

Some Observations on the Balaam Tradition at Deir ʿAllā

BY JO ANN HACKETT

The plaster inscription from Tell Deir ʿAllā currently resides at the Amman Museum. It is impressively displayed across from a copy of the Moabite Stone and next to the Copper Scroll from Qumran. The fragments of the ancient inscription are arranged in order in modern plaster and securely encased in large wood and glass trays, which are themselves enclosed in a wooden cabinet. In 1979 and again in 1981 I went to the museum in order to examine the inscription at close quarters and to photograph it. I was especially interested in checking some specific readings, particularly in the difficult second combination.

Thanks to the cooperative efforts of several scholars since the first publication of the inscription, the first combination can now be read with some certainty, although there are still gaps to be filled in.

Combination I tells of the experience of a man named *blcm brbr*, who is called a seer of the gods (*hzh ʾlhn*, in line 1). We assume that this seer is the same man spoken of in Numbers 22–24 and elsewhere in the Bible. (His name is commonly given as Balaam, son of Beor, in English Bibles, and I continue that tradition here.) In the Deir ʿAllā text, Balaam is visited at night by the gods (*ʾlhn*)

The story of the Deir ʿAllā texts and their contents has been magnificently published by Jacob Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (1976). During the excavation of Deir ʿAllā in the Jordan Valley in February and March of 1967, a sharp-eyed foreman spotted writing on bits of plaster. Thus an important inscription was saved from being shoveled out with the debris.

The date of the inscription is roughly 700 B.C.E. The precise date is still under discussion, with suggestions ranging from the early eighth century to the Persian period. The dating comes from analysis of the formation of the letters in the inscription, as well as from analysis of the artifacts found in the destruction debris. A carbon-14 date could push things back to 800 B.C.E., while others claim 650 or even 600 B.C.E. is more appropriate.

The excavator, H. J. Franken, has suggested that instead of being on the wall of the building that he labels a sanctuary (Hoftijzer and van der Kooij 1976: 12–13), as at Kuntillet ʿAjrud in the Negeb, the Deir ʿAllā texts may have been on a stele or at least on some form of display area. The building was destroyed by an earthquake, so the plaster may have been thrown out during this destruction. The result is some very fragmentary plaster. Franken theorizes that an earthquake shock destroyed portions of the inscriptions, which may now be lost forever. A second shock actually threw the plaster off its backing, thus preserving what we have now.

The excavators did a superb job of preservation. Unfortunately they did not have a great deal to preserve, so in addition to a partial inscription we end up with fragmentary writing as well. The problem has been made worse by water damage to the letters. These are also damaged in specks where the straw in the original plaster has rotted away, leaving holes in the plaster and in the writing.

The Hoftijzer–van der Kooij volume gives full details on the find, how the letters were deciphered, suggested transcriptions and translation, general remarks on the texts, photographs (color and infrared), and drawings of the texts. The last shows the use of red ink in several places, instead of the black ink used for most of the writing. Hoftijzer thinks the red ink may represent the introduction of new and important aspects, such as the title of the prophecy and the beginning of direct discourse. McCarter (1980) believes “red was used for passages referring to the inscription itself, its composition, its utilization, and so on,” whereas Kaufman (1980) has suggested that the shift from black back to red at the beginning marks off the divine quotation. There may have been a magical element in the use of red. Others, including Hackett, do not consider the change in the color of the ink significant (see the notes to her transliteration and translation of Combination I).

The fragments of plaster have been pieced together into fifteen different groups, called combinations. Combination I and Combination II are the largest, with seventeen and thirty-seven lines respectively. The others range from single letters to several phrases. Since the original publication of the inscription, scholars have made several suggestions for changes.

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The Deir ʿAllā text refers to a man named Balaam, son of Beor, a seer of the gods. We assume he is the same man spoken of in Numbers 22–24.



Two portrayals of Balaam riding an ass. Above: From one of the bronze doors of the basilica of St. Zeno in Verona. Above right: From a carving on the capital of a column in the church of Saint-Androche, Saulieu, Burgundy.

and he sees a vision (wyhʒ mhʒh, end of line 1), after which the gods speak to him and give him a message (in line 2: wy'mrw l[blc]m brbcʀ). At the beginning of line 3 we are told that Balaam "got up the next day" (wyqm blcʀm mn mhr), so we must assume that the gods' message to Balaam, following his vision reported in line 1, is contained entirely in the remainder of the second line. This is much too short a message to comprise the upsetting information that was apparently given to Balaam — information that is the topic of the rest of Combination I. Therefore, we

conclude that the significant communication Balaam receives from the gods must have been disclosed to him in the vision in line 1 and that it is this vision, and not the subsequent message in line 2, that he relays to his people later in the extant text. I would propose that the message from the gods in line 2 (unfortunately only partially preserved) simply refers back to the vision in a summarizing or admonishing manner (kh ypʀl could begin such a message: "thus he [El?] will do . . ." — ignoring the change in ink color). The vision and message devastate Balaam.

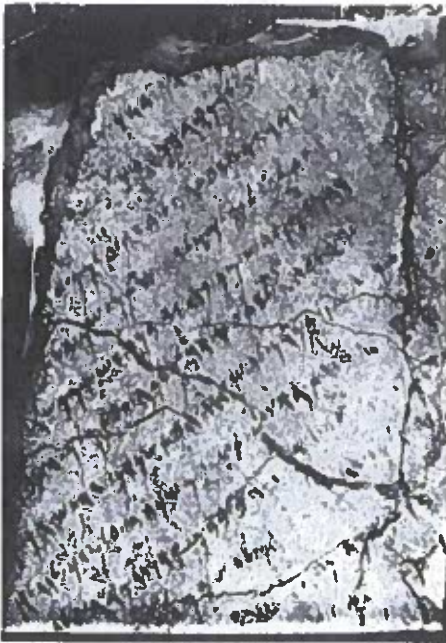
He arises the next day and cries passionately. His people come up to him and ask him why he is crying and fasting. In response, Balaam tells them what the gods have done and are going to do.

Balaam relates a vision of the Divine Council sitting in assembly (lines 5/6: 'l[h]n tyhʒdw / wnšbw šdyn mwʀd). The council addresses a goddess (the imperatives that follow are feminine singular); although we cannot determine the deity's identity, we know that the first letter of her name is š — the rest of her name is lost in a lacuna in the text. The goddess is asked to close up the heavens "in" or "with" a cloud (line 6), to ordain darkness for the earth instead of light, and to seal up the sky forever. This is presumably a punishment, as perpetual darkness would bring the loss of fertility and life on earth.

The reason the gods are angry with the earth is set out in the following lines in the familiar "reversals" text style. It seems that everything on earth has been turned topsy-turvy. For instance, "the [tiny] swift reproaches the griffin-vulture, and the voice of [normally voiceless] vultures sings out . . . Instead of ewes, it is the staff that is led . . . The deaf hear from afar." (This interpretation was proposed by McCarter in 1980.)

Such a series of reversals is known to us from biblical texts like 1 Samuel 2:4–8 and Isaiah 3:4–5 and 24. We find even more striking parallels, however, in Egyptian literature. For instance, in "The Admonitions of Ipuwer" we read: "See, he who had nothing is a man of wealth, the nobleman sings his praise . . . He who was a messenger sends someone else. . . See, the baldhead who lacked oil has become owner of jars of sweet myrrh" (Lichtheim 1975: 157); and in "The Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb," we find: "He who gave orders takes orders" (Lichtheim 1975: 148). There are obvious parallels in our text, in lines 9, 11, and 12.

Combination I breaks off at this



A section of Combination II. Photograph courtesy of the Deir ʿAllā Expedition.

point, and we are still unsure of the relationship between Combination I and Combination II. I have suggested elsewhere that Combination II represents some sort of ritual that is meant to appease the gods and to take away the curse of darkness (Hackett 1984: 80). Late in Combination II, in lines 35 and 36, we can read at the beginnings of the lines, "They [clouds?] will drip with heavy rain" and "They will drip with dew." It would seem that the curse and the loss of fertility have been lifted late in the text.

The Deir ʿAllā Text and the Bible

The Deir ʿAllā inscription is a fascinating text in its own right but it is also interesting because it casts light on the biblical character Balaam. Balaam at Deir ʿAllā is a non-Israelite religious leader revered in Transjordan—precisely as we would expect, given the biblical data. He is a leader in a cult that is not Yahwistic—again as expected from some biblical Balaam traditions (for in-

Balaam in the Bib

Among that unique group of people in the Bible called prophets, one of the more interesting is the prophet Balaam. We do not usually talk about him as a biblical prophet because he was not an Israelite. Despite this, he prophesied by the power of Yahweh, the God of Israel—a situation that was unusual, though not without parallels. In Isaiah, the Persian emperor Cyrus is called the messiah—that is, Yahweh's anointed one (chapter 45, verse 1)—and foreign people (Assyria) are designated as instruments of God (chapter 10, verse 5).

Balaam is mentioned several times in the Bible, but his best-known appearance is in Numbers 22–24. A close reading of the story in Numbers presents some problems. For instance, where does he live? Although Balaam is said to live on the Euphrates River, the description of Balak's messengers traveling back and forth, as well as the description of Balaam's own travels, suggests a location closer to Moab. Both the Samaritan and the Septuagint Greek text of Numbers have Balaam coming from the land of the Ammonites. If Joshua 13:22 represents the same man, he was in this area when the Israelites killed him. The Ammonite area makes more sense in the context of the Numbers story, as well as in the texts found at Deir ʿAllā. McCarter's (1980) suggestion that Balaam was a foreigner at Deir ʿAllā would fit either tradition. J. Lust (1978) suggests Balaam was an Ammonite.

Another problem involves an apparent contradiction in the story. The reader will recall that Balak, the king of Moab, sent messengers to Balaam in order to hire him to curse the invading Israelites. Balaam asked the Lord what to do and God told him not to go with the messengers and not to curse the people of Israel. He therefore sent the messengers away because he could only do what Yahweh allowed. (Note that this is not God in general but specifically Yahweh, the God of Israel.) But Balak would not give up. He tried again, using higher-class messengers. Balaam again asked the Lord and this time God said, "Go, but only do what I tell you."

So Balaam went. And God got mad. We see a parallel to this in the Mosaic tradition in Exodus 4:24, where the Lord, who had just sent Moses back to Egypt, sought to kill him. No clear explanation for the contradiction appears in either instance if we take the texts literally. Why should God want to kill someone he has just allowed or asked to go on an errand? We do not know. Literary critics have theorized that in Numbers we have the strands of two stories woven together—with the poetry in the chapters coming from still other sources. According to this view, in one strand Balaam had permission to go, while in the other he was forbidden or had not asked. If these critics are right, the second strand may help explain why subsequent references to Balaam are mostly negative (Numbers 31:8, 16; Deuteronomy 23:4–5; Joshua 13:22, 24:9–10; Nehemiah 13:2; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14; only Micah 6:5 seems positive: see Baskin 1983 and Coats 1973). Without these references it is difficult to explain why the Israelites would kill someone who loyally obeyed their God and blessed them. (Psychologically, of course, he could be their scapegoat, since they did not obey God themselves.)

stance, Numbers 25 and 31)—a cult that recognizes a council of several gods. The language of the Deir ʿAllā text exhibits syntax and vocabulary similar to biblical Hebrew; it is to be compared with South Canaanite dialects, as I have argued (Hackett 1984: 109–24), or is at least dependent on

Canaanite literary traditions, as McCarter has proposed (1980: 50–51).

Perhaps the most suggestive new information from the Deir ʿAllā text is the mention of a group of gods known as the *šdyn*. We think immediately of *šadday* as an epithet of El in the Hebrew Bible. We are also

and at Deir ʿAllā

It is this interesting, but difficult, character that we are probably dealing with when we come to the Deir ʿAllā texts. Hoftijzer says of the *blcm brbr* who appears in the texts, "There can be no reasonable doubt that in the so-called first combination . . . we have to do with the story of a prophecy." He adds, "In my opinion there can be no doubt that the prophet in question is Balaam, the son of Beor."

There is, of course, doubt. The word *blcm* is actually present in the Deir ʿAllā texts only twice: Combination I, lines 3 and 4 in Hackett's reconstruction (see also McCarter 1980 and Levine 1981); and Combination I, line 5, and Combination XII, fragment d, line 2, in Hoftijzer's reconstruction. The name has also been restored. Hoftijzer restored it in both lines 1 and 2 of Combination I, and virtually all scholars working on the texts since then have followed his lead. In addition, various suggestions have been made for its restoration in other places in the texts. Thus, the two clear instances support the restorations.

My concern here is not a detailed analysis of the text but to note that, fragmentary and uncertain as it is, Combination I from Deir ʿAllā may involve Balaam engaging in prophecy or prediction of doom. As I compare the biblical story of Balaam with the Deir ʿAllā texts, I am struck by an anomaly. In Jeremiah 28, verse 8, Jeremiah says, "The prophets who preceded you [Hananiah] and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and kingdoms." This is a strong contrast to Numbers 23 and following where Balaam prophesies good. But it is in agreement with the Balaam of Deir ʿAllā, if the text in Combination I does indeed predict destruction. If there is a call for repentance in Combination I, that too would be in harmony with the biblical tradition of the preexilic prophets.

The contrast should not be pressed too far, of course. The biblical prophets had their moments of hope. Isaiah knew Jerusalem would be saved. Jeremiah could tell the exiles to settle down and seek the good of the land. They would go home some day. Further, the context of Numbers 22–24 is a setting in which an enemy of Israel called for Israel to be cursed but God called for a blessing.

Whatever qualifier or explanation might be given, it remains remarkable to me that the Balaam of the seventh-century text of Deir ʿAllā has a closer resemblance to those figures we call biblical prophets than does the Balaam of Numbers 22–24.

Like Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22:14), Balaam declared in Numbers 22–24 that he could only say what the Lord allowed. But the activity of blessing and cursing is perhaps more priestly than prophetic in nature. It may reflect the activity of the diviners and seers, forerunners of the prophets (1 Samuel 9:9). In the Deir ʿAllā texts, Balaam is called a divine seer but his activity there more closely resembles the biblical prophets.

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reminded of the oracles of Balaam in Numbers 24, where he twice describes himself as "the one who hears the words of El / who sees the vision of Šadday" (verses 4 and 16). In the biblical context El and Šadday are parallel epithets for Yahweh. At Deir ʿAllā, the same names are pre-

sented in parallel, this time in the plural, but they represent the gods meeting in council: "The *ʾlhn* gathered together / the *šdyn* stood as the assembly" (lines 5/6). Here, I would suggest, *ʾlhn* is the general term for the gods and *šdyn* is the epithet of the gods in their capacity as the

members of the Divine Council. As has long been suggested, the word *šadday* means "the one of the mountain" from an original **šdw/y*, "breast," and the gods in council (with El Šadday as head of the council) are perhaps referred to as "mountain ones" because the council meets on top of a mountain (as in Isaiah 14:13; text 2.1.19–24 in Herdner 1963; see also McCarter 1980: 57).

As an epithet of a group of gods in the Transjordanian region, *šdy* may also have been preserved in the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy 32:17 we read that Israel, in the period between the Exodus and the Conquest, "sacrificed to *šdym*, not Eloah, gods they did not know." The word *šdym* is vocalized *šēdīm* here (the simple plural of *šēd*) and is usually translated "demons." (At Deir ʿAllā *šdyn* could not be vocalized *šēdīm* and read as a plural of *šēd*. The orthographic system operative in the Deir ʿAllā text requires that the *y* in *-yn* be consonantal and not simply a *mater* for *i*.) The Hebrew Bible vocalization *šēd* is probably connected with Akkadian *šēdu* (Kaufman 1974: 101–02), even though *šēdu*, "spirit," carries no negative connotations. Certainly by rabbinic times the meaning "demons" was established. These *šdym* in Deuteronomy 32, however, are specifically called gods, *ʾēlōhīm*, in the second part of the colon. So the word *šdym* in Deuteronomy 32 should describe a group of gods, not simply "demons," that the Israelites worshipped during their stay in Transjordan (note the reference to Bashan—a region north of the river Jabbok—in verse 14). Furthermore, in Psalms 106:37 it is reported that the Israelites "sacrificed their sons and daughters to *šdym*." Again, the reference is to the pre-Conquest sojourn in Transjordan. This report is mentioned shortly after the incident of Baal-peor for which Balaam, son of Beor, is given credit as instigator in Numbers 31:16.

These connections push us in the direction of repointing *šdym* in

Deuteronomy 32 and Psalms 106, so that the y in biblical *šdym*, like the y in the Deir ^cAllā *šdyn*, is consonantal. We would then read for the biblical passages **šaddayim*, and identify by this name one group of the "gods of the nations." The Israelites encountered this group on the east side of the Jordan and participated in its ceremonies and behavior that angered Yahweh. The identification of **šaddayim* allows us to attribute more authenticity to the tradition that Balaam was a religious leader in a ritual cult east of the Jordan. This cult would have been a rival to the Yahwistic cult, and its followers might well have practiced rituals connected with death or sex. (Full decipherment of the extant second combination will give us valuable information relating to this matter.)

A pattern has begun to emerge that ties together Balaam, son of Beor; the plains of Moab in the east Jordan valley; worship of gods with the epithet *šdy*; and various ritual practices. Balaam is connected with this geographical area both by the biblical stories and by the location of Deir ^cAllā itself. The epithet *šdy* is connected to Balaam in Numbers 24 and at Deir ^cAllā. Some sort of ritual dealing with death or sex is apparently being described in the second combination of the Deir ^cAllā text (see, for instance, such phrases as *rwy ddn* in Combination II, line four, likely a sexual image, and *byt c_lmn* in Combination II, line 6, which can be translated "grave"); Balaam (via Baal-peor) is connected in the Bible with sacrifices to other gods (Numbers 25:2), sacrifices of the dead (Psalms 106:28), and perhaps to ritual sexual practices (Numbers 25:6–9). (Child sacrifice could also be mentioned here if Psalms 106:37 is to be brought in. Considering the use of *šdym* in verse 37, I am inclined to add it.)

I might further suggest that the prose portions of Numbers 22–24 were seen by their original audience

as extremely ironic. If we see Balaam as one of Israel's powerful religious rivals, and a leader in a cult that worshipped not Yahweh but a pantheon of other gods, then portraying Balaam as one who must call on Yahweh to determine his movements

and who has no choice but to bless Israel because of Yahweh's favor toward Israel would surely have delighted the early audience. The new information on Balaam provided by the Deir ^cAllā text allows us to infer that this was indeed the gist of the

The Deir ^cAllā Text: Combination I

Transliteration

- 1wh
- 1 [VACAT]spr[.blcm.brbc]r.š.hzh.1hñ[.jh'].jwy'tw.1hn.blylh.wyhz.mhzh
 - 2 kmš'.1.wy'mrw.l[blc]m.brbc.r.kh.ypc[.]'.hr'h.š.lrf[.]ct[.]
 - 3 wyqm.blcm.mn.mhr[.]ly[]mn.[]sh.wlyk[.l.l]wbk
 - 4 h.ybkh.wycl.cmh.1wh.[wy'mrw.l]h[.]blcm.brbc.r.lm.tšm.wtbkh.wy'
 - 5 mr.lhm.šbw.'hwkm.mh.šd[yn.pclw.]wikw.r'w.pclt.'1hn.'1[h]n.'tyhdw.
 - 6 wnšbw.šdyn.mwcd.w'nrw.lš[]tpry.skry.šmyn.bcbky.šm.hšk.w'l.n
 - 7 gh.clm.w'l[.]škrky.thby.št[m.]b.hšk.w'l[.]thgy.cd.clm.ky.ssgr.hr
 - 8 pt.nšr.wql.rhinn.ycnh.h[sd.]bny.nhš.wšrh.'prhy.'nph.drr.nšrt.
 - 9 ywn.wspr[.]yn.[]mth.b'sr.rhln.yybl.htr.'mbn.'klw.
 - 10 []'b.hpš[]styw.hmr.wqbcn.šmcw.mwsr.gry.š
 - 11 [cl.]lhkmn.yqhk.wcnyh.rqht.mx.wkhnh
 - 12 []lnš'.zr.qm.hšb.hšb.whšb.h
 - 13 [šb.]wšmcw.hršn[.]mn.rhq[.]
 - 14 []škl.hzw.qqn.šgr.wcštr.l
 - 15 []nmr.hnyš.hqrqt.bn
 - 16 [y.]mšn.'zrn.wcyn.

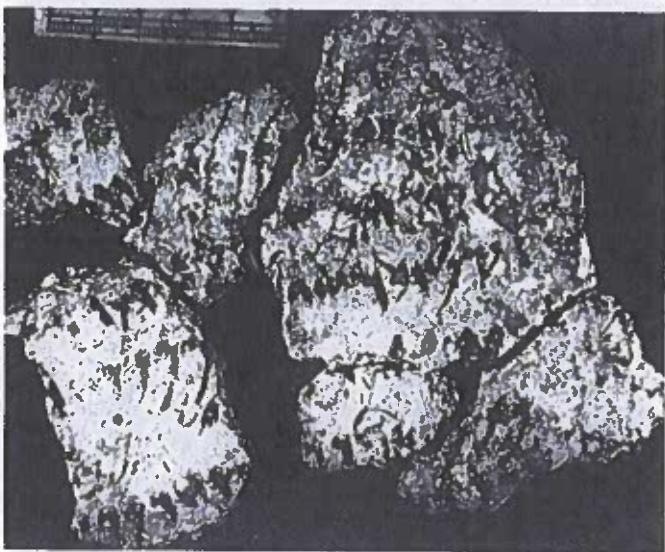
Translation

The account of [Balaam, son of Beo]r, who was a seer of the gods. The gods came to him in the night, and he saw a vision (2) like an oracle of El. Then they said to [Balaa]m, son of Beor: "Thus he will do/make [] hereafter (?), which []" (3) And Balaam arose the next day [] from [] but he was not ab[le to] and he wept (4) grievously. And his people came up to him [and said to] him, "Balaam, son of Beor, why are you fasting and crying?" And he sa(5)id to them: "Sit down! I will tell you what the Šadda[yyin have done.] Now, come, see the works of the gods! The g[o]ds gathered together; (6) the Šaddayin took their places as the assembly. And they said to Š[]: "Sew up, bolt up the heavens in your cloud, ordaining darkness instead of (7) eternal light! And put the dark [] sejal on your bolt, and do not remove it forever! For the swift re(8)proaches the griffin-vulture and the voice of vultures sings out. The st[ork] the young of the NHŠ-bird (?) and claws up young herons. The swallow tears at (9) the dove and the sparrow [] the rod, and instead of the ewes, it is the staff that is led. Hares eat (10) [a wo]lf(?) [] drink wine and hyenas give heed to chastisement. The whelps of the f(11) [ox] laughs at the wise. And the poor woman prepares myrrh while the priestess (12) [] for the prince, a tattered loincloth. The respected one (now) respects [others] and the one who gave respect is [now] re(13) [spected.] and the deaf hear from afar. (14) [] and the ? of (?) a fool see visions. The constraint of fertility (lit. "offspring") (15) [] the leopard. The piglet chases the you(16) [ng of] (?) . . ."



A section of Combination II. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Hamilton.

Below left: Fragments of the text before they were arranged into combinations and designated fragment c of Combination I and fragments c and d of Combination V. Photograph courtesy of the Deir el-Ba'ala Expedition. Below right: Tell Deir el-Ba'ala, viewed from the north.



Notes: The text offered here reflects several changes that have been suggested since the first publication of the text in Hoftijzer and van der Kooij 1976. A. Caquot and André Lemaire suggested in 1977 that fragments c and d in Combination I should be moved up two lines, to yield the reading *wbkh.ybkh* across the third and (now) fourth lines of the text. They also suggested that fragment d in Combination VIII and fragment c in Combination XII should be placed together, since *blcm.brbc* could then be read. In fact, these two suggestions should be combined: Fragment d of Combination VIII and fragment c of Combination XII should be put together and placed within the first combination as parts of lines 3, 4, and 5, thereby insuring that fragments c and d of Combination I could be moved up to fit around the newly placed fragments. Additional fragments have been placed

recently by Gordon Hamilton, of the University of Calgary, who has also worked on the inscription. For instance, Hamilton has put fragment e of Combination V and fragment c of Combination XV in the large gap at the end of line 1, which placement is reflected in my transliteration. Further, Hamilton argues convincingly that we should disregard changes in ink color in lines 1 and 2, since the switches occur precisely at the midpoint of each line. Fitzmyer (1978: 94-95), Naveh (1979: 134-35), Greenfield (1980: 250), and Levine (1981: 196-97) also ignore the ink color, although their translations differ slightly from mine.

For a detailed discussion and justification of the readings and translation offered here, see Hackett 1984.

Underlined words are in red ink in the original.

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Balaam stories in Numbers 22-24.

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ment of the University of Jordan.

I would like to thank Marvin Pope for pointing out to me the implicit connection between Balaam and sacrifices of the dead, based on Psalms 106, and Robert Good for bringing to my attention that *šdym* was also present in this psalm.

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