

THE MEANING OF *AND HE WENT SHEFI* (NUM. 23:3)

GILAD J. GEVARYAHU

The following verse appears in the story of Balaam: *And Balaam said to Balak: 'Place yourself by the burnt-offering, and I will go; maybe by happenstance the Lord will come to meet me; and whatever he may show me I will tell you.'* And he went shefi (Num. 23:3). I have purposely not translated the word *shefi*, as its meaning is in question.

Shefi does not appear in this particular construct anywhere else in the Bible. The *Biblical Encyclopedia* concludes its explanation of the term by pointing out that some interpreters liken it to the word *nishpeh* in Isaiah 13:2, meaning a "barren hilltop." In the context of the Balaam story it would thus denote where he went. This word appears numerous times in its plural form (*shefayim*) in the later Prophets (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21, 4:11, 12:12, 14:6). The encyclopedia treats this interpretation as mere speculation. Joüon takes the word to mean "a path which was smoothed by the feet of those who walked upon it." He justifies this interpretation by pointing out that *shefi* always appears in the context of roads (Isa. 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21, 14:11). Driver notes the similarity between *shefi* and an Arabic word meaning a sand hill. The Ben Yehudah dictionary gave up looking for a standard root and defined it as a small creek bed, also pointing out that *shefi* always appears in the context of water and grazing fields (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 12:12). This is most evident in *I will open up streams on the bare hills [shefayim] and springs amid the valleys [beka'ot]* (Isa. 41:18), which draws a parallel between *shefayim* and *beka'ot*. The *Biblical Encyclopedia* could not reach a conclusion as to the meaning of this word.¹

Targum Onkelos translates the phrase as "and he went alone (*va-azal yehidi*)." Rashi's interpretation follows that of the Targum, explaining that the word means "alone." Rashi derives it from "the expression *shufi va-shaket*, 'ease and tranquility,' which means silence." According to this translation Balaam needed to be in a secluded place so as to receive prophecy.

In contrast to this interpretation, *Targum Yerushalmi* or *Pseudo-Jonathan* translates *shefi* as "bent down like a snake" (connected to the word *shafuf*).

Gilad J. Gevaryahu lives in Merion Station, Pennsylvania. He has written previously for Jewish Bible Quarterly, and for Beit Mikra, Judaism, and other publications.

Rashbam gives "lame" (*higger*) as his interpretation, and we will return to this later. Moskowitz, in the *Da'at Mikra* series, concludes his lengthy interpretation of *shefi* by saying "and others explain 'on foot'".²

Avraham Even Shoshan, in his Hebrew dictionary,³ declares that the common explanation for (*he went*) *shefi* is "in tranquility, slowly." He nevertheless states: "This text is unclear, and my explanation is an educated guess." In his Bible concordance he gives two explanations – the first: "a tall barren hill"; the second: "slowly, methodically."⁴

The Septuagint translates the phrase as "walking straight," while the Vulgate has "walking fast."⁵ English and German translations also disagree about the meaning. Isaac Leeser translates: "and he went thoughtfully alone." *The Interpreter's Bible* (1953) writes "and he went to a bare height" and then states: "It may be better to adopt Binn's second suggestion that the word derives from the Assyrian *šēpu*, 'with hindered step,' which may indicate that Balaam was lame." The JPS (1917) translation is "and he went to a bare height" while the NJPS (1985) gives "and he went off alone," but notes that the "exact meaning of Heb. *shephi* uncertain." Similarly, the Revised King James Version has "and he went to a high place," whereas a modern German version ("nach der deutschen Übersetzung Martin Luthers," 1966) provides: "Und er ging hin auf einen kahlen Hügel [= barren hill]." J.H. Hertz in his commentary translates it as "to a bare height", and adds "the Hebrew *shefi* has also been taken as an abbreviation of the three words *sheol pi YHVH*, 'to inquire of the mouth of the Lord'".⁶

The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch, a manuscript discovered in 1956, leaves the word *shefi* mysteriously untranslated while adding that Balaam "went alone." This additional explanation imitates those of *Targum Onkelos* and Rashi mentioned previously.⁷

In conclusion, there are many interpretations of this phrase, basically having to do with walking or terrain, with no clear agreement as to its exact meaning.

It is my contention that *shefi* derives from the Akkadian word *šēpu* ("foot").⁸ The phrase *va-yelekh shefi* would then simply mean: "and he walked on foot."

The rabbis of the Talmud were familiar with this basic understanding of the word, but they thought that it referred to an injured foot: "Balaam was lame

in one foot, as it is said, *va-yelekh shefi*. Samson was lame in both feet, as it is said (Gen. 49:17), *shefifon alei oraḥ*" (TB *Sotah* 10a; TB *Sanhedrin* 105a; *Midrash Aggadah* [Buber] Gen. 49, *siman* 16; Num. 23). In the singular, *shefi* is taken to indicate one lame foot; *shefifon* is interpreted as being a plural form, thus denoting two lame feet. This is rather like Binn's approach, as noted above. However, while there are a few Akkadian terms for "lame" or "crippled", *šēpu* is not one of them.⁹

Rashbam similarly explains that *shefi* means someone who is a lame, on the basis of *ve-shuppu atzmotav* ("his bones corrode" or "are rubbed away", Job 33:21). However, he understood from the Talmud that the word indicates the leg bone rather than the foot. The Talmud does use the word *shofi* to mean the top of the hip bone, the largest one in the leg¹⁰ (TB *Hullin* 92b; TB *Avodah Zarah* 25a). Rashbam therefore read the Talmud's interpretation of the phrase to mean an "injured leg," whereas the Talmud itself was closer to following the original connotation of *shefi* [as "foot"] based on the Akkadian root. The term *šēpu* can also denote the "foot of a mountain," which may be the source of the topographical interpretations noted above.¹¹

At this point one might ask: Why does the text specifically mention the fact that Balaam went on foot? The message conveyed here is that he lost the use of his female donkey after the talking episode. The *shefi* verse appears not long after that incident, just before his first attempt to curse the Israelites. It is my guess that even Onkelos, who translated *shefi* as "alone," meant that he walked on without the donkey – in other words, on foot. Balaam's ass is not mentioned after its encounter with the angel. Midrashic literature suggests that it was killed by the angel,¹² leaving Balaam no choice but to continue on foot. There may, however, be a narrative function in the idea that Balaam proceeded on foot without his donkey, since it emphasizes the contrast between the two. While that dumb animal paid heed to the angel and stopped in its tracks, Balaam persisted in his course of action and ignored the heavenly warning. The famous prophet and seer was indeed more foolish than his ass!

NOTES

1. *Entziklopediyah Mikra'it*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1963) p. 746. Cf. also Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979) p. 1046, number 8205, where it is explained as "smooth" or "bare." In their *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J.Brill, 1999) p. 1623, Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baum-

gartner and Johann J. Stamm understand the word to mean a barren hill.

2. Yehiel Tzvi Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Bamidbar* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1988) p. 290. Moskowitz does not indicate who the "others" are, this omission suggesting that such interpreters are not generally quoted in the *Da'at Mikra* series.

3. *Ha-Millon He-Ḥadash* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sefer, 1983) p. 1404, s.v. *shefi*.

4. *Konkordantziyah Ḥadashah la-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sefer, 1998), s.v. *shefi*.

5. The Vulgate attached the words *va-yelekh shefi* to the beginning of verse 4, as opposed to the Masoretic text, where they appear at the end of verse 3.

6. J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 674. He also notes the translation of Onkelos, 'alone'.

7. Vatican Neophyti 1 (Jerusalem: Makor ed., 1979) p. 320.

8. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 17, part 2 (CAD; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1992), s.v. *šēpu*, p. 294. I wish to thank Nili Samet, who was the first to translate *shefi* in Akkadian for me.

9. See Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), where *hummuru* (p. 120), *pessu* (p. 273), and *subbutu* (p. 340) are all stated to mean "lame" or "crippled." However, *šēpu* has the meaning of "foot," "on foot," or even "foot of a mountain," not an injured foot (p. 367).

10. See Adin Steinsaltz, who follows Rashi in his interpretation of Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, suggesting that *shofi* is the highest bone in the leg.

11. See *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, p. 367.

12. *Bamidbar Rabbah* (Vilna ed.), Balak 20; *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), Balak, *siman* 14; *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Balak 247 (2005).



Full text of articles from Volumes 1 - 40 is
available for download on our website:

<http://jibq.jewishbible.org/jibq-past-issues/>

