

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BALAAM

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The purpose of this paper is to identify the psychological motives that drove Balaam to embark on a mission to curse the Israelites, given that his chances of success at the outset were very low, and which made him persevere with that mission even after it proved counterproductive.

INTRODUCTION

Balak, the king of Moab, is afraid that the approaching Israelites will fight and vanquish his kingdom. He sends representatives to Balaam, a Midianite diviner,¹ inviting him to come to Moab, curse the Israelites, and thereby help to defeat them. The Torah relates two visits by Balak's emissaries.

While the first group of emissaries waits, God reveals Himself to Balaam and forbids him to go to Moab to curse the Israelites (Num. 22:12). Balak then sends a larger and more distinguished group of emissaries to try to convince Balaam to accede to his request. God now permits Balaam to go with them, but stipulates that Balaam must do only what He commands him.

Accompanied by servants and riding on his ass, Balaam sets out with the Moabite dignitaries. God is furious with him for going and has an angel with a drawn sword block his passage. The angel tells Balaam that he may proceed with the delegates, but must say what God tells him.

Changes in God's messages to Balaam require clarification. Initially, Balaam is denied permission to go to Moab; then he is allowed to do so, but God is incensed when he sets out and has his path blocked. Thereafter, Balaam is again permitted to leave. These apparent inconsistencies can be resolved by close attention to the wording of the text. The first permission was introduced by a conditional clause: *Im li-kro lekha ba'u ha-anashim, kum lekh ittam* – 'If these men have come to call you, [you may] rise and go with them' (Num. 22:20).² This conditional phrase is superfluous: The whole purpose of the delegates was clearly to invite Balaam. The exegetes have assigned special meaning to this phrase. Rashi comments: "If this is your calling, and you expect to be paid for it . . ." Sforno similarly explains: "If they

only want to consult with you . . ."³ Thus, the permission given for Balaam to go to Moab was for other purposes, not for cursing the Israelites, as he was categorically forbidden to do in the initial message that he received from God.

God was incensed that Balaam was going, because he set out with the intention of cursing the Israelites. The text states: *and he went with [im] the Moabite dignitaries* (Num. 22:21). Rashi explains, "In his heart was the same goal as in their hearts." Balaam was only permitted to go *ittam* (Num. 22:20), with them physically, but he went with them psychologically as well (*im*). The fact that Balaam intended to curse the Israelites is more transparent in Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people: *'But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you'* (Deut. 23:6). Ibn Ezra makes it clear that this verse indicates that Balaam meant to curse the Israelites. Nehemiah (13:2) also states that God turned Balaam's curse into a blessing.

Finally, after blocking his path, the angel tells Balaam unconditionally: *'Go with the men'* (Num. 22:35). Rashi teaches, "Heaven leads a man down the road he wants to travel." Balaam is given every warning, but in the end he is allowed to exercise his free will and to do what he chooses.

When Balaam finally reaches Balak, he has him make burnt-offerings and then goes to obtain a message from God. On his return, Balaam delivers a poetic oracle (*mashal*) praising and blessing the Israelites. Balak is upset, but allows Balaam to deliver two more oracles, hoping that he will pronounce a curse on the Israelites. But Balaam continues to bless and praise the Israelites. After the third oracle, Balak is enraged and orders Balaam to return home. Before leaving, Balaam delivers a fourth oracle, predicting that the Israelites will defeat Moab and Edom. He also adds three brief oracles against other nations.

WHY DOES BALAAM ACCEPT THE MISSION TO CURSE THE ISRAELITES?

Given the divine message Balaam received, telling him that he would not be permitted to curse the Israelites (a message reinforced by the blocking of his path), the question that arises is why he undertook a mission doomed to failure. A close examination of the text, with the help of Rashi's comments, provides clues concerning the personal traits that motivated Balaam. Two of

the traits that Rashi attributes to Balaam are avarice and grandiosity.⁴ I will attempt to show that these traits explain why Balaam undertook the mission in the first place and why he continued to pursue it.

However, Rashi himself, while attributing these negative traits to Balaam, does not consider them responsible for his actions. Following rabbinic tradition (*Avot* 5:22), Rashi views Balaam as an evil individual (*rasha*) who attempted to harm the Israelites because he hated them (see his comments on Num. 22:5, 11, 21). However, the textual support for the notion that Balaam was motivated by hatred of the Israelites is rather weak. For example, Rashi comments that the phrase *Balaam saddled his ass* (Num. 22:21) indicates that he saddled it himself, being impatient to go because of his hatred of the Israelites. However, Ibn Ezra observes that the saddling of the ass may actually have been done by one of Balaam's servants on his order. Indeed, two servants are mentioned in the next verse (Num. 22:22) as accompanying Balaam on his journey. Even if we interpret the phrase literally to mean that Balaam did the saddling himself, because he was eager to go, it does not necessarily follow that his motive was hatred of the Israelites. He may have been motivated by his avarice and haughtiness, expecting to reap financial benefits and to gain respect.

I will now discuss the textual evidence which suggests that Balaam was avaricious and haughty.

AVARICE

In the first message from God, Balaam is told: *'Do not go with them. You must not curse that people for they are blessed'* (Num. 22:12). However, Balaam conveys to the delegates only the initial part of God's message. He tells them: *'Go back to your own country for the Lord will not let me go with you'* (Num. 22:13). When the delegates bring back Balaam's truncated message to Balak, he sends a larger and more distinguished group of dignitaries and instructs them to tell Balaam: *'Please do not refuse to come to me. I will honor you greatly* ⁵ *[ki khabed akhbedekha me'od], and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me'* (22:16-17). Balak thus gives a positive interpretation to Balaam's refusal to come: that he is playing for a greater than usual reward. That this is, indeed, on Balaam's mind is suggested by his reply to the new group of messengers: *'Though Balak were to give me*

his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God' (Num. 22:18). Rashi's comment on the first clause of the verse is: "We learn that he was greedy and coveted the money of others. He thought: Balak should really give me all the silver and gold that he has. If not for me, he would have to hire many soldiers and, even then, he would not be certain of victory. But I will certainly be victorious."

The promise of a handsome financial reward is repeated in the first and last encounters between Balak and Balaam. In both instances Balak uses forms of the euphemistic term *kavod* (honor) to refer to monetary reward. When Balak first greets Balaam, he upbraids him for not having agreed to come with the first delegation, adding: '*Am I really unable to reward you?*' [*ha-umnam lo ukhal kabdekha?*] (Num. 22:37). At their last meeting, when Balak dismisses Balaam, he adds: '*I was going to reward you richly [Amarti kated akhabedekha], but the Lord has denied you the reward'* (Num. 24:11). In his reply, Balaam repeats what he told the messengers: '*Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lord's command'* (Num. 24:13).

GRANDIOSITY

Balaam's expectation of a large reward is related to his exaggerated self-importance, as suggested by Rashi's comment on Numbers 22:18 quoted above. Balaam is in effect saying: My reward should be commensurate with my anticipated stellar performance. Rashi also finds a reflection of Balaam's arrogance in two other statements that he makes. In the visit of the first delegation, when Balaam goes to receive a message from God, we read that God asked Balaam: '*Who are these people with you?*' (Num. 22:9). Balaam answers: '*Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message'* (Num. 22:10). Rashi comments: "Though I am not important in Your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings." The basis for Rashi's comment seems to be Balaam's choice of "Balak . . . the king" as the grammatical subject of his answer. God's question was about "these people" and Balaam's answer should therefore have been: '*They are the messengers of Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab.*' By making "Balak . . . king of Moab" the subject (and omitting any reference to the messengers), Balaam shows that he is boasting about his importance.⁶

Rashi also detects an element of vainglory in Balaam's message to the first group of delegates. He says to them: *'The Lord will not let me go with you'* (Num. 22:13). Rashi adds the implicit message: "But only with officials of higher rank than you."

BALAAM'S SELF-DECEPTION

Balaam's inflated ego and hankering after financial gain led him to behave irrationally, to fool himself into believing that he might somehow be able to curse the Israelites. There was a basis for self-deception in the three divine messages that Balaam received prior to his arrival in Moab. Of these, only the first message (Num. 22:12) explicitly forbade Balaam to curse the Israelites. The latter two messages (Num. 22:20 and 22:35) merely stated that he must do/say what God told him. Being eager to accept Balak's offer, this change made Balaam think that just as God had shifted from forbidding to allowing him to go to Moab, so He might also shift from forbidding to permitting him to curse the Israelites. The talmudic sage Rav Nahman saw the change from the initial categorical "do-not-go" to the subsequent "go," albeit with restrictions, as indicating that chutzpah pays off even when it concerns God Almighty (TB *Sanhedrin* 105a). The point is that Balaam had grounds for believing that his (audacious) persistence might facilitate his cursing of the Israelites.

Thus, a haughty ego and a craving for money led Balaam to act irrationally when he accepted Balak's invitation to come to Moab to curse the Israelites. We can now begin to examine why it was that Balaam persisted in his mission, even after his initial failures.

THE HUMBLING OF BALAAM AFTER THE FIRST ORACLE

The consequence of Balaam's blessing the Israelites rather than cursing them in the first oracle was that he met with scorn from the Moabite leadership instead of the respect that he coveted. I will now present the textual evidence for Balaam's lowered standing at that point.

After Balaam delivers his first oracle, Balak rebukes him, saying: *'What have you done to me? I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!'* (Num. 23:11). In addition to the rebuke he receives from Balak, Balaam's loss of respect among the Moabites is also apparent from the

reduced number of notables who come to hear his second oracle. In the case of the first oracle, the text states that Balak and *all the Moabite dignitaries* awaited Balaam (Num. 23:6); but to hear the second oracle, it says that Balak and *the Moabite dignitaries* (Num. 23:17) were there, omitting the word "all." Rashi comments: "Seeing that it was hopeless, some of the dignitaries had left and now only a few remained."

Balaam's loss of respect after his first oracle is also shown by the references to him through pronouns, rather than his name, in the biblical narrative. Balaam's response to Balak's rebuke thus states: *He replied, 'I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth'* (Num. 23:12). The next verse states: *And Balak said to him . . .* (Num. 23:13). Balaam's name is also missing from the following two verses (Num. 23:14-15). The second of these reads: *And he said to Balak [Va-yomer el Balak] . . .* (Num. 23:15).

The text also highlights Balaam's diminished presence after the first oracle by leaving out any mention of his instructing Balak to build altars and make sacrifices. In the preparation for the first oracle, it states that Balaam ordered Balak to build altars and make sacrifices, and that Balak complied (Num. 23:1-2). Similarly, in the preparation for the third oracle, Balaam's order and Balak's compliance are explicitly mentioned (Num. 23:29-30). However, in the preparation for the second oracle, Balaam's order and Balak's compliance are not indicated: the text merely states that Balak built altars and made sacrifices (Num. 23:14).

Prior to the third and fourth oracles, Balaam endures more criticism from the Moabites. After he pronounces the second oracle, Balak tells him: *'Neither curse nor bless them!'* (Num. 23:25). After the third oracle, Balak is furious with Balaam and says to him: *'I called you to damn my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times!'* (Num. 24:10). Balak then orders Balaam to leave at once (Num. 24:11).

Balaam's oracles blessing the Israelites subjected him to criticism and insults from the Moabites. Their negative reaction was already evident after the first oracle, yet Balaam went on to pronounce further oracles blessing Israel.

BALAAAM'S ASSERTIVENESS AND RETALIATION

It should have been clear to Balaam that he was not permitted to curse the Israelites and that his quest for honor and reward was being frustrated. Why

did he not simply abandon the mission? My proposal is that Balaam continued to bless the Israelites after the first oracle so as to aggravate the Moabites in retaliation for their insults to his haughty ego. In fact, he explicitly demands respect. In his introduction to the second oracle, he talks down to Balak, saying: '*Up, Balak, attend. Give ear to me, son of Zippor!*' (Num. 23:18).

In the third and fourth oracles, Balaam's assertiveness is present in full force. As Milgrom comments, "The third and fourth times, casting divination aside, he rises to the level of prophecy. Needing no dictation from God, but flooded by His spirit, he composes his own utterance (*ne'um*) of blessing (24:1-2)." By speaking in his own voice in these oracles, Balaam projects his self-confidence. His enhanced presence is indicated in the narrative by the mention of his name in every verse preceding the third and fourth oracles (Num. 23:26, 27, 28, 29, and 30; 24:1 and 2).

In his introductions to the third and fourth oracles, Balaam identifies himself proudly. In the introduction to the third oracle, he says: '*Word of Balaam son of Beor, Word of the man whose eye is true, Word of him who hears God's speech, Who beholds visions from the Almighty, Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled*' (24:3-4). And in the introduction to the fourth oracle (Num. 24:15-16) he adds one more self-attribute: '*Who obtains knowledge from the Most High*' (Num. 24:16). This elaborate self-glorification contrasts starkly with the first oracle, where he did not even mention his own name. At that point, before the humiliations to which he was subjected, he had no need to assert himself. Back then, he felt that he had received due respect. Balak's initial invitation has the messengers flatter Balaam by telling him in the name of Balak: '*. . . I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed*' (Num. 22:6). Furthermore, upon Balaam's arrival in Moab, Balak sends him a feast of oxen and sheep (Num. 22:40), to "feed" his exalted pride (Sforno). Balaam only demands respect after the first oracle, when he was humiliated and felt a need to assert himself.

Balaam also endeavored to restore his reputation as one able to contribute to the inflicting of harm. Immediately following the Balaam story (Num. 25:1-9), there is an account of Israelite men consorting with Moabite and Midianite women who induced them to worship their idol, Baal-Peor. This brought about a plague in which 24,000 Israelites perished (Num. 25:9). Later, it is stated that the harlotry and idol worship took place on Balaam's ad-

vice (Num. 31:16). I assume that Balaam did this to prove to the Moabites – and to himself – that he still retained the ability to produce results, one way or another.

SUMMARY

This paper has analyzed subtle aspects of the wording in the Balaam story to uncover the psychological subtext of his behavior. It suggests that Balaam had a grandiose feeling of self-importance and a lust for financial gain which drove him to undertake a mission to curse the Israelites, despite clear indications that the mission would fail. In his first oracle, Balaam blesses the Israelites instead of cursing them. This arouses the anger and scorn of the Moabites. Yet Balaam does not terminate his mission after the initial dismal results and its aftereffects. Instead, he reacts defiantly, asserting his superiority and producing three more major oracles of praise and blessing for the Israelites and damnation of their enemies. I propose that he does so in retaliation for the Moabite affronts to his ego.

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NOTES

1. Joshua 13:22 refers to him as a *kosem*. See J. Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) pp. 471-473.
2. This is the writer's literal translation of the Hebrew.
3. These and other English renderings of commentaries incorporate the translations of M. Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011).
4. On the basis of *Avot* 5:23, which states that the disciples of Balaam were characterized by an evil eye, haughtiness, and avarice, Rashi (Num. 24:2) declares that Balaam intended to cast an evil eye on the Israelites. However, the textual support for an evil eye is rather weak.
5. This is the literal translation of the Hebrew. The NJPS renders the phrase as "I will reward you richly," which is indeed what the phrase says euphemistically, as does the English term "honorarium" (Milgrom, *ibid*, Num. 22:17). In general, I use the NJPS translation, without noting minor changes that I have made, in order not to burden the reader.
6. The explanation of Eliyahu Mizraḥi (in *Otzar Mefarshai Rashi al ha-Torah*, Jerusalem: H. Wagshal, n.d., Num. 22:10) gives as a basis for Rashi's comment the fact that Balaam need not have identified Balak as the "king of Moab." This is a possible explanation, but I think that if it were the sole basis for Rashi's comment, he would have made it on the words "king of Moab" rather than on the whole phrase, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab." Moreover, Balak needs to

be identified as the king of Moab, since only a ruler like Balak can ask Balaam curse the Israelites.

7. Milgrom, *ibid.*, p. 473.



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