

Balaam is not presented favorably in most biblical texts that allude to him. One notable exception is the Balaam story (Numbers 22–24) and—outside the Bible—a recently discovered Aramaic inscription. The author of Numbers goes so far as to portray this non-Israelite not only as a believer, but even as a prophet of Yahweh.

The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22–24

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THE UNUSUAL STORY OF BALAAM is preceded by the narrative of Israel's attempt to enter the promised land from the east (Num 20:15–21:35) after failing to do so from the south (14:39–45). Moses sends messages to four kings of the lands on Israel's route, asking permission to pass through each territory: Edom (20:14–21), Arad (21:1–3), and the territories of Sihon, king of the Amorites (21:21–30), and Og, king of Bashan (21:33–35). The forces of Edom are such that Israel does not engage them in battle but turns back (20:20–21). The Israelites defeat the other three, however, and take possession of the territories of at least the last two. At the beginning of Numbers 22 Israel is encamped "in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho" (22:1). Here they encounter Balak, son of Zippor, king of Moab, whose territory lies opposite their place of encampment. He proves to be another obstacle on their way to the promised land. What follows, though, is not the story of the engagement of this enemy, but the story of Balaam.

At the outset, the narrative shows the Moabites' dread at seeing the Israelites encamped on their doorstep (22:3). Realizing the threat that such a horde poses to Moab's security, Balak decides to take action. His strategy is quite different from that of the four recently-defeated kings. He judges that this numerous people is mightier than Moab and is reluctant to challenge them in battle. He

decides to use a “secret weapon.” With promises of wealth and honor Balak tries to induce a renowned diviner, Balaam, to curse Israel to weaken their forces (22:6, 11). This narrative is divided into two major sections: Balak’s attempts to hire Balaam (22:1–21); Balak’s attempts to have Balaam curse Israel (22:36–24:25). Between these major sections is a kind of interlude, the story of Balaam’s talking donkey (22:21–35). Far from being merely an amusing anecdote, this little tale contains important clues for interpreting the story as a whole.

Balaam, seer and diviner

Balaam is mentioned in a number of other biblical passages, where he is mostly viewed negatively.¹ Within the Old Testament, only Micah does not present him in a disapproving light (Mic 6:3–5). In the portrayal in Joshua, Balaam petitions Yahweh to curse Israel but God refuses to grant his request (Josh 24:9–10). In Deuteronomy Balaam utters a curse against Israel, but Yahweh turns it into a blessing (Deut 23:4–7; so also Neh 13:2). Moving beyond the Balak story, Num 31:16 has Balaam counsel Israel to turn against Yahweh in the incident at Baal Peor (Num 25:1–16).

New Testament references to Balaam are even more negative. Second Peter portrays him as one “who loved gain from wrongdoing” (2 Pet 2:15–16; cf. Jude 11). In the book of Revelation, the Balaam stories in Numbers 22–24 and the Baal Peor incident in Numbers 25 are combined in such a way that it is Balaam who induces Balak to harm Israel by enticing them to partake of pagan practices (Rev 2:14). I intend to focus, however, on the portrayal of Balaam in Numbers 22–24 and in an ancient Near Eastern inscription.

Who was this Balaam, son of Beor, whom Balak sought to hire to curse Israel?² Where did he come from and what was his profession? As to Balaam’s origins, some significant information is given in Num 22:5. The verse can be translated, “Balaam son of Beor . . . who is by the river [or wadi], [in] the land of the sons of *‘mw*.” This line is difficult to interpret. Which river or wadi is meant here? Often in the Old Testament “the river” without further qualification is the Euphrates, and some translations adopt this interpretation (e.g., NRSV). But a long journey from the Euphrates to the Arnon on a donkey accompanied by only two attendants does not seem likely.³ The Hebrew text associates Balaam’s origins with “the land of the sons of his people [*‘ammô*].” This is a peculiar and unparalleled way of describing a person’s place of origin. Some have interpreted *‘ammô* as an error or even a later form of *‘ammôn*, which is always preceded by “the sons of” in the Old Testament. The standard rendering of “the sons of Ammon” into English is “the Ammonites.” If this is correct, the “river” mentioned here could be one of the rivers or wadis bordering Ammonite territory. The verse in question might then be translated: “Balaam, son of Beor . . . who [lives] by the river [or wadi] [in] the land of the Ammonites.”⁴

After designating him as “son of Beor,” Num 22:5 adds the term *ḫētôrāh*. This is frequently understood as a place name, “at Pethor,” presumably a site in Mesopotamia.⁵ But attempts to identify “Pethor” with a known Mesopotamian site (e.g., Pitru on the Euphrates) have been unconvincing.⁶ In this context the word is best explained as the Aramaic term for “diviner” or “dream interpreter.” This explanation finds support in a passage from Josh 13:22: “Balaam, son of Beor, *the diviner* [Hebrew *haqqōsem*].” In the Joseph story a derivative from this root is used as a technical term denoting dream interpretation (Gen 40:8; 41:13). It is no doubt significant that Balaam is called a *ḫētôrāh* only here, in the first part of the Balaam story, which is also the only passage that describes him receiving divine revelations at night.

The first delegation of Moabite (and Midianite) dignitaries Balak sends to Balaam comes “with *qēsāmīm* in their hand” (22:7). This Hebrew word is commonly translated “fees for divination,” though it could be rendered something like “the paraphernalia for [i.e., necessary to perform] divination.”⁷ “Divination” in such a context denotes receiving and interpreting messages from the divine world by the manipulation or “reading” of certain objects. In Israel, at least during the pre-monarchical period, the Urim and Thummim would be an example of divination regarded as a legitimate means of contacting the divine world (cf. 1 Sam 28:6). A second biblical text that associates this root with Balaam is, as we have seen, Josh 13:22, which calls him a “diviner” (*qōsem*). Micah 3:7 joins this term with “seers” (*ḫōzīm*) in the context of those who seek an “answer” from God on some matter. In Zech 10:2 those who bear this title are also said to “see” something, but in this case what they see is not a true revelation. Micah 3:11 has “prophets” as the subject of a verb from the root under consideration: “[Zion’s] prophets *divine* for money.” At least in the northern kingdom divination by such individuals was disapproved (1 Sam 28:8–9; Deut 18:10, 14), but this was apparently not the case earlier.

In the third and fourth oracles that Balaam delivers to Balak (Num 24:3–9, 15–24) he is described as one “who sees the vision of the Almighty”⁸ (22:4, 16). This implies that he was understood to be a “seer,” a title used in the Hebrew Bible to describe those endowed with supernatural abilities to see what ordinary mortals could not. Samuel, for example, is described as a seer who would be able to tell Saul where his father’s lost asses had gone (1 Sam 9:9). One West Semitic text discovered almost a century ago gives us a picture of how seers may have functioned at the royal court in biblical times. In 1903 a broken stela was discovered in Syria containing the image and inscription (in Aramaic) of Zakir “king of Hamath and Lu’ath,” who apparently reigned in the late eighth century BCE. Finding himself besieged by hostile armies, Zakir raises his hands to heaven in prayer to his god, Baal-shamayn (“Baal/Lord of the Heavens”). Then he reports: “And Baal-shamayn answered me,⁹ and Baal-shamayn [spoke] to me through *seers* and *‘ddn*¹⁰ and Baal-shamayn [said to me], ‘Fear not, for it was I who made you

king, and [I shall stand] with you; and I shall deliver you from all [these kings] who have forced a siege upon you.’”¹¹ Here we have an example of a seer delivering to a king what amounts to an oracle, confirming that it is the will of the god that he will be victorious over his enemies. The time and locale of this incident place it in relative proximity to Israel during the monarchical period. The inscription is significant to the Balaam story because it shows that the seer was one who was able to report the god’s intentions toward the king’s enemies, at least in particular situations. Furthermore, the seers articulate a favorable message from the gods, what the king wants to hear, which is precisely what Balak expected Balaam to do (compare the “yes-men” prophets in 1 Kgs 22:5–7). Balak’s concept of Balaam’s role is therefore understandable; he is expected to pronounce for the king the divine verdict against Israel.

The third time Balak brings Balaam to a high place to curse Israel, the narrator tells us that the seer “did not go, as at other times, to look for omens [*nēhāšîm*]” (Num 24:1). This line assumes either that earlier in his career Balaam had regularly consulted some kind of omens for divine revelation, or that in the two preceding instances (22:41–23:12; 23:13–26) he had done so but not this third time. The word used in this case, like *qôsem*, also refers to a kind of divination forbidden in Israel during the later period (Deut 18:10; Jer 27:9) but is mentioned without censure in patriarchal texts. In Genesis both Laban and Joseph are said to practice divination of some sort (*naḥaš*). It is through divination that Laban discovers that God has blessed him because of Jacob (Gen 30:27).¹² In Gen 44:5 Joseph divines by means of the silver cup that he has planted in Benjamin’s sack as the brothers prepare to leave Egypt.¹³

Recent Near Eastern light on Balaam

Until quite recently Balaam was known only from the Bible. Then during an archaeological excavation at Tell Deir ‘Allā in the east Jordan Valley in 1967 an Arab worker discovered a piece of plaster with writing on it. What he found turned out to be part of a rather lengthy inscription painted on plaster in black and red ink. The fragments were pieced together painstakingly by Jacob Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij.¹⁴ The resulting text consists of two major sections, which are generally thought to form a continuous narrative. The inscription is dated to the late eighth or early seventh century BCE and is in a West Semitic language, probably Aramaic. The subject of the inscription is clearly indicated in the first line: “The story of [Balaam son of Beo]r,¹⁵ who was a seer of the gods.” Because of the fragile nature of the medium on which the inscription was written, there is still some controversy about the precise sequence of the extant fragments.

The first part of the gods’ revelation to Balaam is fairly well preserved, but interpreters disagree on various points. The gods meet in council and reach a

decision, after which they give commands to a goddess, whose name is only partially preserved. Her role appears to be crucial in implementing the decision of the larger body. The import of these commands is an important point of interpretation. Are the gods commanding her to do something that would spell disaster for the cosmos, or prohibiting her from taking such action? Those who take the latter interpretation think the goddess in question is being prohibited from unbolting the flood-gates of heaven, which would bring about another cosmic flood.¹⁶ But as in Mesopotamian literature “the bolts of heaven” or “the gates of heaven” here are not flood-gates. In Akkadian texts they are always mentioned with reference to the sun-god, being the heavenly portals at the eastern and western limits of the sky through which he passes on his daily journey through the heavens. Hence it is likely that the goddess addressed here is the sun-goddess, whose name would be something like “Shamash” or “Shapash.”¹⁷

The more plausible reading of the text is that the gods are commanding the goddess to lock the bolts or the gates of heaven so that the sun could never rise again and the cosmos would be plunged into eternal darkness.¹⁸ They, not she, are responsible for the impending chaos. Since Shamash/Shapash is the goddess who controls the sun and its light, it is she who must implement their decision. The sun-deity is also in charge of cosmic justice. The decision of the divine council is apparently motivated by rampant “injustice” in the cosmos. Justice or the proper governance of the world involved more than the moral actions of human beings. Wherever creatures acted in a way contrary to what was determined at creation, cosmic justice was out of joint. Thus even the fact that certain birds were acting out of character (e.g., the tiny swallow “reproaching” the intimidating griffon-vulture [lines 7–8]) was a sign that world order had come undone. The decision to take away the light of the sun was a punishment designed to fit the misdeed: cosmic disorder on earth would be matched by cosmic disorder in the heavens.

Because of the fragmentary nature of the Deir ‘Allā text, it is not clear why the gods communicated this decision to Balaam, and how it came about that such a threat was never carried out. Most likely they wanted to make humanity aware of their displeasure with creation in its present state, and the obvious way of doing this would be through a seer or diviner. Since this was a decision taken not by a single god but by the divine council, one would hardly expect it to be annulled. Perhaps Balaam persuaded the gods to reverse their decision. Jo Ann Hackett believes that the inscription’s second part preserves fragments of a ritual designed to placate the gods and overturn the divine curse.¹⁹ But this portion of the inscription is so fragmentary that all explanations are only hypothetical.

The description and function of Balaam in the Deir ‘Allā text show striking similarities to the Balaam of Numbers 22–24. In the inscription Balaam bears the same patronymic title given him in the biblical tradition (“son of Beor”), firmly establishing the identity of the protagonist in this inscription with the biblical

Balaam. The inscription calls him “a seer of the gods,” who “saw a vision like an oracle of El”;²⁰ Numbers 24 refers to Balaam’s powers as a seer (vv. 4, 16). The Balaam of the Deir ‘Allā text receives divine communications from the gods at night, as does his biblical counterpart: “And the gods came to him at night” (cf. Num 22:20: “And God came to Balaam at night”). And as in Numbers, the seer gets up the next morning and communicates the vision he had received that night: “And Balaam arose in the morning . . .” (cf. Num 22:13: “And Balaam arose in the morning . . .”).

Certain aspects of the nocturnal revelation to Balaam are different in the two accounts. In the Deir ‘Allā text the nocturnal revelation from the gods appears to be unbidden. On the other hand, in Num 22:1–21 Balaam expects God to reveal whether he should accompany Balak’s emissaries to Moab (22:8, 19).

A significant point of comparison between the two stories lies in what Balaam does after receiving the nocturnal revelation. In Numbers 22–24 he never wavers from his resolve to report only what God has communicated to him, whether for good or ill, and whether it pleases the king or not. Balaam is portrayed as a man of integrity, a seer completely open to the divine message, whatever it may be. At the beginning and end of his contact with Balak, he insists that the king’s promises of wealth and honor will not sway him from this resolve (22:18; 24:13). Similarly, the Deir ‘Allā account narrates that the morning after the gods had spoken to Balaam, some of “his people” find him weeping and fasting. Clearly the revelation he has received is not a message that pleases him or his people. Nevertheless he faithfully reports the gods’ message as he has received it.

The Deir ‘Allā inscription also provides important background to a divine title that appears frequently in the Old Testament and twice in Balaam’s oracles. As we have seen, Balaam describes himself as one “who sees the vision of the Almighty” (Num 24:4, 16). The Hebrew term for “the Almighty” is *šadday*. In the Deir ‘Allā inscription a related term is used a number of times to designate the gods who communicate with Balaam—*šdyn* (probably vocalized *šaddayīn*). Hackett has suggested that *šaddayīn* is the epithet the gods bear in their capacity as members of the divine council²¹ and that the *šdym* in biblical passages are these same deities (Deut 32:17; Ps 106:37).²² Moreover, it is no coincidence that in the “dialogue” section of Job (3:1–42:6), another non-Israelite protagonist in Israelite literature, God is called *‘ēlōhīm* or *šadday*, the same two terms the Deir ‘Allā inscription uses for the gods.

Finally, discoveries at Deir ‘Allā may provide evidence for identifying the river or wadi near which Balaam was said to reside (Num 22:5). The cultic site excavated at Deir ‘Allā may have been the place where Balaam gave his oracles. This site is approximately a mile north of the wadi Jabbok, which formed one of the borders of Ammonite territory.²³

The Deir 'Allā inscription reveals Balaam as he was viewed by Israel's neighbors in the eighth century BCE. Various details regarding the function and character of Balaam find their closest parallel in the Balaam story of Numbers 22–24. Both present him as a seer and one who received revelations from God at night. In addition, both portray him as a man of integrity, hardly the way he was remembered in the greater part of biblical literature.

The interlude of Balaam, the donkey, and the angel

We have considered Balaam's origins and professional role based on the first part of the Balaam story and have compared the portrait of the seer in Numbers 22–24 with the story preserved in the Deir 'Allā inscription. We now return to the Balaam story itself to take a closer look at Balaam's journey to Moab and the episode of the talking donkey.

The reader immediately notices that there is something peculiar about this narrative. It does not fit comfortably in its present context. First, in 22:20 Yahweh has given Balaam permission to accompany the emissaries of Balak to Moab, provided he agrees to speak only what God bids him to speak. So it is odd that God becomes angry with Balaam for going (v. 22). Second, Balaam is going to Moab with the Moabite ambassadors and their retinue. Yet only four characters are mentioned in 22:21–35: Balaam, his donkey, and his two servants. These servants, however, play no role in the drama. Taken by itself, it reads as though Balaam is not traveling with a larger entourage.

This literary interlude has the earmarks of an “intercalation,” a section of narrative inserted into a larger context. The insertion is not necessarily the work of a later editor or redactor.²⁴ In some instances the insertion elucidates the larger context (and vice versa). Some of the most familiar examples of intercalations come from the Gospels, particularly Mark.²⁵ A case in point is Mark's story about Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and his confession (Mark 14:55–65), which has been inserted into the larger narrative about Peter's denial of Jesus (14:53–54, 66–72). By means of this intercalated story the evangelist creates a powerful contrast between Peter's cowardly denial of being a follower of “the Nazarene” and Jesus' bold confession as the Son of God (14:62). The tip-off that an intercalation is involved is the presence at the end of the inserted material of a “resumptive repetition” (vv. 66–67a) that repeats with slight variation what immediately precedes the intercalated section (v. 54). The same kind of repetition, with only a slight variation, frames the tale of Balaam's donkey in Num 22:20–21, 35:

“But only the word that I speak to you, that shall you do”;
and Balaam . . . went with the princes of Moab (vv. 20–21).

“But only the word that I speak to you, that shall you speak”;
and Balaam went with the princes of Balak (v. 35).

The overall similarity between the interlude of the donkey and the following narrative has not escaped interpreters.²⁶ Both 22:41–24:14 and 22:21–35 are three-part stories. In each, two main characters are involved. The “inferior” character (the donkey in relation to Balaam, Balaam in relation to Balak) is unwilling to do as his “superior” wishes. Just as Balaam does not realize that the donkey cannot go where its master wants because of the intervening presence of the angel, Balak fails to realize that Balaam cannot pronounce a curse of his own volition because such a thing depends on the will of the gods. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, Balak fundamentally misunderstands the function and powers of a seer (diviner) from the author’s point of view. Like Balaam in the donkey interlude he behaves as one who is “blind.”

Another suggestive parallel between the two stories is that the superior figure in each becomes increasingly exasperated by the recalcitrance of the inferior: Balaam by his mount’s refusal to go forward on the road, and Balak by Balaam’s refusal to utter a curse against Israel. This motif culminates in the third scene of each story, where the corresponding characters display an outburst of anger, described in almost identical language (22:27; 24:10).

In the last scene of each there is a significant twist that changes the correspondence of the characters. The last scene of the donkey story expresses two important realizations on the part of Balaam (22:31–35). First, God opens Balaam’s eyes so that he “sees” the angel of Yahweh on the road. Second, he realizes that accompanying Balak’s emissaries to Moab to execute the curse against Israel may be “bad in your [the angel’s] eyes,” that is, displeasing to the angel (22:34). In 24:1 also the seer “sees” (realizes) something important, namely that it is “good in Yahweh’s eyes,” that is, pleasing to Yahweh, to bless Israel. This realization signals a climactic moment in the drama of the narrative, for now Balaam has no further need to go through elaborate rituals to ascertain God’s will toward Israel. His blindness is removed, and he now sees clearly that Yahweh is pleased to bless this people.

One humorous aspect of 22:21–35 is the comic reversal of roles of the two characters: the seer is unable to see (the supernatural), and the dumb beast sees the angel of God! Even more embarrassing for the seer, God enables the donkey to speak, whereas Balaam, the oracle giver, remains mute and uncomprehending. The point of such a reversal focuses not so much on Balaam or his beast of burden as on the sovereignty of Yahweh: God can give speech even to a lowly dumb animal, human expectations and assumptions notwithstanding. The literary connection between 22:41–24:14 and 22:21–35 prompts us to see a similar point with regard to the third part of the Balaam story: despite his famed prowess as a diviner, Balaam’s power is wholly dependent on the divine will. God can make a donkey articulate complaints to its human master and enable a diviner to see things beyond the powers of human perception. In the last analysis the focus of 22:36–24:25 is not Balaam’s role but Yahweh’s role and beneficent word.

Balaam, a Yahwist prophet?

One of the extraordinary features of Numbers 22–24 is the apparent depiction of Balaam as a Yahwist. The narrative speaks of his communication with God. Balaam’s very first words (22:8) make reference to Yahweh speaking to him. In fact, the name Yahweh appears in his speech no less than thirteen times. Does this usage mean that the author regards him as a Yahwist? Not necessarily. The use of the sacred name in such instances might be explained as a stylistic variant for *’ēlohîm*, or on source-critical grounds (J source rather than E source).²⁷ One should not overlook the fact that even Balak twice speaks of Yahweh as Balaam’s divine contact (23:17; 24:11). It is hardly possible to claim on the basis of this evidence that Balak, Israel’s archenemy in the Balaam story, is also a Yahwist! Hence the mere existence of references to Yahweh in Balaam’s speech is insufficient grounds for labeling him a Yahwist. But when the second delegation of emissaries from Balak comes to him, Balaam says that in giving his oracle, “I could not go beyond the word of *Yahweh my god*” (22:18). The phrase “Yahweh my god” is more significant than the divine name by itself. It is tantamount to a confession and suggests that the seer is a bona fide worshipper of this god, or at least that this is the god whom he consults in his divination. Either case would justify his being called a Yahwist. But no such formula occurs on the lips of Balak. On the other hand, the narrative does not explain how this non-Israelite seer, who seeks messages through divination, could be a believer in the true God. One reason the author “Yahwehized” Balaam may have been to solve a dilemma he faced in his portrayal of him. If the seer’s positive oracles concerning Israel are true divine revelations, how could they not come from Yahweh? Conversely, if Balaam divines by a god other than Yahweh, how could his oracles about Israel be true?

In part three of the Balaam story (22:36–24:25) the author further emphasizes the Yahwistic character of Balaam—and at the same time Yahweh’s sovereignty in revelation—by means of an extraordinary detail in 24:1–3: “Now Balaam saw that it pleased Yahweh to bless Israel, so he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face toward the wilderness. Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. *Then the spirit of God came upon him*, and he uttered his oracle. . . .” The meaning of this passage hinges on the interpretation of a phrase in verse 1: “[He] did not go, as at other times, to look for omens.”²⁸ What are the “other times” the writer is referring to? It is likely that this refers to the preceding two instances when Balaam sought an oracle from God while Balak stood beside the seven altars with their sacrifices (23:3–5, 15–16). But can Balaam’s actions at this time be described as “looking for omens”? Omens are not mentioned at all in these two passages. Moreover, the description of his actions in the text does not fit with seeking or manipulating omens: “Stand [here] beside your burnt offering, and I will go [over there]; perhaps Yahweh will come to meet me; whatever he shows me I will tell you” (23:3). “Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet Yahweh over there.’ And

Yahweh met Balaam and put a word in his mouth. . . .” (23:15–16).

But the Old Testament presents other examples of divination that do not mention the objects used in the process and also describe the divine response as an utterance of the deity. A good example is 1 Sam 23:9–12, in which David summons the priest to bring the ephod containing the Urim and Thummim. Though the precise nature of these objects is still unclear, all agree that they were sacred lots of some kind, which the priest threw or manipulated. By the way they landed he was able to “read” God’s answer to the question put to him, probably a simple “yes” or “no.” Yet in this passage the divine answer is expressed as direct speech. Clearly this is an inference based on what the priest saw when the lots were thrown. In both cases the lots simply gave the “yes” answer, which the author of this passage paraphrased as the words of Yahweh. Nevertheless, this is a bona fide example of divination. Similarly, when Numbers 23 describes the outcome of Balaam’s inquiry as God “meeting” him (23:4, 16) or “put[ting] words in [his] mouth” (23:5, 16), such language does not preclude the possibility of divination. These are “the other times” to which Num 24:1 refers. We do not know what kind of divinatory means he used—it was certainly not the Urim and Thummim—but they were no doubt methods employed by diviners in that period. In any case, Yahweh deigns to answer Balaam—this non-Israelite Yahwist!—even though he seeks God through methods that were viewed with disdain in later Israelite sources.

In each of the three parts of the Balaam story God communicates with the seer in a different way. God comes to Balaam at night (22:9, 20); revelation is imparted through a talking donkey and an angel (22:28–30, 32–35); and God “meets” Balaam through “omens” and speaks through God’s spirit (23:3, 16; 24:2). Here too the donkey incident may elucidate something that occurs in part three. In the tale of the donkey God lets Balaam in on what is happening by allowing the donkey to speak to him. The donkey becomes a “medium” of divine revelation, albeit so unusual as to border on the absurd. Only at the end of this story does God speak to Balaam through a “proper” supernatural medium, the angel of Yahweh. In 22:41–23:30 God communicates with the seer at first through the imperfect means of divination, revealing to him each time a blessing for Israel. But in the third instance this means is abandoned and God reveals to Balaam as to any Israelite prophet—by the Spirit of God coming upon him.

The Spirit of God coming upon Balaam marks the high point of his portrait in Numbers 22–24. It is rare for an Israelite author to claim that the Spirit of God (or of Yahweh) comes upon a non-Israelite, enabling him to prophesy like the prophets of Israel.²⁹ Within the dramatic movement of the narrative, the fact that the last pro-Israelite oracle comes to Balaam under the influence of the Spirit of God constitutes the supreme authentication of these oracles as revelations from Yahweh. God has indeed blessed Israel!

Conclusion

Nowhere else in the Old Testament is a non-Israelite seer viewed so favorably as in Numbers 22–24. This passage and the Deir ‘Allā text are the only stories preserved from antiquity that present Balaam in a positive light. Why does this narrative portray him in this way, going so far as to cast him as a divinely inspired prophet? Some hold that Numbers 22–24 is a legend that profiles Balaam’s virtuous character and his contribution to Israel’s welfare.³⁰ But this is unlikely if one considers the story in its larger literary context.

In the context of Israel’s wandering tradition, the Balaam story occurs on the verge of the entrance into the promised land. Up to this point Yahweh has brought them through many dangers. Numbers 20:14–21:35 relates how Yahweh gives them victory over various nations who obstructed the march to the promised land. But on the eve of entering that land, when the goal seems within reach, an ominous figure appears on the scene who apparently has the power to stop them. If nothing else, the Balaam story suggests a setback within the drama of the journey. Far from reassuring, the fact that the writer presents him as a Yahwist may increase the reader’s anxiety: if Balaam goes along with Balak’s plan and invokes a curse on Israel, will Yahweh refuse to listen to this believer with whom he is on such intimate terms? At this point in Israel’s wanderings, doubt is raised whether the people will reach their goal after all. The divine blessing Yahweh has made to the patriarchs is now in danger of being overturned. But in a surprising turn of events—especially considering how negatively Balaam is viewed elsewhere in the Bible—the famous diviner does not utter a curse against Israel after all. Instead he pronounces a series of blessings!

The interpretive interlude of Balaam’s donkey points ahead to this outcome. Just as Yahweh can endow a dumb animal with human speech, so also can Yahweh enable a human being—even a pagan diviner—to speak of divine things. And just as God can do this, so the Spirit of God can descend upon whom it would (see Num 11:16–17). The Balaam story teaches that the power to communicate with the divine world, whether by an Israelite or not, is subservient to Yahweh’s will. Blessing and curse are not commodities under the control of powerful diviners. As Balaam insists all along, they are powers that come from God. Regardless of stature, no king or diviner has the ability to use these powers to thwart Yahweh’s plans for the people of the promise.

NOTES

1. On this topic, see George W. Coats, “Balaam: Sinner or Saint?” in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, JSOTSup 35 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1985) 56–62; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Balaam Son of Beor in Light of Deir ‘Allā and Scripture: Saint or Soothsayer?” in *“Go to the Land I Will Show You”: Studies*

in Honor of Dwight W Young, eds J Coleson and V Matthews (Winona Lake Eisenbrauns, 1996) 95–106

2 The patronymic connected with his name here (“son of Beor”) is found in Num 24 3, 15, 31 8, Deut 23 4, Josh 13 22, 24 9, Mic 6 5

3 See Jo Ann Hackett, “Balaam,” *ABD* (New York Doubleday, 1992) 1 571

4 See Scott C Layton, “Whence Comes Balaam? Num 22 5 Revisited,” *Biblica* 73 (1992) 32–61

5 Deut 23 5 (Engl 23 4), a later text, understands the term as a geographical reference “Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor [in] Aram-Naharaim [Mesopotamia]”

6 “The identification of Pethor with Pitru is a product of modern biblical scholarship” (Layton, “Whence Comes Balaam?” 37, see also n 22)

7 Michael S Moore, *The Balaam Traditions Their Character and Development*, SBLDS 113 (Atlanta Scholars Press, 1990) 98, n 8

8 Lit, “who sees [what] the Almighty sees”

9 The technical term “to answer,” in the sense of delivering an oracle in response to a query or petition for divine aid, is common in the OT Note especially its use in Mic 6 5, where Balaam is said to “answer” Balak

10 The exact meaning of this term is not clear, but virtually all interpreters agree that it is a synonym or near-synonym of “seer”

11 J C L Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol 2 *Aramaic Inscriptions* (Oxford Clarendon, 1975) 9–11, lines 11–15

12 “I have learned by divination that Yahweh has blessed me because of you” (RSV)

13 This may be a reference to lecanomancy, divination by means of observing mixed liquids in a cup or bowl See Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 52

14 Jacob Hoftyzer and G van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Alla* (Leiden E J Brill, 1976)

15 The text as restored by Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text From Deir ‘Alla*, HSM 31 (Chico Scholars Press, 1980) 25 Of this first occurrence of the name and patronymic in the inscription (line 1) only the last letter is preserved The restoration is certain, however, as the full name occurs in line 4

16 This is the position of a number of commentators on the inscription See M Dijkstra, “Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?” *JBL* 114 (1995) 53

17 In many parts of the ancient Near East the sun deity was male This was the case in Mesopotamia, for example, where Sumerian Utu (Babylonian Shamash) was the sun-god On the other hand, the chief solar deity in the Hittite pantheon was female (the sun-goddess of Arinna), as was the sun-deity Shapash at Ugarit

18 This interpretation has been defended by P K McCarter, Jr “The Balaam Texts from Deir ‘Alla The First Combination,” *BASOR* 239 (1980) 49–60, and by Hackett, *Balaam Text*

19 Jo Ann Hackett, “Some Observations on the Balaam Tradition at Deir ‘Alla,” *BA* 49(1986) 218

20 The Hebrew for “sees a vision [of the Almighty]” in Num 24 4, 16 is identical to the wording of the Deir ‘Alla inscription

21 *Ibid*, 219

22 *Ibid*, 219–20

23 Layton, “Whence Comes Balaam?” 47

24 See Burke O Long, “Framing Repetitions in Biblical Historiography,” *JBL* 106 (1987) 385–99 Examples of this technique in the OT include Genesis 38 (framed by 37 36 and 39 1), 2 Chron 2 2–16 (framed by vv 1, 17), and 2 Sam 3 2–5 (framed by vv 1, 6a)

25. Markan intercalations would include 2:5b–10a; 3:4–5a, 22–29; 5:25b–34; 6:14–29; 11:15–18; 14:55–65. See Howard C. Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 54–56.

26. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 104–07.

27. The standard source-critical analysis of the Balaam story holds that 22:41–23:26 belongs to the E source and 23:28–24:19 belongs to J (see, for example, Martin Noth, *Numbers*, OTL [London: SCM, 1968] 171). This analysis, however, is problematic. It separates the third part (23:28–24:14a) of what is a clearly developed three-part story in this section of the narrative (Balaam with Balak in Moab) from the first two sections of the same story (22:41–23:12; 23:13–27). The tripartite structure of the interpretive story of Balaam's donkey also confirms the threefold character of part three (22:36–24:25).

28. Moore translates, “[to] call (the gods) via omens” (*Balaam Traditions*, 105, n. 38). This is not impossible, but since the text twice speaks of God meeting Balaam (23:4, 16), it is difficult to accept Moore's interpretation at this point.

29. A possible exception is Isa 61:1. Some commentators take the speaker to be Cyrus, king of Persia, whom Yahweh elsewhere in Deutero-Isaiah calls “my anointed.”

30. Coats, “Balaam: Sinner or Saint?” 62.



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