

## Numbers 22-24: Balaam gets a bad reputation<sup>1</sup>

[Numbers 22](#), a northern text from the Elohist<sup>2</sup>, picks up after Korah's rebellion, the people continued on their slow march to Canaan. They tried at first to enter via Edom, to the southeast of their future homeland, but the Edomites refused them passage (Num. 20:18). So they turned north instead and ultimately circled around Edom, scoring victories on the way over the Amorite king, Sihon, and Og, king of Bashan. Soon they were on the doorstep of Moab, directly east of Canaan. It was then that the famous confrontation with Balaam occurred. It happened like this:

The Moabite king, Balak, was clearly worried at the progress of this new people in the region. He therefore appealed to a renowned soothsayer, Balaam son of Beor, to help rid him of the Israelites<sup>3</sup>. Balaam had a reputation as a curser, someone who was capable of harming people through his imprecations. Balak therefore offered Balaam a hefty sum to travel from Aram to Moab and curse the Israelites, and after some hesitation, Balaam agreed.<sup>4</sup> Before his departure, however, Balaam received a divine warning: "Do only what I tell you to do" (Num. 22:20).

On his way to Moab, Balaam ran into the snag: his donkey, spotting an angel in front of them, shied from the road and ran into a nearby field, refusing to budge. Balaam at first saw nothing and, furious at his donkey, beat the poor animal mercilessly. It was only when she protested (actually speaking to her master in human words) that he finally spotted the angel himself and understood why she would not move. The angel then told Balaam that he could continue his journey but cautioned him again in God's name: "You can say nothing other than what I [God] tell you" (Num. 22:35).

Arrived in Moab, Balaam tried to cooperate with the king's wishes. But every time he opened his mouth to curse Israel, all that came out were blessings. Some of them were worded in the elegant language of biblical poetry:

From the top of these crags I see them, as I gaze from the mountain heights: A people that dwells apart and is not reckoned among the nations!

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number Israel's dustclouds? Let me die the death of the righteous that my offspring may be like him!

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<sup>1</sup> This is adapted from James Kugel, [How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now](#), Free Press, 2008, p. 336-340

<sup>2</sup> Friedman notes that the Balaam episode here is "perhaps the hardest section in the Torah in which to delineate sources" due to its composite nature. There seems to be a core group of texts that presents Balaam in a good light: he gives four oracles that present Israel in a positive light, he refuses to curse Israel, and he only "goes up" with Balak at the command of the Lord. These evidences place him in a positive light. But later, in the Priestly chapter of Numbers 31, Balaam is denigrated. But at least in the core of his oracles and his statements regarding his unwillingness to predict harm upon Israel he is a positive figure. See: Friedman, [The Bible with Sources Revealed](#), p. 280.

<sup>3</sup> The leading role in this drama is taken by the diviner Balaam, 'the man whose sight is clear, . . . who hears the words of El, who obtains knowledge from Elyon and sees the vision from Shadday'. In the narrative itself he has no title. He is not called a prophet (נביא), nor a seer (ראה/רזה), nor a man of God (איש האלהים). Yet through his actions, Balaam clearly has the power to curse as well as bless Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Balaam agrees to "go up" with Balak **only after** being commanded by God to do so! See Numbers 22.20.

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob; O Israel, your encampments! Like softly swaying palm groves, or gardens beside a river, Like aloes the LORD has planted, and cedars on watery banks. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall have mighty streams.

A star will come forth from Jacob, and from Israel rise up a scepter. It will crush the Moabites' brow, and the forehead of all of Seth. Edom will be its possession, and Seir will fall to its spoil: Yes, Israel will triumph!

(Num. 23:9–10; 24:5–7, 17–18)

Needless to say, these words did not find favor with Balaam's employer, King Balak. He dismissed Balaam without the promised payment, and the professional curser returned to his homeland. **One would think, given this bare recital, that Balaam would have been one of Israel's cherished heroes**, a foreign soothsayer who blessed Israel instead of cursing. **But his reputation among ancient interpreters was quite the opposite: he was Balaam the Wicked.** According to later interpreters, part of the reason lay in the story itself. After all, he tried to curse Israel; it was only that God would not let him. More than that, however, was the role that money played in the story. When Balak's envoys approached Balaam with their offer, they said in the king's name: "I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me" (Num. 22:17). **Much of this was diplomatic code language.** "Great honor" is an elegant way of saying "a lot of money," and "whatever you say to me I will do" meant: name your price. Balaam took the hint, replying, "Even if Balak were to give me his palace full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God." **Nice words—but what they really meant, interpreters felt, was, "This could really cost you."**

**Here are some of the commentaries by later interpreters:**

Woe to them [ungodly men]! For they . . . abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain. ([Jude 1.11](#))

Whence do we know that Balaam had a large appetite [for money]? From his saying, "Even if Balak were to give me his whole palace full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God." [That is, he would not have mentioned silver or gold if that were not what was really on his mind.]

*Abot deR. Natan* (B) ch. 45<sup>5</sup>

But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things they understand not, and shall utterly perish in their own corruption... having eyes full of adultery... which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Peor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness... ([2 Peter 2.12-15](#))

At first he was a holy man and a prophet of God, but afterward, through disobedience and the desire for lucre, when he tried to curse Israel, he was called by the Holy Writ a "soothsayer." ([Joshua 13.22](#))

Jerome, *Questions in Genesis* 22:22

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<sup>5</sup> Ancient Jewish commentary on scripture. See: [The Jewish Encyclopedia](#). See also: [MyJewishLearning](#).

In short, **Balaam the Wicked was one of the great villains of the Hebrew Bible, taking his place next to the diabolical fratricidal Cain and the seditious Korah in the rogues' gallery of ancient Israel.** "Don't be like these," Scripture was saying.

### **Balaam and Modern Scholarship**

In 1967, an Arab worker at an excavation site at Deir 'Alla', in Jordan, discovered a piece of plaster with writing on it. It turned out to be part of an inscription dating back deep into biblical times, perhaps belonging to the late eighth or early seventh century BCE.<sup>6</sup> It was written in a dialect that seemed to be some sort of mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew. The inscription was full of lacunae, but it clearly reported on someone named **Balaam son of Beor, who was a seer of the gods.** The gods came to him in the night, and he saw a vision like an oracle of [the god] El. Then they said to [Balaa]m son of Beor: Thus he will do [ ] hereafter, which [ ]. And Balaam arose the next day . . .<sup>7</sup>

The inscription went on to tell a (very fragmentary) story different from the one in the Bible, but it nevertheless delivered a shock to scholars. After all, there could hardly be a story in the Bible that seemed more fictional than Balaam's—a professional curser and his talking donkey! Yet here was a certifiably ancient inscription that spoke of precisely such a man, and described him just the way the Bible did, as a seer who communicated with the divine at night. **Indeed, the fact that the inscription spoke of "the gods" in the plural and named the Canaanite god El in particular only added to its historical cachet:** apparently such a man, or at least the legend of such a man, existed outside of the biblical orbit. In the Bible, Balaam obeys "the LORD," but in the inscription he belonged to the world of those who still spoke of "the gods" and El. Did this mean that behind the biblical narrative stood some real, historical figure?<sup>8</sup>

This point of contact between the Bible and an excavated text has not, however, stopped scholars from asking the usual questions about the biblical story as it now exists: Is it all of one piece? Why was it written? And by whom? On all these questions opinion is still somewhat divided.<sup>9</sup> **One thing on which most scholars agree, however, is the episode of Balaam and the talking donkey: they believe that this is an insertion into an earlier story. The reason is that this episode seems intended to portray Balaam in a negative light: the great seer cannot even perceive what his donkey can! Take that incident out, scholars say, and you have a smoothly running narrative that presents Balaam altogether positively,**

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion Hackett (1980), Hoftijzer and G. Van der Kooij (1991); M. Dijkstra (1995); Nulleumeier (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Hackett, 1980, p. 29. See also: Hackett, [Some Observations on the Balaam Tradition at Deir cAllā, \*The Biblical Archaeologist\*, Dec., 1986, Vol. 49, No. 4 \(Dec., 1986\), pp. 216-222.](#) The Deir cAllā 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. Balaam relates a vision of the Divine Council sitting in assembly (lines 5/6: *'l[h]n 'tyhdw l wnsbw idyn mwcd*). 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 s - 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. (Hackett, p. 217)

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the answer was: not necessarily. Scholars were quick to point out that the mention of Balaam's name at Deir 'Alla did not prove that there ever was a "real" Balaam, and even if there was, that his name had not simply been taken over by the biblical writer for an utterly fictional tale. See recently, R. P. Carroll (1997: 91-93).

<sup>9</sup> Rofe (1979) (Hebrew) reviews previous scholarship and offers its own assessment; see also Moore (1990).

**as someone who, from the beginning, knew that Israel was blessed by God** (Num. 22:12). Although he went to Moab as Balak requested, Balaam nevertheless warned the king time and again that he could say only what God allowed (Num. 22:38; 23:12, 26; 24:12).

The fact that, without the donkey incident, the story portrays Balaam altogether positively does not mean, however, that this positive portrayal is itself all the work of a single author. After all, scholars note, the prose framework seems at variance with the blessings spoken by Balaam in some of its details.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, because of their language and orthography (spelling), the blessings appear to be quite ancient. Albright in particular highlighted some of their archaic features.<sup>11</sup> But even the blessings may not be of one piece. One theory holds that the first two blessings (Num. 23:7–10 and 18–24), which refer to the basic situation described in the story, may have been composed to go with the frame narrative: in them Balaam keeps saying why he cannot curse Israel. But the latter two blessings (24:3–9 and 15–24) seem disconnected from the frame story. Cut away their (nearly identical) opening verses, this approach claims, and these passages could well be two (or more) ancient prophetic oracles originally attributed to someone else entirely, or to no one in particular.<sup>12</sup> In them, the speaker “predicts” the conquest of Edom by David but knows nothing of Edom’s subsequent resurgence. He mentions among the enemies of Israel the “Sethites” (24:17); this seems to be a memory from the distant past. All this makes these last two blessings sound particularly old. The surrounding prose, scholars say, does not. It is written in standard biblical Hebrew, of the sort spoken in the middle of the pre-exilic period. Still, the basic prose narrative, with its positive portrayal of Balaam, is probably earlier than the talking donkey incident, which seeks to denigrate Balaam. Indeed, the positive portrayal of Balaam would certainly fit well with the positive assessment of Balaam found in the words of the eighth century prophet Micah:

O my people, remember what King Balak of Moab plotted, and what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal—so that you may know the saving acts of the LORD. (Micah 6.5)

Though it is not entirely clear, this passage as well might seem to be presenting Balaam as a positive figure: he answers the wicked Balak, presumably by blessing Israel rather than cursing, and by that answer he apparently gives proof of the “saving acts” of God.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rofe (1979) observed that the blessings mention “the LORD” only once, in a stock phrase (24:6), preferring otherwise to speak of divinity in general terms, whereas the prose narrative is all about the dominion of Israel’s particular God. This indicates, he says, that the source of the blessings was different from that of the prose (27–28).

<sup>11</sup> Albright (1944).

<sup>12</sup> Even if the introductory lines are original, they seem to highlight the disjunction between the blessings in chapter 24 and those of chapter 23: Balaam introduces himself as if he were an unknown quantity. Rofe (1999: 589).

<sup>13</sup> Contrast this with Deuteronomy’s account of the incident, where Balaam seems to take a turn for the worse: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you)” (Deut. 23:3–5). Unfortunately, this passage is hard to date, scholars say: the parenthetical remark may be an editorial gloss of much later vintage.

**Putting all this together:** it seems to some scholars that Balaam's last two blessings may go back to the time of David's kingdom, if not earlier. These only later came to be attributed to Balaam, a legendary soothsayer, and the first two blessings added to them. **At that time or possibly still later on, a surrounding narrative was created to contain them, one that presented Balaam as an altogether positive figure.** Then —perhaps at a time when the very idea of a pagan prophet being addressed by Israel's God had become anathema—the talking donkey was introduced, and with it, the presentation of Balaam as a buffoon. This negative assessment of Balaam may well have been the work of a priestly writer, scholars say, since such an assessment is reflected elsewhere in priestly writings. (Thus, Balaam is blamed for the Israelites' sin at Baal Peor in Numbers 31.16 (A Priestly<sup>14</sup> text!); Balaam's well-deserved death by the sword is reported in Num. 31:8, cf. Josh. 13:22.) This negative portrayal was then picked up and carried forward by the ancient interpreters. **Thus was born the legend of "Balaam the Wicked."**<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that in Numbers 31, Moses is pictured as angry that the Israelites have not killed the Midianite women, who, he says, caused the breach at Peor. Thus, in P, Moses denounces his wife's people, the Midianites, and he orders all nonvirgin Midianite women to be killed. This might or might not include his own wife, but either way it denigrates Moses' connection to Midian through his wife, and it possibly denigrates the Mushite priesthood, who are descended from Moses and that Midianite woman. This is an essential argument in P: to denigrate the Mushite priests and elevate the House of Aaron. This story in Numbers 31 accomplishes this goal. See: Richard Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, p. 298.

<sup>15</sup> One commentator laments: Sometimes there is a great distance between the 'original' narrative and its final reception. The differences may be clear, but why they came about is not. Therefore I focus on a range of texts with more or less related traditions thereby studying the development of changes to Balaam's image in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua and Micah. Brief remarks gradually darken the portrait of Balaam, which is entirely negative by the end. In the final texts he is no longer seen as the seer who blesses Israel but as the source of inspiration for apostasy, as a false prophet who must be put to death. Ed Noort, [Balaam the Villian: The History of Reception of the Balaam Narrative in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets](#), as found in [The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam](#), edited by George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, Brill, 2008, p. 4.