

"MOSES WROTE HIS BOOK AND THE PORTION OF BALAAM"

(TB BAVA BATRA 14B)

SHUBERT SPERO

The story of Balaam in the Book of Numbers (Chapters 22-24) has over time elicited a number of serious questions both structural, pertaining to the story as a whole, its authorship and place in the canon, and internal, pertaining to the plot and its characters. Its location in the Book of Numbers seems appropriate as one of the events which occurred on the east side of the Jordan. However, it is told completely from the vantage point of Balak, King of Moab: what he thought, how he invited a sorcerer from Mesopotamia to curse Israel, what God told Balaam, and how Balaam responded. The question is: how did this information get to Moses, since he was not at all involved in the event? There is no indication in the text that this was revealed to him by means of prophecy. I believe that these questions prompted the Rabbis in the above title to insist that it was, nevertheless, Moses who composed the Portion of Balaam. I will return to this later.

In terms of the story itself, the main questions have been:

- 1) Why does God initially forbid Balaam to accept Balak's invitation and, when the delegation returns with a better offer, why does God tell him to go with them?
- 2) Why is Balak so insistent on urging Balaam to try again and again, when the sorcerer has repeated over and over that God, not he, is in control?
- 3) How are we to understand the inclusion of a story about a pagan sorcerer and a talking donkey in the Torah?

But perhaps the most interesting question of all centers around the character and personality of Balaam who, the Rabbis decided, was a *rasha* – "wicked" and dissolute. How can an individual who is a practitioner of magic and sorcery suddenly turn into a *navi* upon whom the *spirit of God* rests? (Num. 24:22).¹

Shubert Spero was ordained at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He has a B.S. from CCNY, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University. He is the Irving Stone Professor of Jewish Thought at Bar Ilan University. He is the author of God in All Seasons (1967), Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition (1983), and Holocaust and Return to Zion: A Study in Jewish Philosophy of History (2009).

In order to understand these specific internal problems we must first grasp the overall purpose of the story and the spirit which animates the portion as a whole. Clearly, the aim of the story is to ridicule and poke fun at the superstitious beliefs and idolatry of the time. The reader, therefore, is to look for the irony and comic aspects of the situation, all of which are offered in a quasi-serious spirit. With this in mind, let us review the above questions. When Balak's messengers deliver his invitation, Balaam asks them to stay overnight so that he may consider his reply, *as the Lord may speak unto me* (Num. 22:8). This was probably known to be Balaam's standard response to those who requested his services. It said, in effect, "Give me time overnight to consider your offer." He no more meant to "consult" God than Balak's men believed that this was what he was going to do. So when, for the first time in his life, the living God actually appears to Balaam, no one is more overwhelmed than he! Yet when, the next morning, a pale and shaken Balaam tells the messengers that God has forbidden him to go, there are plenty of smiles and winks among them. Their report to Balak, of course, mentions nothing about God but simply implies, "Balaam wants a higher fee." This impression is confirmed when the delegation, returning with a better offer, is told by Balaam that God may now allow him to go!

A close reading of God's conversation with Balaam will explain why, when the delegation returns, God tells Balaam to go with them. From the beginning, He feigns ignorance of everything going on beyond His conversation with Balaam. God thus asks Balaam, *'Who are these men with you?'* (22:9). Balaam explains and God then replies: *'Do not go with them; you shall not curse this people for they are blessed'* (22:12). The assumption is that Balaam repeats this to the messengers, who inform Balak that God has said that the Israelites are a blessed people who cannot be cursed, so it is a mission impossible! The reality, however, is that while Balaam, after the first visitation, reports "God will not permit me to go with you," he does not tell them what God said about Israel. When members of the delegation report to Balak, all they say is that Balaam refuses to come with them, not even mentioning God. When the delegation returns, God says to Balaam: *'If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do'* (22:20). This means, "If, after I (God) told you that Israel is a blessed people and cannot be cursed, Balak persists in asking you to come

and curse Israel, he evidently seeks to match his will against Mine. So be it! Go with them, Balaam, and may the contest begin.'

This seemingly inconsistent reaction on God's part has the following result:

1. Balak, now thoroughly convinced that Balaam's God-talk is no more than a front for his own decisions, cannot take seriously Balaam's repeated mumbling, *only the word that God puts in my mouth, that shall I speak* (Num. 22:38). Yet the fact that Balaam has insisted on a large fee suggests that this sorcerer is very confident that he can perform the services for which he is being paid.
2. Balaam is now absolutely terrified by his encounter with the living God, and his usual self-confidence is badly eroded.

The incident with the donkey is a further step in the humiliation of Balaam and the ridicule of his magical powers. At this point in the story we must see events as they appear to the distinguished princes of Moab who have come to honor the famous sorcerer, one claiming to *know the knowledge of the Most High* (24:16). Picture them riding ahead of Balaam when suddenly they hear an animated conversation. Turning back, they witness the following series of events. Balaam seems to have trouble with the donkey he has been riding. It had evidently turned off the path, then swerved sharply to the wall, injuring Balaam's leg, and Balaam is now furiously striking the beast with his staff. The animal suddenly lies down and, much to their astonishment, Balaam appears to be talking to it! The famous sorcerer, whose mere curse is supposedly fatal, is heard to say: *'Were there a sword in my hand, I would have killed you'* (22:29). Then, for no apparent reason, Balaam looks up, bows his head, falls on his face, and seems to be talking quietly to himself. He and the donkey rise up at last, resuming their journey.² The Moabite princes are baffled by what they have seen and heard, but assume that it had to do with some magical rituals that the sorcerer performed. Balaam, however, is utterly crushed by this experience. After all, his donkey was able to see the angel with a drawn sword, whereas he who prides himself on being *the man whose eye is opened . . . who sees the vision of the Almighty* (24:3-4) could not do so earlier!

The character of Balaam, as it emerges solely from the text of these three chapters in Numbers, is that of an amoral professional sorcerer who will curse or bless anyone for the right fee. There is no mention here of any pagan

gods or worship. Indeed, sorcery in those days was considered a sort of quasi-science which operated in a realm independent of the gods. Balaam himself claimed that he knew how to bypass or manipulate the gods.³ From the very first time that God appears to him, Balaam is perfectly obedient and gives no hint of wanting to curse Israel. A dramatic change seems to affect him when makes his third attempt to do the bidding of Balak. We are told that Balaam *went not, as the other times, to use his enchantments . . . and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe. The spirit of God came upon him, and he took up his parable. . .* (Num. 24:1-3). Does this mean that Balaam, at this point, actually becomes a *navi*, a prophet in the full sense of the word?⁴ According to Maimonides, Balaam was accorded the lowest level of prophecy known as *ru'ah ha-kodesh*, the Holy Spirit.⁵ This means that the initiative and choice of words originated in the individual, whereas divine inspiration helped him to find the best expression for his thoughts. In light of 24:1 and the fact that Balaam was told to say only what God would *show* him (23:3), we may conclude that all four of Balaam's parables were divinely inspired, the only difference being that the first two came via Balaam's magical apparatus while the last two came directly from the mouth of Balaam.

When we examine the content of Balaam's oracular poems, we find that they are all friendly and complimentary to Israel, though hardly "blessings" in the usual sense of the word. Perhaps, however, they may be called "blessings" in the sense of those Jacob bestowed on his sons before his death, which were really prophetic insights about each of them (Gen. 49:28). At any rate, there are certainly no curses to be found in Balaam's utterances, nor any indication that he wanted to curse Israel.

This brings us to what, I believe, is the key to the problem behind the Rabbis' strange statement which I have used as the title of this article. What difficulty did they find in the Portion of Balaam that compelled them to emphasize its Mosaic authorship? There is a reference by Moses to the Balaam episode in the course of his farewell addresses in the Book of Deuteronomy. Explaining the ban on intermarriage with the Moabites, Moses says: *Because they met you not with bread and water... and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-Naharayim, to curse you. Nevertheless, the Lord your God would not hearken unto Balaam, and the Lord your God turned [va-yahafoh] the curse into blessing for us* (Deut. 23:5-6).

Two items in the above statement seem strange. What "curse" is Moses referring to? There never was an actual curse! Should not Moses have said, "The Lord your God would not hearken unto *Balak*" instead of Balaam? The answer is that Moses could not have known all of the details of the Balaam story at the time of his orations, which was in the eleventh month of the fortieth year after he had conquered the lands of Sihon and Og on the east side of the Jordan (Deut. 1:1-5), but before the Israelite invasion of Midian. He knew only that Balak had sent for Balaam to curse Israel and that somehow what had issued from Balaam's mouth was pleasant and positive. Hence he wrote in broad terms that Balaam failed in his mission to curse the Israelites. So where did the detailed three-chapter-long Portion of Balaam in Numbers come from?

I would offer the following theory. Immediately after the portion of Balaam, we are told how the people committed harlotry with the daughters of Midian and were severely punished (Num. 25:1-9). Moses is commanded to perform what is to be his last action: *Avenge the children of Israel on the Midianites; afterwards you shall be gathered unto your people* (Num. 31:2). Moses raises his troops and sends them into battle against Midian, under the leadership of Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest. Their victory is total and the loot is staggering. A notable figure is among those killed: *Also Balaam, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword* (31:8). We do not know what brought Balaam to Midian; when last heard of, *Balaam rose up and returned to his place* (24:25).⁶ Nor do we know the circumstances of his death. There in Midian, however, Phinehas had an opportunity to learn all the details of the Balak-Balaam encounter, at least from Balaam's viewpoint.

Archaeological discoveries suggest that Balaam ben Beor was a well-known figure, one popularized in the region's folklore on account of his exploits, as well as his curses and blessings.⁷ It would be consistent with what we know of him that Balaam, while visiting Midian, boasted of his experience in Moab and recited the beautiful poems he had composed. Phinehas conveyed this information to Moses, who realized its significance – showing God's love for His people, the prophetic beauty of Balaam's *meshalim*, and the ineffectualness of pagan sorcery. Moses then utilized this information when he wrote what we call the Portion of Balaam.

My theory finds support in the Jerusalem Talmud's somewhat different version of the Mosaic authorship of *parashat Bil'am*: "Moses wrote the five books of the Torah, *ve-hazar* [and returned?] and wrote *parashat Balak u-Vil'am*" (TJ *Sotah* 5). The word *ve-hazar* has puzzled the classical commentators.⁸ According to the theory outlined above, *ve-hazar* should be connected to the following word as *ve-hazar ve-khatav*, meaning "*and he rewrote the Portion of Balaam*." That is to say, with this new information in hand and for the sake of history, Moses wished to expand the story of Balaam and God's "wondrous works," and perhaps give a rather different slant to the one he had touched upon in Deuteronomy 23:5-6. He therefore composed "the Portion of Balak and Balaam"⁹ and inserted it, where it belongs chronologically, in the Book of Numbers.

God could easily have persisted in his first command to Balaam, ordering him not to go with Balak's emissaries. Instead, we have a dramatic narrative and inspired poetry containing some penetrating insights into the character of Israel. The whole episode also offers the reader what are probably the only comic scenes in the Bible, as it exposes the empty pretensions of pagan sorcery.

NOTES

1. See Ethics of the Fathers (*Avot*) 5:22, where he is described as having "an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and an expansive appetite."
2. It is perfectly reasonable, in the circumstances, to interpret the speech of the donkey as the fruit of Balaam's overheated imagination and sense of guilt for pretending to have powers which he does not really possess.
3. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 84.
4. On the words *and there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses* (Deut. 34:10), the *Sifre* comments: "However, among the Babylonians [variant text: nations of the world] there did such arise and who was that? Balaam ben Beor."
5. *Guide for the Perplexed*, 2:45.
6. According to the Rabbis and a hint in the text (Num. 31:16; see Rashi ad loc.), Balaam had been called back to the area as a consultant and it was his idea to have the daughters of Midian entice the Israelites at Baal Peor.
7. In the course of excavations conducted in 1967 at Tell Deir Alla in the Jordan Valley, archaeologists discovered the remains of plaster that had fallen from a wall or monument, on which there was writing in black and red ink dating from the middle of the eighth century BCE. The script is thought to be close to what is known about the Amon writing while the language seems to be an Aramaic-Canaanite-Moabite dialect. When put together and deciphered, the inscription

is a prophecy attributed to "Balaam bar Beor," who is called "a man seer of God." This would seem to indicate that belief in the reality of a personage named Balaam ben Beor was quite widespread in that entire area. See *World of the Tanakh*, Bamidbar (Jerusalem-Ramat Gan: Revivim, 1985) p. 13 (Hebrew).

8. For example, one of them states that it may refer to some long-lost work called *Parashat Balak u- Vil'am* and not to our story in Numbers.

9. Additional support may be found in the memory of this event in the writings of later prophets. Thus, in the Book of Joshua: *Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel; and he sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. But I would not hearken unto Balaam; therefore he even blessed you; so I delivered you out of his hand* (Josh. 24:9-10). Joshua, the faithful disciple of Moses, repeats the wording found in Deuteronomy. Several hundred years later, the prophet Micah, who probably had access to all the sources, gave a more informed view: *O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him* (Micah 6:5).



If you have written a paper in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* and wish to see if it has been quoted in another academic journal, book, or doctoral dissertation, access <http://scholar.google.com> and type in Jewish Bible Quarterly under "journal" and your name under "author".



INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions to Authors* and journal style can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

Before submitting articles, contributors are asked to reread them and check the spelling of proper names (as in the JPS Bible), the transliteration of Hebrew words and phrases (see our *Instructions to Authors*), and all source references (particularly biblical citations).

