

As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. --- Numb. 24:2

How did God speak through Balaam? Rabbi Eliezer said: like an angel. Rabbi Yochanan said: like a fish-hook (i.e., Balaam did not wish to do so, but God forced him to praise Israel). --- Talmud, **Sanhedrin** 105b

When God first met Balaam, He said to Him: What are you doing? Balaam said, *I have set up (for You) seven altars.* (23:4) This can be compared to a money-changer who falsified his weights; when the inspector came and caught him, he said: I have already sent a gift to your house! Likewise did Balaam act. --- **Midrash Numbers Rabbah** 20:18

The spirit of the Divine Presence rested upon Balaam lovingly because of God's love and affection for him. (I.e., because Balaam really meant to bless the Israelites). --- Rashbam (Shmuel ben Meir, 12th c.)

The spirit of God came upon him: against his will, to force him to bless them. --- Yosef Bekhor Shor, student of Rashbam

Wounds by a loved one are long lasting; the kisses of an enemy are profuse. (Proverbs 27:6) The curse uttered by Ahijah the Shilonite was better than the blessing given to them by the wicked Balaam. Ahijah cursed them by comparing them to a reed; the reed rises in water, drives young shoots and has many roots...and stands firm in its place. Not so Balaam, who blessed them by comparing them to a cedar, which does not grow in water, does not drive young shoots, and has few roots...hence, when a strong southern wind blows, it uproots and overturns it. --- Talmud, **Ta'anit** 20a

The spirit of God came upon him: This is the same experience that a real prophet has. Remember what Moses told Joshua: *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!* (Numb. 11:29) Isaiah too said: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me* (Isa. 61:1), and Balaam calls himself *him who hears God's speech*, for he has become a prophet. --- Nachmanides

It is not him, Balaam, upon whom God's spirit fell; this refers to Israel. The Torah had to write Balaam's name once more along with the word **va-yisa**, "he raised (his eyes)"...He invoked the prophetic powers with which he had been equipped, in order to see what ordinary folk could not see. And it mentions his name to make clear that what Balaam did here, he did in his capacity as a prophet designated by God to the Gentile nations. He succeeded in seeing the Israelites, as a result of invoking these powers with which God had equipped him. --- **Or ha-Chayyim**, Chayyim ben Attar, 17th c. Morocco

Word of him who hears God's speech, who beholds visions from the Almighty, prostrate, but with eyes unveiled. --- Numb. 24:4

He has now become one who sees through a clear glass, like the original prophets, of whom it was said, *I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as **El Shaddai***, (Exod. 6:3) using the same two divine names as in our verse, **El** and **Shaddai**. Or, perhaps, he is one level below them, since *visions from the Almighty* are not the same as the Almighty Himself; or perhaps even two levels below, since it says (literally) he "envisioned visions" from the Almighty. --- Nachmanides

What did Balaam see? He saw that God's will could not be influenced by sorcery; the thoughts he had uttered previously now became his own thoughts; he turned to the wilderness waiting to act as a vehicle for God's will. --- S.R. Hirsch, 19th c. Germany

When does a person begin to see the hand of God? When he is prostrate, when he is humbled, his eyes are opened, then he pays attention and observes that there is (Pirkei Avot 2:1) "an eye that sees and an ear that hears." --- Menachem HaKohen, 20th c. Israel