

# UNDERSTANDING BALAAM'S DONKEY: AN INTERTEXTUAL APPROACH\*

NAVA SCHORER-FINKELMAN

The story of Balak and Balaam, as presented in Numbers 22-24, raises several exegetical questions. This paper sets out to solve one of the primary issues: How does the donkey episode fit in with the rest of the narrative? A comparison with key sections of the Exodus narrative may help clarify this issue.

Balaam's character, as presented throughout this narrative, appears to be self-contradictory.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, he attempts to curse Israel at Balak's behest. On the other hand, he repeatedly professes subservience to Israel's God, declaring that he 'could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God' (Num. 22:18; see also 23:12,26; 24:12-13).<sup>2</sup> This apparent contradiction within Balaam's role led many scholars to describe this story as the product of an "exegetical evolution."<sup>3</sup> Some claim that "the Masoretic Text of the Balaam cycle presents a nightmare to those who would analyze it critically," as it "exhibits clear signs of being a literary mosaic" filled with "source conflation."<sup>4</sup>

The primary difficulty with the portrait of Balaam stems from the donkey episode (Num. 22:21-35). As opposed to the other sections of the narrative, where Balaam repeats his lack of ability to do other than what God says, in the donkey episode Balaam appears to be opposing God's will. Due to this discrepancy, many scholars assume this section to be a later insertion, an "adjustment in the tradition to accommodate the negative tradition about Balaam, the seer who could not see, with the positive tradition about the legendary Balaam who could speak only the word given him by the Lord."<sup>5</sup> Similarly viewing this section as negatively presenting Balaam, some view it as a "polemic against false prophecy,"<sup>6</sup> or, more extremely, as "a picaresque fable mocking the reputed clairvoyance of diviners."<sup>7</sup> Some perceive this mockery as aimed particularly at Balaam,<sup>8</sup> so as to "keep Israelites from finding Balaam too exalted a character," where the story shows that without God's enlightenment, he is even less perceptive than his donkey.<sup>9</sup>

Some scholars view God's conversations with Balaam as "the most striking" aspect of this story.<sup>10</sup> At first God tells Balaam to *not* go with Balak's people (22:12), then he tells him to 'go with them' (22:20), and finally becomes angry when Balaam does so. *Nava Schorer-Finkelman recently submitted her doctoral dissertation, "Foreigners who Speak of God in Biblical Narrative," under the guidance of Prof. Joshua Berman, through the Tanakh department of Bar Ilan University. She lives in Beit Shemesh and teaches in Matan.*

(22:22a).<sup>11</sup> Many commentators are puzzled by this apparent 'fickleness' on God's part. Some view it as "an act of irresponsible despotism on God's part," resolving the apparent contradiction by assuming this section to be a fusing of different versions of the story.<sup>12</sup> Others, such as Abravanel, also note the apparent anomaly of the donkey section. Abravanel writes: "For what purpose did God's angel go out to Balaam on the way? He [the angel] did not tell him other than what the Blessed One had already told him... If so, his [the angel's] appearance was for naught!" Since the angel seems to repeat the same message previously given by God, that Balaam go with Balak's people, then this whole section appears to be redundant.

Conversely, other scholars view the donkey story as an integral part of this narrative, noting, for example, the pattern of threefold repetition which would be incomplete without it.<sup>13</sup> Others view the donkey episode as the turning point, during which Balaam undergoes a role-reversal, switching from the hired curser to God's prophet.<sup>14</sup> Alexander Rofé states that "any attempt to fit the Balaam narrative into a strict, source-critical structure... is ultimately unenlightening and counterproductive. In the discussion below I adopt a synchronic approach; "Whoever put these chapters together intended that this be done."<sup>15</sup> I claim that the purpose of this section is to portray Balaam as a negative character, who fulfills his role as God's prophet out of coercion, not choice. Prior to the donkey episode, Balaam thought he could circumvent God's will and curse Israel; the donkey episode 'taught' him that his very speech is controlled by God. I support this claim by a close reading of the text, combined with a comparison to sections of the Exodus narrative.

Balaam initially, and repeatedly, acknowledged that he needs God's permission to go with Balak's men. This reflects a then-common belief that magic did not work without divine authorization.<sup>16</sup> While he believed that he needed the deity's permission to go, he did not think that this deity also had power over what he will say once he gets there. Balaam, the foreign sorcerer, was unfamiliar with the concept of a deity powerful enough to control his power of speech. This lack of understanding plays out in the discrepancy between his conversations with the deity and with Balak's men. When Elohim first denies his request, he tells Balaam: '*You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed*' (22:12). This response has three parts. The first part denies Balaam permission to accompany Balak's men (*You shall not go with them*), the second part denies Balaam permission to curse them (*You shall not curse the people*), while the third provides a reason for the second part (*For they are blessed*). Balaam recounts only the first part to Balak's people: *The Lord has re-*

*fused to give me permission to go with you* (22:13). The following night, Balaam receives a different answer from the deity: ‘*Go with them, but be sure to do only what I tell you*’ (22:20). Once again, this directive has two parts: the first pertaining to Balaam’s physical action, and the second to his actions once he gets there. This time Balaam silently accompanies the men (22:21), conveying the impression that God had agreed to endorse Balaam’s mission; Balaam did not relay that this permission was contingent upon his carrying out God’s mission – “to do only what I tell you” (22:20) – whatever that may be.<sup>17</sup> According to R. Hirsch, “Balaam... at this time at the start of his journey, was of the opinion that in spite of everything, he would still succeed in pronouncing the curse.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, God *was very angry that he went* (Num. 22:22). A comparison with the Exodus narrative helps support this claim.

There are several parallels between our narrative and that of the Exodus, two long narratives which bracket the Israelites’ forty-year sojourn in the desert. Both Pharaoh (Ex. 1:9) and Balak (Num. 22:3) fear the Israelite masses (Ex. 1:9, Num. 22:3) and implement a plan to weaken them (Ex. 1:10-22, Num. 22:5-6). In both narratives the king is helped by magicians, the *ḥartummim* in Exodus and Balaam in Numbers. In both narratives God’s will is made known to the enemy king through the intermediacy of a prophet: in the Exodus narrative it is Moses, while in the Balak narrative, which features no Israelites, it is Balaam. Pharaoh’s free will was taken away by this God who *hardened his heart* (Ex. 9:12; 10:20,27); Balaam’s freedom of speech was taken away as well.

The story of Balak’s attempt to have Israel cursed is coherent. However, this story is bisected by the episode of the speaking donkey (Num. 22:21-35). What is the purpose of this episode?<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, while the framework of the story presents Balaam as beholden to Israel’s God, whom he calls his own even while contemplating accepting Balak’s hire (Num. 22:18), in the donkey episode he is presented negatively, rebuked by both his donkey (22:28, 30) and God’s angel (22:32-33). In order to clarify the role of the donkey episode, and expose Balaam’s true intentions, we will now compare this episode to three elements in the Exodus story: The power of speech, the motif of the sword, and the enemy’s confession of sin. The first occurs at the prophets’ ‘dedication’, the second on the prophets’ journey to their missions, while the third parallels Balaam to Pharaoh.

In the donkey episode Balaam is confronted by a talking donkey. While this miracle itself is surprising, it is even more astonishing that Balaam does not react with surprise, but rather carries on a conversation with his beast, more concerned with her

lack of obedience than with her speech. This miracle is presented as God's doing: *Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey...* (Num. 22:28). This can be compared with what God tells Moses: *'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'* (Ex. 4:11). Just as God can give voice to a person, or sight to the blind, so in our narrative God gives voice to the donkey, and sight to the 'blind' Balaam who did not see the angel when even his beast did (Num. 22:31).<sup>20</sup> God explained this to Moses in order to convince him to serve as prophet, by expressing God's will to Pharaoh. God is now showing Balaam the same thing, and for the same purpose. Countering Balaam's assumption that he has power over his own speech, God proves that speech – even that of a beast – can be controlled by God. If Balaam goes to Balak, he goes as God's hire, whether or not he accepts the mission.

God chooses his messengers, even as against their own personal choices. When Moses made a final attempt to evade God's mission, *'O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else you may send'* (Ex. 4:13), God in his anger responds: *'I will be with your mouth'* (Ex. 4:15), echoing a previous command, *'Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say'* (Ex. 4:12). God commissioned Moses as prophet, stating that he will cause Moses to speak as God wills. The story of the donkey ends similarly: *The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you'* (Num. 22:35).

A further comparison between the two narratives again shows Balaam as unwilling messenger, where his own preference would have been to curse the Israelites. This can be demonstrated by a comparison of the sword motif in both stories. In the Exodus narrative, when Moses and Aaron initially confront Pharaoh, they demand: *Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword* (Ex. 5:3). The sword motif comes up again when, following Moses' and Aaron's demand, Pharaoh increases the Israelites' labor. The Israelites then complain to Moses and Aaron: *'May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us'* (Ex. 5:21). While Moses and Aaron feared God's wrath, the enslaved Israelites feared Pharaoh. In a contest of wills and might, the Exodus narrative highlights the question: Who holds the sword? Is it God, or Pharaoh, who threatens the Israelites with his sword?

The donkey narrative likewise mentions a sword twice. First, it is the angel who wields a sword when blocking Balaam's progress (Num. 22:23). The donkey saw the

sword and attempted to avoid it, while Balaam was unaware of the divinely-sent apparition. The second mention of the sword is in Balaam's diatribe to his faithful donkey: '*You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now*' (Num. 22:29). Balaam makes his intentions very clear: If he had a sword in his hand, he would have killed the donkey. The double use of the sword motif raises questions similar to that of the Exodus narrative. The donkey saw the sword-wielding angel and attempted to avoid it. Was the donkey threatened by the angel? Balaam subsequently declared that had he only had a sword, he would have killed the donkey. Should the donkey fear Balaam, then? Who is the true master over the donkey's wellbeing? Balaam's threat was hollow, as he did not have a sword. The angel, on the other hand, who had one, clearly stated that he would have killed Balaam and spared the donkey (Num. 22:33). If we follow the comparison to its logical conclusion, this would place the donkey as representing Israel in the story, and Balaam's explicitly-stated intention to harm his donkey as representing his intention to harm Israel, an intention made clear by God's displeasure at Balaam's departure despite divine permission to do so. Some scholars indeed take this view.<sup>21</sup> Who then, holds the sword to Israel's wellbeing? God, or Balaam?

Balaam set out to help the enemy king Balak harm Israel. This is reminiscent of Israel's concern, in Exodus, that Moses had "put a sword" in Pharaoh's hand to harm them. In both narratives, the prophets' sword eventually benefits Israel: Pharaoh's continual attempt to defy God's will ended in the Israelites' release from bondage, while Balaam's weapon, his words – here an empty threat – eventually articulate some of the most beautiful blessings showered on Israel. God's sword in each case turned out to be aimed at Israel's enemies. Despite Moses' fear, God did not strike Israel *with plagues or with the sword*; it is Egypt who suffered God's wrath. And in the donkey narrative, the angel's sword which the donkey tried three times to avoid turned out to be aimed not at her, but at Balaam, Israel's enemy: As he tells Balaam, '*I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it*' (Num. 22:33). Balaam, like Pharaoh, will not be allowed to harm Israel; he himself was killed *with the sword* (Num. 31:8).

A third parallel again shows Balaam as 'sinner', this time by comparing him to Pharaoh. We can compare Balaam's response to the angel to Pharaoh's response to Moses. Balaam apologizes: '*I have sinned, for I did not know you stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases you, I will turn back*' (22:34). Balaam assumed his sin lie in going with Balak's men, accepting Balak's hire,<sup>22</sup> while others

emphasize his lack of understanding.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Pharaoh said *'I have sinned... Entreat the Lord... I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer'* (Ex. 9:27-28), making it sound as if his sin was not letting the people go. Moses responds: *'... I will spread out my hands to the Lord... that you may know that the earth is the Lord's'* (9:29), indicating that Pharaoh's sin lay in not 'knowing' the Lord. Pharaoh thought his sin lay in the act of not releasing the Israelites, while Moses retorted that his sin lay in not recognizing God. Had he recognized God, he would surely have released the Israelites upon God's demand. The fact that the angel in our story does not accept this offer, but rather paraphrases God's words from Num. 22:20, saying "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak" (22:35) shows that Balaam's sin did not lie in his going with Balak's people, but rather in his going with the wrong intent.<sup>24</sup> His sin lay in assuming it possible to oppose God's will.<sup>25</sup> The angel reiterates that Balaam is explicitly sent as God's messenger to speak God's words, warning him again to speak nothing else. He is not free to accept Balak's hire and curse the Israelites; it is God who controls not only his actions, as he himself had admitted in 22:18, but his mission as well.

I would like to add one final thought. Throughout these chapters Balaam repeats that he must say as God instructs him (Num. 22:13; 23:12, 26; 24:13), while God's instructions are vague – *'only the word which I speak to you - that you shall do'* (22:20), *'only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak'* (22:35), *'Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak'* (23:5, 16). It seems that even Balaam did not know what he was instructed to say, thus leaving the reader with the question: What will God's word be? While God originally tells Balaam *'You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed'* (22:12), God later reverses this ruling and instructs Balaam to go. Perhaps they are to be cursed after all? As readers we are privy to what amounts to a covert miracle: God exerts power over an enemy's speech, rendering his attempt to curse Israel futile.

Other than the literary benefit gained from the suspense that this creates, it also raises the possibility that God may have chosen to curse Israel. This story clearly illustrates that "such power as was possessed by humans could only be exercised in conformity with the divine will."<sup>26</sup> However, as later generations learned, the divine will does not always choose to bless Israel. Just as God could use foreigners as tools for blessing, such as Balaam, so God could use foreigners to punish Israel.<sup>27</sup> Our story has a happy end: God chose to bless Israel. But it is precisely this narrative, in which God chooses to have Balaam override Balak's plans, that teaches the reader that the

ending could have been different.<sup>28</sup> God directs history as he pleases. And the lack of Israelites in this story demonstrates that this is true whether or not the recipients of salvation or punishment are aware of God's involvement.

#### NOTES

\* This paper is partly based on my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, *Foreigners who Speak of God in Biblical Narrative*, carried out under the guidance of Prof. Joshua Berman, submitted December 2020, Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

1 For helpful summaries of the various roles Balaam is assigned in the scholarship, see Moore, Michael S., *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, SBL Diss Series 113 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 97ff; Davies, Eryl W., *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1995, p. 240; and Knierim, Rolf P., and Coats, George W., *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 252. For discussions of Balaam's character see Moore, *Traditions*, pp. 98ff; Licht, Yaakov, *Perush 'al Sefer Bmidbar [22-36]* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), pp. 131-140; Savelle, Charles H., "Canonical and Extracanonical Portraits of Balaam," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (2009) pp. 387-404; and Way, Kenneth C., "Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflections on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13," *JSOT* 34/1 (2009), pp. 47-62, esp. p. 51.

2 "Somehow we have two Balaams: one who is an obedient servant and another who has embarked blindly on a "perverse journey" against God's will." Hagan, Harry, "Balaam: To Bless or To Curse," *Bible Today* 59/1 (2021) pp. 32-39, p. 37.

3 See Vermes, Geza, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, Leiden: Brill, 1961, pp. 175ff. This hypothesis is bolstered by the variations in divine appellations. Also see Noth, Martin, *Numbers* (London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 171-178; Rofé, Alexander, *Sefer Bil'am* (Heb.), Jerusalem: Simor, 1980, especially pages 1-31; Budd, Philip J., *Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), pp. 272-273; and, Davies *Numbers*, p. 238.

4 Greene, John T., *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Traditions* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 19, 21.

5 Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, p. 256.

6 Budd, *Numbers*, p. 260.

7 Levine, Baruch A., *Numbers 21-36* (NY: Doubleday, 2000), p. 138.

8 Such as Zakovitch, Y., *The Pattern for the Numbers Three and Four in the Bible* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Makor, 1979), pp. 108-109; Levine, *Numbers*, p. 154; Milgrom, J., *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 469, and many others.

9 Ashley, Timothy R., *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 436.

10 Gray, George B., *Numbers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 317.

11 Ashley attempts to resolve this issue by translating the 'ki' in 22:22 temporally: God was not angry with Balaam *that* he was going, but rather *when* he was going, "for an unspecified reason." *Numbers*, p. 454. I find this reading unconvincing.

12 Noth, *Numbers*, p. 178.

13 Balaam receives three revelations; his donkey three times tries to stop his progress; he delivers prophecies on three separate occasions. Licht, Jacob, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), pp. 71-72) and Moberly, W.L., "On Learning to be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and his Ass," in Harland and Hayward (eds.), *New Heaven and New Earth Prophecy and*

*the Millennium: Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 14. See also Moyer, Clinton J., "Who Is the Prophet, and Who the Ass? Role-Reversing Interludes and the Unity of the Balaam Narrative (Numbers 22-24)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37/2 (2012) pp. 167-183, and Frisch, Amos, "The Story of Balaam's She-Ass (Numbers 22:21-35): A New Literary Insight," *Hebrew Studies* 56 (2015) pp. 103-113.

14 See the discussion in Moyer, *Prophet*, and Sals, Ulrike, "The Hybrid Story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24): Theology for the Diaspora in the Torah," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008) pp. 315-335.

15 Ashley, *Numbers*, p. 454.

16 Levine, *Numbers*, p. 173. On the need for divine ratification of curses see Brown, R., *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), p. 209.

17 Nahmanides (Num. 22:20) writes that Balaam deliberately omitted God's caveat in his zeal to do Balak's bidding. R. Yaaqov Medan claims that at this point God himself did not yet know whether he will instruct Balaam to curse or to bless, the direction dependent upon Israel's subsequent behavior. Medan, internet lecture, 28/07/20.

18 Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary on Num. 22:21, trans. by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1982).

19 Levine, *Numbers*, p. 154, sees in the donkey episode yet another parallel to the Exodus story, where the angel, on the *derekh*, plays the role of setback on the prophet's way to his mission, just as Moses, on the *derekh* (Ex. 4:24), was detained by the circumcision incident. The word *derekh* is repeated eight times in the Numbers story (22:22, 23x3, 26, 31, 32, 34). Both stories also mention *regel* (Ex. 4:25; Num. 22:25, 32).

20 Nahmanides hints to this connection in his commentary on Num. 22:20.

21 Frisch, *Story*, discusses this parallel at length. Also see Hagan, *Balaam*, p. 36: "Balaam's desire to hurt the donkey mirrors the king's desire to injure Israel." Rahimi, too, sees the weak donkey who bested Balaam both physically and orally as representing Israel. Balaam failed to overcome the donkey three times in this part of the story, foreshadowing his thrice-repeated failure to curse Israel in the second half of the story. Rahimi, Moshe, "'Atzat Bil'am – Sefer Devarim" (Heb.), *Talalei Orot* 7 (1997), pp. 20-52, especially pp. 26-27.

22 Noth, *Numbers*, p. 180, and Gray, *Numbers*, p. 336.

23 Gass cites an opinion which likewise hints at this, calling Balaam's sin not a 'moral misconduct' but rather 'culpable blindness.' Gass, Erasmus, "The Angel as One Form of Divine Communication in the Balaam Narrative," in: Reiterer et al. (eds.), *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, Yearbook 2007 (Berlin and NY: De Gruyter, 2007), p. 104, fn. 44. Creatively, Ashley hints that not having seen the angel, Balaam sinned by striking his donkey (*Numbers*, p. 459).

24 Some of the English translations of this verse miss this point, translating Numbers 22:32 as "I don't think you should go to Moab" (Contemporary English Version), or "you should not be making this journey" (Good News Translation). If the angel wanted to prevent Balaam from going, he would have done so.

25 Frisch is skeptical of Balaam's sincerity, writing that "In this dire situation, Balaam's declaration, "I have sinned" (22:34), cannot be taken on its own as conclusive evidence of a genuine inner reformation without support from the plot. The Pharaoh likewise proclaims, "I have

sinned” (Ex. 9:27; 10:16–17)—and immediately reverts to his wicked ways. Only actions truly count, not words...” (*Story*, p. 105).

26 Davies, *Numbers*, p. 243.

27 See, for example, 2Kgs. 18:25 and Jer. 40:1-3.

28 Contra Budd: “The story is a powerful celebration of the certainty of Israel’s success.” Budd, *Numbers*, p. 283.



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