BALAAM AND HIS TALKING DONKEY

FRED BLUMENTHAL

What happens to a prophet or a clairvoyant whose visions of future events clash with his inner hopes and desires? He can, like Jeremiah, devote his life to an ongoing effort to change a threatening future, while accepting God's ultimate judgment. Or, he can, like Jonah, try to silence the prophetic voice within himself by flight. Balaam chose neither one of these two alternatives. He was neither emotionally able to accept the ordained course of history nor prepared to divest himself of his prophetic calling. The ensuing dichotomy is the subject of the story which follows.

The existence of such a contradiction of feelings is evident at the very beginning of the Balaam story. It can be assumed that Balaam, an acknowledged prophet, knew that the Israelites were a blessed nation. Yet, it took a re-affirmation from God Himself to reject King Balak's first invitation, which apparently had tempted him. When the second delegation arrived, having been sent to persuade him to come, he received permission to go, with the restrictive condition that he could not issue the King's desired curse but had to pronounce whatever God would command. So there was clearly a split personality traveling; the clairvoyant prophet and the man full of hate for Israel who hoped to find a way to alter the glorious future which was Israel's destiny. The Talmud explains this succinctly when it refers to Balaam being called a sorcerer in Joshua 13:22. It asks: "Was he not a prophet?" The answer offered is that he originally was a prophet, but later turned into a kosem [sorcerer].

This conversion from a genuine, clairvoyant prophet to a scheming sorcerer explains why the King's first delegation was unsuccessful, and why the second delegation accomplished its mission. The decisive difference between them was that the first messengers carried tools of witchcraft in their hands (Num. 22:7). They were apparently sorcerers of Balak's court, and their invitation implied the use of witchcraft. Balaam was not yet willing to assume the role of sorcerer. That he was tempted to do so is attested by the fact that it took a

Fred Blumenthal is a retired businessman who divides his time between Jerusalem and Cedarhurst, NY. He was educated at the Samson Raphael Hirsch School and the Yeshiva of Frankfort, Germany, and has pursued biblical studies throughout his adult life.
command from the Lord Himself to make him refuse. The second delegation, according to the text, carried no such tools. Therefore, he obtained permission to accept their call. Quite clearly this describes the conflicting emotions within Balaam: On the one hand, his desire to hold on to the privilege of being a true prophet, and on the other hand, his ardent desire to engage in any activity which would alter the set course of Israelite history. When traveling to the court of King Balak, the text reports *he rode on his donkey and two of his servants were with him* (22:22), the two servants alluding to the ambiguous personality which set out on this journey, represented later by the donkey and its rider.

That the donkey temporarily acquired the gift of language is better understood when an allegoric interpretation is applied. Maimonides expresses his conviction that this remarkable story was not an actual occurrence, but what he calls a "prophetic vision."² Indeed, the words which the donkey "speaks" are irrelevant considering what had happened to provoke them. An angel appeared, a messenger from the Lord, carrying an unsheathed sword, with the obvious intention to kill Balaam who, remarkably, failed to notice him. The donkey who had seen the threatening angel found ways to avoid the disaster. When suddenly endowed with the ability to speak to its rider the expectation would be for the animal to express its surprise that the human being whom it carried failed to see the threatening "person" who tried to murder him. Instead, the extraordinary instance of the talking animal produced only a reference to its past loyalty, without any mention of the danger looming right there and then.

In an allegoric interpretation, the talking donkey becomes the symbol of Balaam's inner voice which advocates witchcraft, whereas its rider represents the genuine prophet. The sword-bearing angel intends to kill the prophetic quality of Balaam's life, but not the body of the man, who had up to now been the carrier of a prophetic soul. What the donkey really expresses is that such a menacing inner conflict had never before clouded the great prophet's judgment. It injects into Balaam's conscience the fact that the voice of hate within him has attained the upper hand, and that his prophetic quality has been muted to the point where he cannot even see the angel. When he eventually perceives him, he has re-awakened his prophetic abilities. No longer does the heavenly messenger need to use his power to execute. Balaam
has recaptured, for the time being, his special status. The angel can disappear and the donkey returns to its animalistic silence.

However, the inner conflict is certainly not eradicated, as can be seen from the preparations Balaam makes prior to the first two blessings of Israel: they are symbols of enchantments. Only prior to the third blessing is it stated: And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, . . . and the spirit of God came upon him (24:1-2).

It is much later, after he has issued the blessings emanating from the prophet (although resented by Balaam, the hateful man), that the inner rage makes its second appearance. It is then, that he "advises" the King how he could surreptitiously corrupt the common enemy and create a situation from which Balak's people might benefit (24:14). At this point Balaam has turned into the sorcerer, as he is described in the Book of Joshua.

As a vision or as an allegory, the story of Balaam embodies a meaningful, religious lesson for its readers throughout the centuries. It delves into the nature of prophecy and the demand upon those endowed with it to be fully immersed in its revelations, and to accept without reservation the Lord's wishes which are conveyed.

NOTES
1. TB Sanhedrin 106a
2. Guide of the Perplexed, Book II Chapter 42

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