the will of God**, thus powerfully demonstrating God's control over everything in the world.

In summary, the angel did not stand in Balaam's way with the aim of killing him or even stopping him. Had Balaam recognized the signs present in the obstacles placed in his path, the angel would not have been revealed to him at all. Only after Balaam fails to recognize these signs does the angel appear to him and explain what he did not understand for himself: **all events are directed by God, and one cannot oppose His will.**

The figure of an angel with a drawn sword appears twice more in the Bible:

#### JOSHUA'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL

And it was when Joshua was in Jericho, and he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, **there stood a man opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand**; and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No, for I am a captain of the host of God; now I have come." And Joshua fell upon his face to the earth and bowed down, and he said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" And the captain of the host of God said to Joshua, "Remove your shoes from upon your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy." And Joshua did so. (Josh. 5:13-15)

וַיְהִי בַּהַיּוֹם הַהוּא שֶׁיָּרָח וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ עֹמֵד לְגַדְדוֹ וְחַרְבּוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ, וַיִּלְכֵּךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ – הֲלָנֹו אַתָּה אִם לְצָרֵינוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר – לֹא, כִּי אֲנִי שׂוֹר צָבָא ה', עֲתָה בָּאתִי; וַיַּפֵּל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל פָּנָיו אַרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ – מָה אֲדַנִּי מִדְּבַר אֵל עֹבְדוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר שׂוֹר צָבָא ה' אֵל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ – שֶׁל נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל הַגִּלְגָל כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו קֹדֶשׁ הוּא, וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כֵּן. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ ה', יג-טו

Before the capture of Jericho, an angel of God appears with its sword drawn. Why does it appear?

The angel with a drawn sword is a threatening image, but here too – as in the story of Balaam – it does not seek to kill Joshua. It does not accuse Joshua of any specific sin.<sup>11</sup> Why, then, does it appear?

God's  
Hand in  
the Cap-  
ture of  
Jericho

Abarbanel explains that the angel comes to direct Joshua regarding how to capture Jericho:

To let him know that he should not think he will capture Jericho with human force, and that which it said: “Remove your shoes from upon your feet” – is meant to say: Remove from yourself your thoughts of how to capture the city by force, as “The place upon which you stand is holy,” and you will capture it by a divine miracle, not in another way.

להודיעו שלא יחשוב שילכוד יריחו בכוח אנושי, וזה שאמר “של נעלך מעל רגלך” – רוצה לומר: הסר ממך המחשבות אשר אתה בהם לקחת את העיר בחזקה, לפי שהמקום אשר אתה עומד עליו קודש הוא ובנס א-לוהי תילכד, לא באופן אחר.

11 However, the Sages explain that instead the angel comes to rebuke Joshua:

אמר ליה אמש ביטלתם תמיד של בין הערביים ועכשיו ביטלתם תלמוד תורה! על איזה מהן באת? אמר ליה “עתה באתי”. מיד “וילן יהושע בלילה ההוא בתוך העמק” ואמר רבי יוחנן: מלמד שלן בעומקה של הלכה.

It said to him: Last night you neglected the evening continual-offering, and now you have neglected the study of Torah! [Joshua said to him:] For which of these have you come? It said to him: “Now I have come.” Immediately, “And Joshua lodged that night within the valley [emek].” And Rabbi Yohanan said: This teaches that he immersed himself deeply [be’omka] in [the study] of halakha. (Sanhedrin 44b)

According to Abarbanel, the angel appears to Joshua to reveal to him that Jericho will be captured by divine forces, not by man.<sup>12</sup> Just as the angel appeared to Balaam, so it appears to Joshua. In both cases, the angel's mission is to emphasize that **the events about to occur are directed by God, not by man.**<sup>13</sup>

~~~~~  
12 As the book of Exodus states:

הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ מִלְאָךְ לִפְנֶיךָ לְשָׁמְרֶךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְלְהַבִּיאֲךָ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנֵתִי: הַשְׁמֹר מִפְּנֵי וְשָׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ אֵל תִּמְרָר בּוֹ כִּי לֹא יִשָּׂא לְפִשְׁעֵכֶם כִּי שָׁמִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: כִּי אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹלוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר וְאִבִּיתִי אֶת אֹיְבֶיךָ וְצָרְתִי אֶת צָרְיֶיךָ: כִּי יֵלֶךְ מִלְאָכִי לִפְנֶיךָ וְהִבִּיאֲךָ אֶל הָאֱמֹרִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִי וְהַפְּגַעֲנִי הַחַי וְהַיָּבֵסִי וְהַכְּחָדְתִּיו. שְׁמוֹת כ"ג, כ-כג

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and bring you to the place that I have prepared. Take heed of it and listen to its voice; do not rebel against it; for it will not pardon your transgression, for My name is within it. But if you indeed listen to its voice, and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy for your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel shall go before you and bring you to the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Canaanite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite; and I will cut them off. (Ex. 23:20-23)

13 However, there is clearly a significant difference between Balaam and Joshua: Balaam attempts to circumvent God's will, and the angel that appears to him is an expression of the conflict between his actions and God's command. In contrast, Joshua seeks to fulfill God's will, and the angel comes to tell him that Jericho will be captured by direct divine intervention and not by man.

## DAVID'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL

The angel with the drawn sword appears yet again in the time of David. After David counts the nation, he realizes that this was a mistake and seeks to repent for his sin. God allows him to choose the punishment he will endure:

Go and speak to David, saying, “So said God, ‘Three things I offer you; choose one of these... Either three years of famine, or three months to be swept away before you enemies as the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or three days of the sword of God and pestilence in the land, and the angel of God destroying throughout all of the borders of Israel...”” And David said to Gad, “I am in a great strait; let me fall now into the hand of God, for His mercies are very great, and let me not fall into the hand of man.” And God sent a pestilence upon Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell. And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, and as it was destroying, God saw and reconsidered this evil,

לְךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ אֶל דָּוִד לֵאמֹר - כֹּה אָמַר ה', שְׁלוֹשׁ אֲנִי נוֹטֵה עֲלֶיךָ, בְּחַר לְךָ אֶחָת מֵהֵנָּה... אִם שְׁלוֹשׁ שָׁנִים רָעָב, וְאִם שְׁלֹשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים נִסְפָּה מִפְּנֵי צָרֶיךָ וְחָרֵב אוֹיְבֶיךָ לְמִשְׁגָּת, וְאִם שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים חָרֵב ה' וְדָבַר בְּאַרְצוֹ וּמִלְאַךְ ה' מִשְׁחִית וְיִשְׂרָאֵל... וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל גָּד - צַר לִי מְאֹד, אֲפֹלָה נָא בְּיַד ה' כִּי רַבִּים רַחֲמָיו מְאֹד וּבְיַד אָדָם אֶל אֲפֹל: וַיִּתֵּן ה' דְּבַר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּפֹּל מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבְעִים אֲלָף אִישׁ: וַיִּשְׁלַח הָאֱלֹהִים לְוַהֲלֵם מִלְאַךְ לְיִרוּשָׁלַם לְהַשְׁחִיתָהּ, וּכְבַּחֲשִׁית רָאָה ה' וַיִּנְחַם עַל הַרְעָה וַיֹּאמֶר לְמִלְאַךְ הַמִּשְׁחִית רַב עֲתָה־קָרָה יָדְךָ, וּמִלְאַךְ ה' עִמָּד עִם גֶּרֹן אֲרֻנָּה הַיְבוּסִי:

and He said to the destroying angel, “Enough; now lower your hand.” And the angel of God was standing by the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite. And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of God standing between the earth and the heaven, with its sword drawn in its hand, stretched out over Jerusalem; and David and the elders covered in sackcloth fell upon their faces. (I Chr. 21:10-16)

וַיִּשָׂא דָּוִד אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת מַלְאָךְ ה' עֹמֵד בֵּין הָאָרֶץ וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ נְטוּיָה עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם, וַיַּפֵּל דָּוִד וְהַזְקֵנִים מִמְּקֹסִים בְּשָׁקִים עַל פְּנֵיהֶם. דברי הימים א כ"א, י-טז

“Let me fall now into the hand of God”

David chooses the punishment of pestilence, as it is meted out directly by God and not through a human intermediary. The following *midrash* explains David’s considerations when choosing his punishment:

At that moment, King David said to himself: If I say, “Let a famine come,” the Israelites will say, “He relies on his treasury, and therefore he said, ‘Let a famine come.’” And if I say, “Let the sword come,” the Israelites will say, “He relies on his warriors, and therefore he said, ‘Let the sword come.’” I shall ask for a pestilence... (*Eliyahu Rabba* 8)

באותה שעה, דוד המלך אמר בדעתו: אם אומר אני תבוא רעב, יהיו ישראל אומרים – בוטח באוצרותיו, לפיכך אמר יבוא רעב. ואם אומר אני תבוא חרב, יהיו ישראל אומרים – מפני שהוא בוטח על גיבוריו, לפיכך אמר תבוא חרב. אשאל דָּבָר... אליהו רבה, ח

The simple understanding of this *midrash* is that David fears the nation’s criticism should he choose a

punishment that he has the personal means to avoid. But the *midrash* may hint to a deeper theme. David chooses pestilence because it is the only punishment to which no one is immune. It is a true expression of God's complete dominance over the world. According to this interpretation, the continuation of the verse – “And let me not fall into the hand of man” – is David's request to avoid punishment at the hands of man. The verses emphasize the divine origin of pestilence.

Now it is clear why an angel with a drawn sword appears to David as well. Here, too, the angel symbolizes **God's complete control over these events**. David is already aware of this point – he specifically chooses a punishment that would make clear to all that this it is not a natural disaster or coincidence, but the hand of God: “Let me fall now into the hand of God.”

## Summary

The angel with the drawn sword appears three times in the Bible. In the first instance, it seems to come with destructive intentions, but in fact only the angel in David's time causes any damage.<sup>14</sup>

A closer examination of the angel's three appearances reveals that the angel is a symbol of God's will, and

---

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that even in David's case, the angel does not appear when it is carrying out its destructive mission, but only afterwards. This supports the interpretation that **the appearance of the angel is not a threat**; rather, it conveys a message.



it appears in order to emphasize that the present events are not controlled by man, but by God.

In Balaam's case the appearance of the angel is particularly significant, as he initially refuses to accept God's will and attempts to bend it to his own. The angel does not try to stop Balaam; it merely reveals God's will to him and explains that one may only dispense blessings and curses in accordance with His will. Following this encounter, Balaam should understand that his will is in conflict with God's, and that will of God that will ultimately prevail.

After his encounter with the angel, Balaam does continue on his journey with Balak's ministers, but his perspective has changed. Immediately upon meeting Balak he tells him in no uncertain terms what he had neglected to tell him before:

|                                  |                                     |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Have I now any power at all to   | הֵיכֹל אוֹכַל דְבַר מְאוּמָה,       |
| speaking anything? The word that | הַדְבָר אֲשֶׁר יִשִּׁים אֶל-לוֹהִים |
| God shall put into my mouth,     | בְּפִי אֶתֹו אֶדְבֹר.               |
| that I shall speak. (Num. 22:38) | בַּמַּדְבֵּר כִּי-לֹא               |

God has given man free choice, which includes the ability to act contrary to His will. Man's role is to attempt to express God's will in this world, instead of trying to subjugate God's will to his own. God's voice cannot always be heard, but it echoes in the world. One who truly seeks to fulfill God's will learns how to listen for this voice, how to truly search for God and carry out His will.