

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About
Numbers, chapters 22 – 24 – Bilaam
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A) Background

- 1) Chapter 22, verse 1 – The Israelites are now encamped where they will stay through the rest of the Book of Numbers and all of Deuteronomy.
- 2) Chapter 21, verses 11 – 13 - They are encamped on the border between Moav to the south, whose territory they skirted on the east and did not conquer, and the territory of Sichon King of the Amorites to the north, whose territory they did conquer.
- 3) Chapter 21, verse 26 - The territory of the Amorites had earlier belonged to Moav but had been conquered and wrested from their control.
- 4) Genesis chapter 36, verse 35 – The Midianites are a tribal people who live among the Moabites.

B) The man Bilaam: one side of the coin - Chapter 22, verses 2 – 20; 35b – 41; chapters 23 -24

- 1) His character seems to be portrayed in the story in a uniformly positive fashion.
 - a) Again and again, he accepts God's word, and passes it on faithfully, not matter what the price.
 - b) Again and again, he speaks openly of his powerlessness to take initiative against God. He sees himself as a servant of God.
 - c) Again and again, he wishes to do that which pleases God.
 - d) When he thinks that he understands what God wants, he still waits to take initiative until God's spirit rests upon him.
 - e) He prophesizes that he himself is blessed by God for his obedience.
- 2) There may be another biblical source that corroborates this understanding
 - a) Micha chapter 6, verse 5
- 3) There are a small number of post biblical sources that corroborate this approach
 - a) Pseudo Philo, Philo of Byblos, chapter 18, page 123 – “Wherefore Lord do you tempt the race of men” They therefore cannot sustain it, for you know more than they all that was in the world before you founded it. And now enlighten your servant if it be right that I go with them”.
 - b) Agadat Breishit 65 – “I cannot undertake to do any evil against Israel with whom is the Lord”.
 - c) Seder Eliahu Raba 26:142 – “Bilaam ... was greater in wisdom than Moshe”
 - d) Numbers Raba 14:20 – “There were three features possessed by the prophecy of Balaam that were absent from that of Moses: (1) Moses did not know who was speaking with him (see Exod. 3:6; Exod. R. 3:1), whereas Balaam knew who was speaking with him (24:4). (2) Moses did not know when the Holy One Blessed Be He would speak with him, whereas Balaam knew (24:16a). In illustration of this, Balaam has been compared with a king's cook who knows what fare the king will have on his table and how much is spent by the king on his board. It was in the same way that Balaam knew what the Holy One Blessed Be He would speak to him about. (3) Balaam spoke with Him whenever he pleased, for it says: ‘prostrate, but with eyes unveiled’ (24:4,16), which signifies that he used to prostrate himself on his face and straightway his eyes were unveiled to anything he inquired about. Moses, however, did not speak with Him whenever he wished”.

C) The man Bilaam – the other side of the coin – Chapter 22, verses 21 -35a

- 1) He is depicted as angering God, presumably for going with the men against God's will.
- 2) The whole purpose of the donkey story seems to be to lampoon him and show him to be a fool.
 - a) Bilaam, who desires to subdue Israel with words, cannot even subdue his ass with a stick (Tanhuma Balak 9).

- b) Bilaam, who claims prophetic sight (24:4, 17), cannot see what his ass sees three times.
 - c) Bilaam, who claims prophetic speech since the Lord puts words into his mouth (22:38; 23:5, 12, 16), is now matched by his ass (v. 28).
 - d) Bilaam, who boasts that “his knowledge is from the Most High” (24:16), has to admit, “I did not know” (v. 34; Tanhuma Balak 10).
 - e) Bilaam, who is the wisest of the wise, is bested in a verbal exchange with the most stupid of beasts (v. 30; Gen. R. 93:10; Num. R. 20:14).
 - f) Bilaam, who wishes to slay a whole people with his words, can only kill his ass with a sword (Num. R. 20:14).
 - g) Bilaam, who would slay his ass if only he could find a sword (v. 29), does not see the sword extended by the angel (v. 23).
- 3) The ass in this episode plays the role of Bilaam—beholding divine visions with eyes unveiled—to Bilaam’s Balak. In truth, Balaam is depicted on a level lower than his ass: more unseeing in his inability to detect the angel, more stupid in being defeated verbally by his ass, and more beastly in subduing it with his stick whereas it responds with tempered speech.
- 4) If indeed he will prophesize, he is no better than a talking donkey, but certainly not a prophet in any essential sense.
- D) Biblical corroboration of this understanding.
- 1) Numbers chapter 31, verses 7 – 8, 15 - 16
 - 2) Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 5 - 7
 - 3) Joshua chapter 13, verses 21 – 22; chapter 24, verse 9 – 10
- E) In post biblical tradition he becomes an exemplar of villainy
- 1) Philo portrays him as more eager even than Balak to curse Israel (1 Mos. 285–286).
 - 2) Josephus also insists that Balaam intended to comply with Balak’s wishes (Ant. 4.119–122).
 - 1) The Christian Bible, too, emphasizes Balaam’s avarice (2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11) and his counsel of idolatry and debauchery (Rev. 2:14).
 - 2) Tractate Avot chapter 5, mishna 19 - “Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a gross soul. What is the difference between the disciples of our father Abraham and the disciples of the wicked Balaam? The disciples of our father Abraham benefit in this world and inherit the World To Come, and as is stated, "To bequeath to those who love Me there is, and their treasures I shall fill" (Proverbs 8:21). The disciples of the wicked Balaam inherit purgatory and descent into the pit of destruction, as is stated, "And You, G-d, shall cast them into the pit of destruction; bloody and deceitful men, they shall not attain half their days. And I shall trust in you" (ibid., 55:24). [See Sanh. 105a–106b, Targums to chaps. 22–24]
- F) Reconciling the two approaches – re-examining the positive verses about him
- 1) Chapter 22, verses 7 – 8 – Why didn’t Bilaam just tell them straight out that this is impossible? Everyone knew what God had done for the Israelites. And as a prophet, he should have known and understood. Rather, perhaps he is searching for a way to manipulate God and to get what he wants.
 - 2) Chapter 22, verse 13 – He does not tell the full truth, perhaps because he is looking for a way to do what he wants.
 - 3) Chapter 22, verse 19 – This is totally superfluous; he is perhaps rather looking for the answer that he wants.

- 4) Chapter 22, verse 34 – He should not be speaking in this fashion, but should have immediately turned around and gone home.
 - 5) Chapter 22, verse 37 – 38 – He should tell the whole truth, as revealed to him in verse 12 – that the Israelites are blessed!
- G) Rashi's Commentary. We will see that Rashi finds plausible hints that Bilaam was not as positive a character as we might have thought, and secondly, we will see that Rashi creates opportunities to bash him.
- 1) Verse 8 **Lodge here for the night:** The Divine Spirit rested on him only at night, and the same applied to all gentile prophets. So it was with Laban, [God came to him] in a dream at night, as it says, "God came to Laban the Aramite in a dream at night" (Gen. 31:24), like a man going to his concubine in secret. — [Mid. Lev. Rabbah 1:13]
when the Lord speaks to me: If He advises me to go with people like you, I will go with you. But perhaps it is beneath His dignity to allow me to go with anyone but higher ranking nobles than you.
 - 2) Verse 9 **Who are these men with you:** It came to delude him. [Rashi means: "the ways of the Lord are straight, and the righteous shall walk in them, and the rebellious shall stumble on them" (Hosea 14:10). By asking, "Who are these men with you," God meant to enter into a conversation with him, as Rashi states in the section Bereishith (3:9) on the word, "Where are you?" But it came to Balaam to delude him, for he erred.] He [Balaam] said, "Sometimes, not everything is revealed before Him, for He is not always omniscient. I will find a time when I am able to curse, and He will not realize it." - [Mid. Tanchuma Balak 5, Num. Rabbah 20:9]
 - 3) Verse 12 **You shall not go with them:** He said to Him, "If so, I will curse them in my place." He replied to him, "You shall not curse the people." He said, "If so, I will bless them." He replied, "They do not need your blessing, 'for they are blessed.'" As the saying goes, "We say to the wasp (Other editions: the bee), 'Neither your honey, nor your sting.'" - [Mid. Tanchuma Balak 6, Num. Rabbah 20:10]
 - 4) Verse 13 **to go with you:** Only with greater nobles than you. This shows us that he was conceited and unwilling to reveal that he was under the control of the Omnipresent except in an arrogant manner. Therefore, "But Balak sent... again..." (verse 15) - [Mid. Tanchuma Balak 6, Balak Num. Rabbah 20:10]
 - 5) Verse 18 **a house full of silver and gold:** This shows us that he was greedy and coveted other people's money. He said, "He ought to give me all his silver and gold, since he has to hire many armies, and even then, it is questionable whether he will be victorious or not, whereas I will certainly succeed." - [Mid. Tanchuma Balak; Num. Rabbah 20:10]
 - 6) Verse 20 **If these men have come to call for you:** If the calling is for you, and you expect payment for it, arise and go with them.
but: In spite of yourself, "the word I speak to you-that you shall do." Nevertheless, "Balaam went." He said, Perhaps I can persuade Him and He will consent [to my cursing them].
 - 7) Verse 22 **because he was going:** He saw that this was considered evil by the Omnipresent, yet he longed to go.
 - 8) Verse 35 **Go with these men:** A man is led along the path he wishes to follow. — [Mak. 10b]