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The Coherence of the Biblical Story of Balaam

Robert Shenk

Critics discussing the biblical story of Balaam view the story as riddled with inconsistencies. The chief of these is that God persecutes Balaam despite what seems to be consistently virtuous behavior on the part of the prophet. When the Moabite king Balak asks Balaam to come to prophesy and curse Israel, Balaam dutifully asks God's permission to make the journey, and upon God's saying "no," Balaam refuses. When Balak sends a larger delegation shortly thereafter, Balaam warns the king that he might not be able to curse Israel, however much gold and silver Balak will offer him. And he makes no motion of going until, on his asking God a second time, God does grant him permission to go. However, as soon as Balaam saddles his ass and starts off, God persecutes him. An angel stands in Balaam's way and not only opposes and threatens the prophet but announces he would have killed Balaam had the ass on which the prophet was riding not seen the angel and avoided God's messenger three times in succession (Num. 22.33).¹

Although Balaam at this point acknowledges his guilt, saying "I have done wrong" (Num. 22.34), most modern critics aren't convinced. "Why would God give Balaam permission to go from Mesopotamia to Moab on condition of obedience to divine will and then get mad at the soothsayer for making the journey?" asks one commentator (Clark 137), summarizing critical problems with this passage. That is, why did God let this apparently dutiful and reverend seer go in the first place, if He didn't want him to? Isn't this an arbitrary and capricious God who would so castigate and punish for no good reason? There are other related inconsistencies—that "at one moment Balaam appears to be

Israel's friend, at another her enemy" (Saydon 251), for instance, or that although the Balaam we see here seems to be of great integrity, he is spoken of very derogatorily later in the Bible (Coats, "Balaam" 21). Given such discrepancies, scholars can perhaps be excused for believing that the Balaam story is not one but two or three stories spliced together awkwardly by a bumbling redactor who had no sense of consistent characterization, or any appreciation of plot, or even a basic notion of justice.

Other difficulties with the Balaam material are often cited. Doublets like 22.3a and 22.3b occur unnecessarily in the text (Noth 171). In the "beast" episode, two servants of Balaam mysteriously appear as Balaam's companions, not to be heard of again (Num. 22.22; Gray 309; Budd 266). And there are many grounds for arguing that the two pairs of major oracles with which the Balaam material concludes (Num. 23–24) do not come from the pen of a single author (Gray 309). But such difficulties can be accounted for readily. Doublets are common in Hebrew and may simply be used for emphasis (Sturdy 160). The presence of two servants may "serve only to show that Balaam travelled like a man of superior rank" (Noth 179).² As for the variance in the pairs of oracles, most critics agree that the story builds to a measured climax through Balaam's pronouncement of the four oracles and Balak's varied response to them, despite the oracles' sharp differences (Gray 316–17; Sturdy 178; Budd 262; Noordtzijs 232–33). In the end the main factor arguing a lack of literary unity in the Balaam material—the one almost everybody cites, critic and popular expositor alike—is that of the thematic inconsistency of the beast episode within the whole narrative (Noth 178; Sturdy 165; New English Bible 163). The broadly-held modern conclusion is that the Balaam material includes two widely differing, even contradictory stories placed side by side in the same narrative (Gray 308; Coats, "Way" 62).

But then modern biblical scholarship identifies many cases in the Pentateuch in which two or three different narrative strands seem to have been woven together to produce the extant biblical text. It is possible, even likely, that this may have happened with the story of Balaam. Yet we would be wise not to conclude prematurely that any splices are inept just because different strands are visible, or—in eagerness to differentiate J from E from the Priestly strand in any particular account—to ignore what synthesis may actually have been achieved in

the text. Both biblical and literary scholars are prone to pick apart such a text into fragments, and here as with other great literature the wise reader is careful not to give too much credit to source study unless it illuminates the existing text.

But of course we do have to deal with the text's difficulties. If there is no plausible relationship between the permission God gives to Balaam in Numbers 22.20 and his severity toward Balaam in Numbers 22.22–35, then perhaps we must agree with, say, John Sturdy, who argues that the episode was originally a “folktale” told about someone else which has been inserted in this story to provide delay and tension, though the original story was complete without it (165). Or with Alexander Rofé who believes the episode was a piece specially composed as a burlesque of the Balaam of the main narrative, into which it was later inserted (45–52; qtd. in Safren 105). Or with George W. Coats, who thinks that the beast episode is a “digression” that contradicts the main story, and who in one of his articles tends to disregard the episode altogether.³ Despite their differing views, all these authors would agree that the “speaking ass” episode contradicts the rest of the story outright, and most of them would see this as evidence of a fundamental lack of literary coherence in the Balaam material taken as a whole.

But is there any plausible account of the overall narrative of the existing text of Numbers 22–24 that would lead to a different conclusion, one answering reasonably the basic difficulty—why did God let Balaam go in the first place, if He didn't want him to? In this essay I mean to pose an account of God's behavior in these three chapters of Numbers that will show God acting reasonably, and what is more, acting in the same way He acts in many other Old Testament episodes. I will proceed to demonstrate a unity in the Balaam story taken as a whole, a unity that begins with the dual embassies of Balak and goes on to encompass both the beast episode and the utterance of the four major oracles by the seer. Finally I will argue that Balaam's later history of opposition to Israel, while only touched on in widely scattered biblical passages and not mentioned at all in Numbers 22–24, nevertheless is completely in character with the narrative history of Balaam we find in the original story.

A couple of other ancient stories about gods, oracles, and prophets may help us—not that either of them could possibly have influenced

the biblical account, but simply to illustrate the likely “psychology,” as it were, of the character of God that is portrayed in the Balaam narrative proper (Num. 22–24). As is well known (and indeed is often brought to our attention by biblical critics), the ancient world reported experience with a great variety of divine personalities, and commented on many aspects of the divine nature. An example of such a story is Aesop’s fable, “No Respite”:

A man to whom a friend had entrusted some money was trying to rob him of it. When his friend challenged him to deny the debt on oath, he thought it safest to go away into the country. On reaching the gates, however, he saw a lame man leaving the town, and asked him who he was and where he was going. “Oath is my name,” replied the man, “and I am going to punish perjurers.”

“And how long is it usually before you return to a city?”

“Forty years, or sometimes thirty.”

The embezzler hesitated no longer, the very next day he solemnly swore that he had never had the money. But soon he found himself face to face with the lame man, who hauled him off to be thrown from a high rock. The culprit started to whine. “You said it would be thirty years before you returned,” he complained, “and you have not let me escape for a single day.” “Yes,” replied the other, “when someone is determined to provoke me, I come back the very same day.” (162)

The similarity of the personification of the god in this fable to the God of Numbers 22–24 is readily apparent. Here “Oath” seems purposely to mislead in order to punish the outrageous effrontery of the embezzler. Perhaps there is a similar disingenuousness on God’s part in the Bible, one due to the nature of Balaam’s request. After all, what was Balaam after? Later biblical interpreters of this story (in, for instance, 2 Pet. 2.15–16 and Jude 11) have stressed greed as Balaam’s damning motivation. Despite the fact that modern scholars typically disparage such an interpretation (Budd 272–73; Sturdy 161; Coats, “Balaam” 21), the greed motive makes sense. For it is only upon Balak’s sending of a more important emissary with greater promises of honor and his implicit offer of great wealth that Balaam actually makes the trip.

To be sure, gifts for divination were probably customary. In 1 Samuel 9.7, for instance, Saul searches for a present to give Samuel, and similar gifts are mentioned in 1 Kings 14.3, 2 Kings 8.8–9, and

elsewhere. Still, several biblical proverbs warn against perverting judgment by receiving gifts or bribes—for example, Exodus 23.8: “You shall not accept a bribe, for bribery makes the discerning man blind and the just man give a crooked answer.” There is common consent among scholars that by sending a larger delegation, Balak is primarily offering Balaam a larger honorarium (Budd 265; Noth 177; Maarsingh 80), and Balaam’s immediate response to Balak’s second request, in which he ostentatiously scorns “all the silver and gold in [Balak’s] house” (Num. 22.18) makes clear that the seer understands exactly what is being proffered. So the biblical author likely meant to condemn Balaam for being swayed from obedience by the honor and wealth that Balak offers him. If this were Balaam’s intended motivation—and significantly, this honorarium is the only motivation overtly suggested in the text for Balaam’s asking God a second time—clearly God’s anger with the seer would have just basis.

Admittedly the story from Aesop quoted above as a possible comparison differs from the biblical narrative in important respects. “Oath” in the fable merely gives the embezzler rope with which to hang himself and doesn’t actually approve the deed. The lame man answers the question, “And how long is it usually before you return to a city?” with perfect truth: he just omits the fact (for which he isn’t asked) that on special occasions he returns earlier. In contrast, the God in Numbers 22–24 seems to change faces completely, and without justice. He gives permission, but then condemns Balaam for making use of His permit. The comparison with the fable suggests God’s change in behavior might be justified under unusual circumstances, but doesn’t fully answer the question as to exactly what the circumstances might be, or how if at all God’s actual duplicity in the ass episode could be seen as reasonable.

Here one other ancient story of prophecy can guide us. In the *Histories* of Herodotus there is a putatively historical account of a Lydian named Pactyes who fled to a city named Cyme to escape the reach of the Persian monarch Cyrus, whom he had offended. Cyrus demanded that the city surrender Pactyes. Seeing that other cities and peoples who had earned Cyrus’s displeasure had been sold into slavery, the citizens of Cyme “decided to take the advice of the oracle at Branchidae as to whether they should obey.” The story continues:

The messengers from Cyme were instructed to ask how to deal with Pactyes in the way most likely to win the favour of the god, and the answer they received was that he must be given up to the Persians. The messengers returned home to report, and the citizens of Cyme were prepared in consequence to give up the wanted man. But just as they were about to do so, one of their number, a man of repute called Aristodicus, son of Heracleides, stopped them, because, as he said, he had his doubts about the oracle's answer and thought the messengers had not reported it correctly. The result of this was that another party, of which Aristodicus himself was a member, left for Branchidae to repeat the question about Pactyes. On their arrival Aristodicus, as spokesman, put to the oracle this question: "Lord Apollo, Pactyes the Lydian has fled to us for safety, to escape violent death at the hands of the Persians, who are now demanding that we should hand him over. It is a wicked thing to betray a suppliant, and in spite of our fear of Persian power we have not dared to do it until we receive from you clear instructions upon how we should act." The answer to this second question was the same as before: namely that Pactyes must be handed over to the Persians.

Aristodicus, however, who had expected this answer, was not yet satisfied. He went all round the outside of the temple, and took from their nests the sparrows and other birds which had built there; and the story goes that while he was doing it he heard a voice from the innermost shrine, saying: "Impious wretch, how dare you do this wicked thing? Would you destroy those who have come to my temple for protection?" Aristodicus, by no means at a loss, replied: "Lord Apollo, do you protect your suppliants, yet tell the men of Cyme to abandon theirs?" "Yes," answered the god; "I do indeed, that you may suffer the sooner for the sacrilege, and never come here again to consult my oracle about handing over suppliants." (77-78)

The analogy to be drawn is pretty obvious: like Apollo, who is outraged that the citizens of Cyme would consider for a moment the betrayal of a suppliant, God in Numbers can be seen as greatly affronted that Balaam would even bring up the subject of the denunciation of Israel a second time. Balaam has been told once, and once ought to be enough—prophecy is very serious business, and this God an awesome, "terrible" God. But an obsessive desire for Balak's silver and gold blinds Balaam to the weighty character of God's original re-

sponse, and to the dread nature of this particular God. Thinking perhaps that this God is like all the other spiritual beings with whom he deals, subject to bribes and favoritism, vacillating and frivolous in favor, Balaam shows himself, like the embezzler in Aesop, “determined to provoke” God—and God knows it. But since the prophet will only accept the answer that will let him pursue Balak’s tendered riches, Balaam acts without the wisdom that marks the astute Aristodicus, who knows that the gods must somehow be just. God recognizes Balaam’s perversity, and paradoxically confirms him for a while in his perverse behavior by giving Balaam exactly what he wants.

If anyone were to suggest, “Surely the Hebrew God never acts likes this,” one would hope it would not be the biblical critics cited above. There are numerous instances in the Old Testament, in fact, in which the Hebrew God is said to lead someone on and oppose him at the very same time. There is the episode, for example, in which Jacob, already chosen as God’s patriarch and highly blessed in all his works, returns to his country and kindred, only to have to wrestle with a spiritual creature on the way. Jacob succeeds with difficulty (sustaining a wound in the thigh), but in the process asks to know who he has been wrestling with—and discovers he has “seen God face to face” (Gen. 32.22–32). A bit later (in Exod. 4.19—again, in the same Pentateuchal synthesis that contains the Book of Numbers) we read of Moses in Midian being given a commission to deliver Israel from Pharaoh. As Moses returned to Egypt with his Midianite wife and his child to begin to carry out that commission, “the Lord met Moses, meaning to kill him.” Apparently the Lord was only forestalled from this purpose by Moses’s wife Zipporah’s immediately circumcising their son (Exod. 4.24–26).

In both these instances a Hebrew meets spiritual opposition from God despite his uniquely “chosen” status, and this in the midst of a journey sanctioned or even commanded by God. One could theorize a rationale for God’s acts in each case—Jacob’s contest might be a kind of penance for his earlier deceit of his brother (cf. his confession of unworthiness in Gen. 32.10, just before the wrestling episode), while God might be understood to oppose Moses in the latter case because, although obeying God’s command to journey back to Egypt, Moses has yet fully to acknowledge his family’s identity as Israelites; he has not yet circumcised his son. Critics might cry out at this point not only to

challenge my interpretation of motives but to point out that both of these “fragments” seem to be based on primitive sources which describe demons or spirits rather than Israel’s transcendent God, and that they can hardly be taken as representative. But I would argue that these episodes have been placed in the biblical text in such a way as to reflect specifically upon the acts of the Hebrew God toward His people at important moments of Israelite history, and because of that placement and their received textual content, they have become thematically definitive.

Later biblical episodes also reveal a severely ironic God. For instance, there is the passage from 2 Samuel 24.1 in which God is said to incite David against the Israelites by ordering him to number Israel and Judah; here again God is represented as leading a favorite into sin (or into further sin). Long before this, an “evil spirit from God” had been sent to trouble Saul (1 Sam. 18.10), whereupon the king hurled a spear at David. Much later, God is said to put a lying spirit into the mouth of all his prophets to entice Ahab into a vain and personally disastrous attack on Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22.22–23). In the latter text, Ahab believes the lying spirit, goes to war, and consequently dies dramatically, prostitutes washing themselves in his blood and the dogs licking it up (1 Kings 22.38). In all these episodes evil acts beget opposition from God, who has no compunction at all about leading His enemies or even His sinning favorites into deeper sin, difficulty, or danger.

Most pertinently, however, God’s actions in the Balaam episode resemble those of God toward one of the main characters in the foundational story of the Hebrews—the Exodus itself. In the biblical book by that name, God is said not once but several times to cement Pharaoh in his opposition to the Hebrews, to “harden Pharaoh’s heart,” in the familiar language of the King James Version (Exod. 7.3, 9.12, etc.). In Exodus as in Numbers, God adamantly opposes a willful adversary who would destroy His favored people, and He adds an element of drama by first enticing that opponent more deeply into his obstinacy. Why? In order evidently that the eventual release of His chosen people will be all the more glorious and memorable. Says God, “I have made him and his courtiers obdurate, so that I may show these my signs among them, and so that you can tell your children and grandchildren the story: how I made sport of the Egyptians, and what signs I showed among them” (Exod. 10.1–2). Clearly, in both the Exodus ac-

count and in the story of Balaam, God can be seen as using His opponent as a tool for manifesting His great favor toward the Israelites. In both cases the manifestation is extremely dramatic, but the manipulation of the enemy can, on reflection, seem somewhat unjust.

This apparent impropriety of God's acts toward Pharaoh was noticed by the church fathers. They made use of the same text to produce an answer—that sometimes Pharaoh is said to harden his *own* heart (Exod. 8.15, 9.34, etc.), and that at any rate Pharaoh had been guilty of great oppressiveness before God instructed Moses to deliver his ultimatum. In Exodus, as throughout the Pentateuch, God is typically regarded as invincibly opposed to and manipulative of his enemies, but also as eminently righteous in that manipulation, those enemies being both arbitrary and tyrannical, as well as often being from the beginning bent on destroying the Hebrews. And so by analogy, if we recognize that Balaam is to be understood as greatly hardened in evil, the justice of God's punishment and forcible use of the prophet to demonstrate God's favor to the Israelites will be vindicated.

Not only Balaam's likely motivation from greed, but his hedging and careful cultivation of the appearance of righteousness indicate the depth of his perversity. That is, there's something of legalistic cunning about Balaam, not only in his seeking convenient judgment without respect for justice (for he never pauses to consider whether or not the Israelites *ought* to be cursed), but also in the nature of that very same righteous-sounding caution to Balak, his proviso that "even if Balak were to give me all the silver and gold in his house, I could not disobey the command of the Lord my God in anything, small or great" (Num. 22.18). To at least one critic this warning is evidence of Balaam's probity (Coats, "Balaam" 25–26), despite the fact that any assertion of probity in a non-Hebrew prophet desiring to curse Israel would seem very unusual in a biblical text.⁴ But rather than proving Balaam's respect for the divine, this answer sounds to me rather like lawyerly hedging; it appears that Balaam is simply covering himself in case this particular god remains adverse.

After all, could a prophet always please his client? What if the god proved antagonistic? Supernatural considerations aside, mere political prudence would indicate a prophet would sometimes have to pronounce a negative reply, and certainly he would want an excuse ready in the event that what he said didn't please. In fact, in this very story, Balaam

has occasion to defend himself against Balak's anger by reminding him several times of what he had said before—"Must I not keep to the words that the Lord puts into my mouth?"; "Did I not warn you that I must do all the Lord tells me?"; etc. (Num. 23.12, 23.26, 24.12-13). One biblical scholar argues plausibly of these passages that in them Balaam is chiefly invoking his professionalism as a seer, partly to impress Balak, and partly to build up a rhetorical defense. Balaam's carefully conditional statements are thus "not proof of Balaam's willing submission to the Lord's will," but instead are meant to assert that seers are in contact with real divinities, and are not just paid charlatans, whatever Balak would like to think (Noordtzij 205, 229, 221).

However, saying something is true and its actually being so are two different things in God's view, as the biblical portraits of Joseph's brothers, of Delilah, and of the serpent in the Garden of Eden all help to manifest. The difficulty for Balaam now is that he is closely constrained, and his equivocations can please neither of those with whom he has to deal. His protestations of virtue don't satisfy Balak, who initially expresses "utter consternation" at Balaam's actions (Maarsingh 85), and who eventually conceives such anger at the seer that he stalks off without paying the promised fee. On the other hand, the God whose curse Balaam is seeking immediately sees through and abhors his pretense, and responds to the seer with an unconditional opposition, an opposition which in the process shows up Balaam's own great blindness and perversity.

Ira Clark, who discusses intelligently many of the repetitions in the story, shows how the "triple blockading of Balaam's journey to Moab" manifests the seer's obdurate insensibility:

The first time, God's angel with drawn sword forces the ass off an apparently broad road into a field, for which Balaam beats the ass. The second time, the angel blocks a narrow path between walled vineyards, and when the ass swerves it crushes Balaam's foot, for which Balaam beats it again. The third time, the angel stands "in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left." The ass can only lie down, so now Balaam, in a rage, strikes it "with his staff." When the Lord opens the mouth of the beast to protest the beating, ridicule increases because of Balaam's failure to notice the miracle; he does not hear and understand God, but goes right on to threaten the ass, wishing for a sword. At the

same time, from the Israelite vantage, the audience watches the ass watch the angel brandish a sword over the spiritually blind and deaf seer, the alien prophet who has promised to look and listen for God's commands.

Clark adds significantly, "Isn't God's wrath more than justified when it is directed against someone's refusal to see and to hear what he has just promised to follow?" (140).

Clark comments further on the sarcasm, ridicule, and general humor of the episode, but I'm less certain than Clark and others how humorous the "ass" part of the story is meant to be—or at least that humor is meant to be the initial response.⁵ In my judgment, a perceptive reader's response to the beast episode taken seriously (as it seldom is)—especially to the great spiritual creature with sword drawn who has first completely terrified a dumb creature and then made it speak, and now is threatening the seer's own life—would likely include a good deal of awe and some fear. There is a numinous dimension in the story, to the events of which a fully conscious and imaginative response on the part of both character and reader would be something like Jacob's at Bethel: "How fearsome is this place! This is no other than the house of God, this the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28.17); or like the "horror of great darkness" that falls on Abraham in the manifestation of the divided beasts and the burning lamp (Gen. 15:12; KJV). Ironically the so-called seer or prophet Balaam is shown to have no feeling at all of the unearthly quality at the very heart of his chosen profession.

Balaam is simply lacking in vision, in all senses of the term—lacking moral, spiritual, and psychological apprehension. Only when God forcibly opens his eyes does Balaam see anything, and then he sees but a glimmer of the source of God's anger: "Now, if my journey displease you, I am ready to go back" (Num. 22.34). What he does not realize even now—he seems completely dumbfounded—is the enormity of God's displeasure, which results from God's hatred of what Balaam is, and also God's love of those people who Balaam, following Balak's invitation, would try to destroy. Balaam has ample opportunity to consider the nature of his mistake, for having manifested His displeasure with Balaam and His utter contempt for Balaam's motives, God will use the alien prophet for His own ends. And in the prophecies Balaam delivers upon joining Balak there will be successive reminders of Balaam's obsti-

nacy to God's purposes, his lack of knowledge of the character of God, and his blindness to the nature of all truly spiritual things, especially those concerning Israel.⁶

Certainly the oracles in which Balaam so strikingly pronounces God's favor for Israel refer on one level to Balak's original (and continuing) request that Israel be cursed. Thus the first oracle begins:

From Aram, from the mountains of the east,
Balak king of Moab has brought me:
"Come, lay a curse for me on Jacob,
come, execrate Israel."
How can I denounce whom God has not denounced?
How can I execrate whom the Lord has not execrated?
(Num. 23.7–8)

This oracle clearly relates specifically to the Moabite king's petition, and it does so by manifesting God's blessing (rather than his cursing) of the Israelites, in opposition to Balak's wish.

And yet it must be remembered that Balaam twice sought to go with Balak as the king had originally asked—and why seek to go with him if there wasn't a chance to do what the king requested? Thus the last two lines of the oracle quoted above relate as directly to Balaam's as to Balak's intention to have Israel denounced.

Similarly with lines three and four of the second oracle:

Up, Balak, and listen:
hear what I am charged to say, son of Zippor.
God is not a mortal that he should lie,
not a man that he should change his mind.
Has he not spoken, and will he not make it good?
What he has proclaimed, he will surely fulfil.
I have received command to bless;
I will bless and I cannot gainsay it. (Num. 23.18–20)

Lines 3 ff. of this prophecy certainly refer in one sense to Balak's asking Balaam to try again, to get the curse right this time. Yet taking the beast episode into account, the oracle could be understood also as revelatory of what Balaam himself learned when he asked God a second time to allow him to go with Balak's deputation. That is, these lines could easily be understood to allude to Balaam's attempt to get God to change His mind, not just Balak's.

Now the third and fourth oracles omit Balak entirely and focus directly on the blessing of Israel. Interestingly, they could even be said to *constitute* such blessings, whereas the earlier oracles merely witnessed to Israel's being blessed (Noordtzi 224). But these revelations (and their introduction) also draw attention to the new situation of Balaam himself.

Consider the narrative that precedes the oracles. It informs us that the seer now is possessed of a wholly new orientation. According to this narrative, Balaam "did not go and resort to divination as before" (Num. 24.1) but simply "looked" toward the desert and was immediately overcome by the spirit of God (Num. 24.2–3). Here the prophet is shown to be enforceably perceptive, perceptive somehow not by his own seer's craft but "under the direct influence of inspiration" (Noth 189).

But then the oracles themselves also emphasize Balaam's new orientation—and they do so repeatedly. Consider the first several lines of these last two oracles (which are virtually identical); note their intense focus upon vision or perception:

The very word of Balaam son of Beor,
 the very word of the man *whose sight is clear*,
 the very word of him *who hears the words of God*,
 who *with staring eyes sees* in a trance
the vision from the Almighty:
 how goodly are your tents, O Jacob. . . .

(Num. 24.3–5; italics added)

Possessed by the spirit, Balaam in the third oracle is now very clear-sighted, not blind to Israel's blessedness, and he goes on to speak in yet a fourth oracle (that Balak doesn't want uttered at all) with a similar meaning. In that final oracle Balaam, "who shares the knowledge of the Most High," both "sees" and "beholds" the great vision of the star come out of Jacob, the prediction of Israel's future greatness (Num. 24.16–17).

Certainly the first five lines from the third oracle quoted above are meant in part to comprise a strong preface to the profundity of the blessing of Israel which is to follow. But it is strange that critics who are otherwise so suspicious of repetition in the Balaam material (repetition of similar phrases, repetition of Balaam's conditionals, repetition of God's warnings to Balaam not to say more than He tells him) have not

turned their attention to this extraordinary set of repetitions: (1) the four separate references to Balaam's new perceptive powers within the six lines cited above; (2) the doubling of these six lines, employed as they are at the beginning of both the last two oracles; and (3) the similar repeated stress on Balaam's new visionary experience in the third oracle's very introduction. I would argue that such otherwise purposeless repetition draws attention to Balaam's own posture, and thus implies a signification other than the pronounced blessings themselves. That is, these last two oracles with their great stress on clear-sightedness and their overt and even self-conscious reference to Balaam himself (yet one more feature utterly unnecessary to the blessing of Israel *per se*) can be understood to underline by contrast the prophet's original obstinacy and great sightlessness.

Such a theme—incorrigible perversity on the part of a partisan prophet met with God's equally devastating implacability, the seer's perversity exposed both by the outward events of the narrative and by the light of revelations from his own mouth—can perhaps illuminate one other vexing problem in the Balaam material. After delivering his oracles, Balaam is said to return home (Num. 24.25), and no further actions of his are narrated. In light of this passage textual commentators find great difficulty in understanding later comments in the Bible such as the Israelites had slain Balaam while making war on Midian (Num.: 31.8), or that Balaam was to blame for the events in Shittim that are said to have immediately followed the oracles and Balaam's departure—specifically, that “the people began to have intercourse with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices offered to their gods; and they ate the sacrificial food and prostrated themselves before the gods of Moab” and “joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry with them” (Num. 25.1–3).

To be sure, depending on the translation, Balaam is not specifically blamed in Numbers itself for the events at Shittim, except perhaps by implication. According to the New English Bible, Moses condemns the Israelites for sparing the Midianite women in the following words: “Remember, it was they who, *on Balaam's departure*, set about seducing the Israelites into disloyalty to the Lord that day at Peor, so that the plague struck the community of the Lord” (Num. 31.16; italics added). According to this translation, Moses connects the incident with Balaam only in an oblique way. But other translations (the KJV, for instance)

lay the instigation of the Hebrews' seduction to the "counsel of Balaam" himself. And the author of Revelations (in the process of blaming the church at Pergamum for holding false doctrine) is very specific in blaming the prophet himself for the Israelites' sin:

You have in Pergamum some that hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put temptation in the way of the Israelites. He encouraged them to eat food sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication, and in the same way you also have some who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. (Rev. 2:14–15)

One commentator objects to this later assertion in a way typical of such objections, that Balaam's ill teaching is not mentioned in the earlier story, and that action of this kind would presuppose a great fall from grace on Balaam's part (Butzer 250).

Such backsliding is not unusual in biblical material, the Israelite nation itself being fearfully guilty of it from the making of the golden calf through virtually the entire Old Testament, and specifically in the episode at Shittim just mentioned. Nevertheless I'd suggest that in the case of Israel's enemies consistent obstinacy rather than fall from grace is more typical, for her opponents seldom acknowledge the truth at all, and therefore establish no pattern of good behavior from which to swerve. Further, as we have seen above, Balaam's own working against God seems entirely in character, so that no change of behavior need be posited. Yes, Balaam is said at one point to repent, and then he becomes the mouthpiece for the great oracles blessing Israel. But the existence of any genuine repentance and godliness in Balaam through this whole narrative is extremely doubtful. Only in the face of the fearful angelic presence does Balaam express any regret at all, and in pronouncing the oracles, Balaam serves merely as a conduit for an expression of God's good will toward Israel. As we have seen, besides God's putting "words into Balaam's mouth" (Num. 23.5) in the first and second divinations, in the third and fourth oracles the spirit of God completely possesses Balaam, just as it had the dumb ass, one supposes—that is, without any need whatsoever for the creature's consent.

The very physical stance of the seer during his delivery of the third and fourth oracles may be significant. In Numbers 24.4 and 24.16, Balaam is portrayed as literally "falling down," i.e., in an ecstatic condition, robbed of the normal control of his own body" (Noth 190). In a

later biblical text Saul at one point hears that his enemy David is in Naioth and sends a party of men to seize him. But “when they saw the company of prophets in rapture, with Samuel standing at their head, the spirit of God came upon them and they fell into prophetic rapture.” This happens twice more, until Saul decides to come after David himself. “On his way there the spirit of God came upon him too and he went on, in a rapture as he went, till he came to Naioth in Ramah. There he too stripped off his clothes and like the rest fell into a rapture before Samuel and lay down naked all that day and all that night” (1 Sam. 19.18–24). So even though some scholars tend to see Balaam’s pronouncement of the oracles as evidence of his godliness,⁷ other biblical passages portray God inflicting prophetic fits against an individual’s political or personal bent. Despite his utterance of the oracles, then, it is likely that Balaam remains throughout Numbers an obstinate seer testifying for the Israelites very much against his own will.

That at any rate is the consistent interpretation by other biblical writers of the Balaam narrative. For example, Moses is quoted in Deuteronomy 23.5 as saying, “The Lord your God refused to listen to Balaam and turned his denunciation into a blessing,” which suggests Balaam’s intent all along had been to curse. And the narrator of Joshua speaks of Balaam’s intentions in similar terms (Josh. 24.9). Despite modern scholars’ contempt, these views of such indigenous ancient authors ought to carry substantial weight. In my view, instead of being arbitrary detractions based on later Hebrew chauvinism (Budd 272–73), the references to Balaam’s enmity to Israel that we find in Deuteronomy and Joshua and the references to his greed that appear in 2 Pet. 2.15–16 and Jude 11 all seem based in great part on straightforward readings of Num. 22–24. These biblical authors seem simply to have interpreted the *whole* of that story in a quite reasonable way—that is, not ignoring the beast episode, nor denigrating it into complete insignificance, but instead seeing it as central, according both to its unambiguous portrait of God’s opposition to Balaam, and to its pivotal placement in the text.

Such obduracy as other biblical writers conceive being Balaam’s likely intellectual stance, what wonder if, once free from the immediate enforcements of God’s angel and spirit, the prophet were immediately to revert to his earlier obstinacy and hint to Balak and others how to stymie the hated Israelites? That act would be no stranger nor less char-

acteristic than Pharaoh changing his mind once the Hebrews have gotten away and chasing after them in his chariots, reverting to the hatred he was obsessed with from the beginning. Admittedly there is very little biblical documentation for Balaam's leading Israel astray in the apostasy described in Num. 25 (Noth 173).⁸ But the fact that Pharaoh's recurring obduracy in the face of God's implacability is part of the same editorial synthesis as the story we are considering implies strongly that the reversion to ill form that the Revelations passage suggests is thematic.

It may be thematic across an even wider spectrum of biblical writings. In reversing his behavior as soon as he is out of the immediate grip of God, Balaam would seem to resemble Saul, for example, who twice repents of his attempts to murder David in the wilderness (1 Sam. 24.17, 26.21), and yet each time soon turns perverse and seeks to kill David again. Or consider another biblical visionary, whose famous story similarly manifests God's great grace in face of the opposition of His chief visionary and spokesman. Despite the fact that the Book of Jonah celebrates God's concern for the Gentiles rather than His opposition to them, that later Israelite prophet greatly resembles this Moabite seer, chiefly in his inexorable ill will. Jonah must be pursued by God, cast into the sea by the sailors, and swallowed by a whale (another obedient beast like Balaam's ass) before he will obey God and preach to the Ninevites. He carries out God's orders despite himself and very much against his personal inclination.

As He did in Numbers, God in the Book of Jonah shows great favor to the prophet's enemies, but also shows kindness to the prophet himself, performing miracles and object lessons for Jonah personally. But Jonah, after briefly relenting and denouncing the Ninevites as God had ordered, again turns obstructive, taking great offense at the divine forgiveness which he had anticipated and resented from the start. In the end we have no idea if Jonah's ultimate stance was repentant or not. After recounting God's explanation to Jonah of the parable of the gourd (Jon. 4.5–11), the narrator doesn't even bother to show us whether or not Jonah gets the point. As far as we know, Jonah may continue obstinate, completely obsessed by the fierce, mortal anger that we see him express just two verses before the end of the book (Jon. 4.9). The point here is that despite his repeated witnessing of God's miracles, and despite Jonah's own statement of contrition followed by a brief performance of God's directive, Jonah's attitude and behavior are

typically negative rather than obedient and God-fearing. Yet despite the prophet's vehemence, this opposition merely serves in the text to highlight by contrast the brilliant grace of God's generous purposes.

So it appears to be with Balaam, who finds God's clear-sightedness thrust upon him against his own strong bent. Like Jonah's obstinacy, Balaam's opposition is ultimately futile, and only augments the perspective of the Israelites' success. Against the visionaries' ill will, God's good will appears more magnificent; against their failed stubbornness His great power stands out.

Ultimately the story of Balaam, far from being a fractured account by an incompetent editor attempting futilely to link a trivial "fable" or "folktale" with great visionary and even "legendary" literature (Coats, "Way" 57), is instead a calculated, intelligent, and consistently sober narrative which tells one story, and tells it well. The writer narrates the coherent story of an enormously perverse spiritual opposition to an invincible God's unchangeable good will. The beast episode in the story, rather than bearing a fable's mere prudential emphasis, instead manifests awesomely the invisible spiritual barricades confronting those opposed to God's grace and favor. And rather than being unrelated to the whole of the narrative in which they occur, the great visionary promises of the Balaam story are precious precisely because the grace they declare is beset on every side by willful opposition—even in the very mouth that utters them.

In every respect, then, the story is a unity, celebrating God's reliable grace. But it also reminds us, especially in the sequel of the apostasy at Shittim—no doubt placed immediately after the great oracles so as dramatically to demonstrate the Israelites' strong tendency to fall back into sin (Sturdy 183)—that such grace is conditional upon the sustained cooperation of the people who have been so greatly favored. In the end the story in Numbers manifests the great dimensions of freedom given to human moral choice. For ill or for good, a human being's ultimate alignment is up to that person alone. On the one hand, the story portrays a person's ability to reject obstinately at every moment all power intended at good, although such obstinacy must ultimately result in futility. On the other hand, it presents in the oracles the great rewards to be attained by a free and whole-hearted obedience. It is such a generous and total assent that, despite opposition from Balak, Balaam, and all other such opponents, the God in Numbers, in the Pentateuch

as a whole, and in many later biblical books is repeatedly calling for, and sometimes succeeds in eliciting.

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical references and quotations are from the New English Bible.

2. Recently a critic has argued (Safren 109–11) that the two servants who go with Balaam on his journey are meant to parallel the two servants who accompany Abraham on the latter's journey to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22.1–19). In this view, the "Binding of Isaac" is a journey of profound obedience, the "Tale of Balaam's Ass" is a journey of profound *disobedience*, and the latter story is a "reflection story" that mirrors and contrasts with the former.

3. In his analysis of the Balaam story, Coats terms the beast episode "a secondary element in the Balaam story itself," and proceeds to speak as if the episode did not exist: "[The story] presents Balaam, not as a sinner whose plan for cursing Israel Yahweh foiled by direct intervention, but to the contrary *as a saint who intended from the beginning to do nothing other than obey Yahweh's word*" ("Balaam" 22; italics added). Similarly, Sturdy discusses later biblical passages dealing with Balaam and in one statement fails in any way to take into account the most famous part of the story: "In [Num.] 31.16, [Balaam] is supposed to have led Israel to sin, and this view of him is taken over in the New Testament in Jude 11, and 2 Pet. 2:15–16. But *there is no sign of disapproval of him in these chapters [Num. 22–24] at all*" (161; italics added). One can only remonstrate that, while its inclusion might conceivably make the story incoherent, the beast episode clearly denotes some significant opposition to Balaam on God's part. And like it or not, it remains a part of the received text.

4. Budd recognizes the strangeness of such apparent biblical praise of a non-Hebrew seer: "Countless scribes and storytellers must have puzzled over the story of a foreign seer who is also Yahweh's prophet" (261). I'm arguing, of course, that Balaam isn't really Yahweh's prophet, and thus there is no real reason for such puzzlement.

5. P. J. Budd is one of the few modern biblical scholars who acknowledges some logic to including the ass episode in the Balaam material (263–64). Nevertheless Budd goes on to say he does not regard the beast story as depicting Balaam “in a seriously disadvantageous light,” and he emphasizes that the story was meant to be “satirical,” a “popular story” or folktale (264). In my opinion Budd is representative of critics who miss the profound opposition between the characters in the story, and the consistent soberness of the narrative. Although its basic situation may seem somewhat incongruous, there is no flippancy at all in the beast episode as its author conceives it, either on the part of the ass, or on the part of the angel, or on the part of God.

6. My discussion may seem to condense the story somewhat by omitting discussion of the meeting between Balak and Balaam, and their going off to the first sacrifice. Clark makes an interesting point about this section. If the beast episode is understood to be an integral and meaningful part of the story, fully reflective of character, there is a natural imaginative progression in the narrative: “As Balak goes off with Balaam to the sacrifice, the Israelite audience watches with a considerable sense of *déjà vu*” (141). That is, Balak is the second in a series of characters in the text—Balaam, Balak, the Moabites, and other alien nations—who, despite being warned, blindly continue their utterly hopeless campaigns against an unconquerable and implacable God.

7. Gray says Balaam “delivers his messages to Balak overmastered, like a Hebrew chosen of Yahweh for any special task, by the Spirit of God” (318). However, Gray also admits the possibility that Balaam might be understood to be acting under divine compulsion (318–19).

8. More than one commentator has suggested there may have been more information in the original Baal-Peor story than in the version on which the existing account in Numbers 25.1–5 seems to have been based (Budd 277; Noordtzi 237). It is possible the original story contained a description of Balaam’s part in Israel’s later apostasy (Noordtzi 238).

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