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A Prophet Unlike Moses: Balaam as Prophetic Intercessor

Abstract

The Balaam narrative (Numbers 22:1-24:25) is fraught with textual and theological incongruity. A narrative analysis of the corpus, however, reveals the incongruities as literary devices that render Balaam as a prophetic anti-type in contrast to Moses. While both Balaam and Moses are obedient messengers who speak the words of Yhwh, their ministry as intercessors manifests vastly different understandings of Yhwh. Both figures try to change Yhwh's mind. Balaam does so through ritual manipulation and with the idea that Yhwh can be induced to curse what Yhwh has blessed. Moses, however, directly appeals to Yhwh for mercy in response to a divine decree of destruction. The prominence and ambiguous rendering of the Balaam narrative therefore reflects its importance in assisting Israel to discern trustworthy versus untrustworthy prophets.

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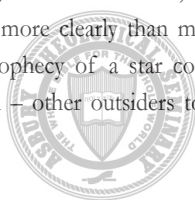
Introduction

The Balaam narrative (Numbers 22:2-24:25) is a jumble of anomalies. It begins by presenting Balaam as an exemplary servant of Yhwh. Balaam consults Yhwh for direction when emissaries from the Moabite king Balak seek his aid to curse Israel (22:8). He does not go with them when Yhwh forbids him to go (22:10). When emissaries with more prestige arrive and tell him to name his own price, he emphatically declares that he cannot go beyond what God has commanded him (22:16-18). Then he departs, in obedience to Yhwh's command that he accompany them (22:20-21). Immediately following, however, we read that God is enraged that Balaam goes with the men and that the angel of Yhwh blocks his way (22:22-24). The story takes a farcical turn, as a donkey sees what the prophet cannot and questions him (22:25-30), only to have the angel rebuke Balaam for his crooked way and inform the prophet that the donkey has saved his life (22:31-33). After the angel admonishes him to say only what Yhwh tells him to say, the narrative again depicts him as an exemplary servant; Balaam declares that he cannot be bought and will only say what Yhwh tells him (23:12-13, 26; 24:12-13).

There are also inconsistencies of broader import. What is a non-Israelite diviner doing delivering prophecies in the name of Yhwh? How is Balaam on speaking terms with Yhwh? How does Balaam even know the divine name, disclosed to Moses only a generation earlier (Exod 6:2-3)? And why does Numbers devote so much attention to a pagan prophet?

Subsequent biblical references to Balaam take a neutral or negative slant. In most cases Balaam appears in connection with Balak's attempt to curse Israel (Deut 23:4-5; Josh 24:9-10; Mic 6:4). Two reports that the Israelites killed Balaam along with the kings of Midian cast him as an enemy (Num 31:8; Josh 13:22). Two additional references in the New Testament paint an even darker picture. Second Peter presents Balaam as an example of avarice (2:15). Revelation 2:14, on the other hand, depicts Balaam as a sinister seducer who taught Balak to draw the Israelites into idolatry and fornication.

Early Christian and Jewish interpretation echoes the ambiguous character of the biblical narrative. Ambrose viewed Balaam as proud man who was motivated by the love of money. Jerome, on the other hand, wondered why Balaam was able to see the coming of Christ more clearly than many prophets, and an array of interpreters associated his prophecy of a star coming from Jacob (24:17) with the star that guided the Magi – other outsiders to whom God spoke (Lienhard 2001:243-49).



Early rabbinic interpretation generally casts Balaam in a negative light, with a prominent thread corresponding to the Christian depiction of Balaam as proud, greedy, seductive, and mendacious (b. Sanh. 105a-b; b. Sanh. 106a.); one tradition casts him as a figure of archetypal wickedness characterized by an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a proud soul, and leading a host of followers to Gehenna (m. \square Abot 5:19). Another thread contrasts Moses with Balaam as an exercise of differentiating Israel's prophets from those of the rest of the world. One positive perspective renders Balaam as a prophet to the nations, in contrast to Moses as a prophet to Israel, and identifies the qualities that distinguished them (Num. Rab. 14:20). A negative comparison, on the other hand, contrasts the compassion and message of Israel's prophets with the cruelty of pagan Balaam, who wanted to destroy an entire nation without cause (Num. Rab. 20:1).

Extending this last thread of rabbinic midrash, in its opposing strands, into narrative analysis, reveals that the Balaam narrative renders its protagonist as a sort of prophetic anti-type in contrast to Moses. Both Moses and Balaam are depicted as obedient servants of Yhwh who speak Yhwh's words. Yet Moses is an exemplary figure, while Balaam is ultimately false and dangerous. On what basis is this distinction made? The answer, the story suggests, is to be discerned in the way that Balaam undertakes the task of prophetic intercession. The story of Balaam, in brief, presents an opposing depiction of prophetic ministry, rendered to assist Israel in the task of distinguishing between true messengers and the false ones. Balaam manifests many of the attributes of a true prophet of Yhwh. Yet Balaam undertakes intercession, a primary prophetic task, in a radically different way than Moses, and in so doing reveals what characterizes untrustworthy prophets.

Priesthood and Prophecy in Numbers

Israel in Numbers is an ordered and ordering community wandering within a boundless wasteland. Ordering the life of Israel, particularly in terms of its social manifestations, constitutes a prominent motif in the book. Numbers begins with an ordering event, a census and registration of the people according to tribe, clan, and patriarchal household (1:1-47). Another ordering event follows: a schematic configuration of the Israelite camp, in which the tribes are assigned places facing the tent of meeting on every side, under tribal ensigns and according to tribes, clans, and patriarchal households (2:1-34). There follows in turn a delineation of Levitical duties (3:5-13), a corresponding census and placement of Levites within the Israelite camps according to clans, and an assignment of responsibilities

relative to the tabernacle and altar, all according to clans (3:14-39; 4:1-49). After a brief section of legislation (5:1-6:21), the ordering impulse resumes with a detailed account of the presentation of offerings by the leaders of the twelve tribes (7:1-88) and the separation and consecration of the Levites (8:5-26).

With Israel's departure from Sinai (9:1-10:36), the book turns toward to a straightforward narrative mode and to the introduction of the prophetic office, the other institution of divine mediation in Israel (11:1-17). An instance of complaining, first from the people and then from Moses, provides the context for an outbreak of prophecy. In response to Moses's exasperated protest that he cannot shoulder the weight of leadership alone, Yhwh declares that he will take some of the spirit in Moses and disperse it to seventy elders. Ensuing events depict various aspects of prophetic ministry, beginning with a dialogue between Yhwh and Moses that ends with Yhwh declaring, "Now you will see whether or not my word will take place" (v. 23). When Yhwh puts some of Moses' spirit on the elders, they prophesy (v. 25). The prophesying spills over established protocol; the spirit rests on two men designated to receive it but who are not present with the others (v. 26). In response to Joshua's plea that Moses stop the disorderly situation, Moses declares that he wishes all the people were prophets (vv. 28-29). Yhwh then fulfills his word with a miraculous provision of quails but follows this up with a plague (vv. 31-34).

The topic of Yhwh's revelation to the prophet is then taken up in the next episode, which is precipitated by Miriam's opposition to Moses' marriage to a Cushite (12:1-10). The challenge provokes Yhwh to summon Miriam the prophet, Aaron the priest, and Moses to the tent of meeting. Here Yhwh speaks about prophets, elevates the singular status of Moses above all religious offices, and rebukes Miriam and Aaron. The encounter concludes with Moses interceding on behalf of a leprous Miriam and Yhwh's mitigation of her status to a seven-day exclusion from the camp. The themes of opposition to Moses, Mosaic mediation, and divine judgment then extend into the next two events. First, when the people refuse to enter Canaan, Moses intercedes to turn away divine anger, and Yhwh lessens the judgment he declared (13:1-14:45). Second, when Korah leads a rebellion against Moses, Moses appeals to God for vindication, and Yhwh renders judgment upon the rebels (16:1-50).

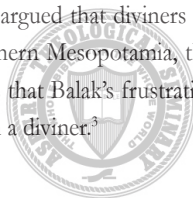
A third iteration of the themes occurs during an episode at Meribah, shortly before the Balaam narrative (20:1-13). The account anticipates the story of Balaam in its allusion to magic. At Meribah, the people's complaining so vexes Moses that he strikes the rock in a manner that suggests a magical performance. By announcing that he and Aaron will bring water from the rock and then striking it twice, Moses signals that the miraculous power to do so issues from himself, rather

than Yhwh. For this, Yhwh disqualifies Moses from leading the people into the land, “because he did not remain faithful to Yhwh, to treat Yhwh as holy in the sight of the people.”¹ The performance undercuts Yhwh’s holiness by suggesting that Yhwh is not truly transcendent and, like all the other deities of the ancient world, may be manipulated by someone with access to the superior power of magic.

Balaam as Intercessor

Although Balaam is nowhere identified as a prophet, the narrative associates him with prophetic attributes and practices. He relays messages that Yhwh gives him or puts in his mouth (22:8, 38; 23:5, 12, 16; 24:4; cf. 24:15), and two of his prophecies are specifically called oracles (24:4, 15). He prophesies under the impulse of the divine spirit (24:2). Balaam evokes the visionary aspect of Israelite prophecy by referring to himself as one who sees with open and uncovered eyes, possesses the knowledge of the Most High, and he receives visions from the Almighty (24:4, 15, 16). He thereby casts himself as a seer, an alternative and perhaps archaic designation for a prophet (1 Sam 9:9, 19; 2 Sam 24:11; 2 Sam 17:13; Amos 7:12). The association is accentuated through irony in the satirical account of his donkey’s stubbornness, during which the donkey sees what Balaam cannot and warns Balaam accordingly (22:21-35).

Balaam, however, is also associated with divination and sorcery. The Moabite and Midianite elders who approach Balaam on Balak’s behalf believe him to be a diviner (22:7); that is, someone skilled in predicting the future and determining the divine will by reading omens or performing rituals. Balak, however, is not interested in knowing the future but in changing it. He enlists Balaam as a sorcerer, that is, someone who is able to wield transcendent power for good or ill. The Moabite king expects Balaam to curse Israel and becomes increasingly frustrated when Balaam repeatedly blesses the nation instead. The interplay between the roles of diviner and sorcerer has elicited significant discussion. The majority of interpreters regard sorcery as within the diviner’s purview. Balaam’s failure is therefore viewed in terms of Yhwh’s refusal to authorize the execration, and Balak’s frustration emanates from his anger that he is not getting the diviner he paid for.² Jacob Milgrom, however, has argued that diviners and sorcerers were distinct and separate functionaries in northern Mesopotamia, the place of Balaam’s residence. On this basis, Milgrom argues that Balak’s frustration emanates from the fact that he wanted a sorcerer but hired a diviner.³



It is important to note at this point, however, that Balaam does little by way of action to confirm either of these roles. His divining consists only of looking for a favorable omen during the first two sacrifices (24:1). Likewise, he possesses the power to bless and curse only by reputation (22:6); Balaam himself repeatedly declares that he has no power to override Yhwh's pronouncement of blessing over Israel (22:18, 38; 23:8, 12, 20; 24:12-13). In short, Balaam acts like a diviner, just as he acts as a prophet, but the office is never ascribed to him directly.

The first section of the narrative portrays Balaam as an exemplary prophetic figure. When the emissaries from Balak arrive with the king's request, Balaam consults God for direction and, when God forbids him to go, sends them away (22:7-14). When Balak entices Balaam by sending more and higher-ranking officials, and with a "name your price" offer, Balaam again refuses, this time emphatically declaring that Balak cannot pay him enough "to do anything, whether great or small, that goes beyond the direction of Yhwh my God" (22:18). Balaam is thus portrayed as an individual of uncompromising integrity and a dutiful servant of Yhwh, who does not act presumptuously and cannot be compromised by the temptation to gain wealth or prestige.

Yet Balaam does something that anticipates how he will later deal with Balak. After his emphatic refusal to go beyond Yhwh's directive, Balaam invites the emissaries to stay for the night, saying "Let me find out if Yhwh says anything more to me" (22:19). The statement echoes Balaam's response to the first group of emissaries (v. 8), but results in a different response. In the first instance, Yhwh tersely commands Balaam, "You are not to go with them. You are not to curse the nation, because it is blessed" (v. 12). Yet, this time Yhwh declares, "Get up. Go with them. But do only what I tell you to do" (v. 20). The instruction draws us back to what Yhwh directed Balaam in the first place, and particularly the reason Yhwh gave for refusing the emissaries: the Israelites are blessed. In light of Yhwh's prior declaration, why did Balaam not dismiss the emissaries immediately? Why did he instead tell them to remain so that he could find out whether Yhwh had anything more to say? What more need Yhwh say, having already expressed his will to Balaam in unambiguous terms in the first instance? Why, in short, would Balaam seek a second consultation? And why, when he does, would Yhwh tell him to go?

What transpires when Balaam departs suggests an answer to the last question. God is angered that Balaam has gone with the emissaries, and the angel of Yhwh blocks his way, ready to strike him down (22:22). Yhwh's anger and action, however, clash with what Yhwh has directed Balaam to do. Does God's anger then issue from caprice? The end of the account lends clarity. When Yhwh opens Balaam's eyes and announces that he has been spared, Balaam prostrates himself

and confesses that he has sinned (v. 34). But what is his sin? That he beat the donkey and tried to push ahead? Or that he decided to go with the officials of Moab in the first place? Balaam confirms the latter by offering to go back if Yhwh is displeased.

Yhwh reiterates his command that Balaam accompany the men and do only what he has been told (v. 35, cf. v. 20). Now, however, that command reverberates with divine anger and displeasure. The second iteration thus nuances the first, intimating that Yhwh's directive that Balaam accompany the men did not express God's will. It was rather a concession, or more likely, a test.⁴ Yhwh has already disclosed his disposition toward Israel in response to the first delegation (v. 12). No more need be said. Balaam's second consultation, however, signals that he thinks Yhwh might be inclined to change his mind; Yhwh may say something more (v. 19). In a sense, this is what Yhwh does by telling Balaam to go, but now the command expresses divine displeasure rather than divine endorsement.

Balaam's consultation of Yhwh in the second instance, when Balaam knows what Yhwh has already spoken, signals why Balaam directs Balak to offer seven burnt offerings on seven altars, and to do so repeatedly after Yhwh has given Balaam blessings to speak over Israel rather than curses (23:1-24:13). The odd and excessive repetition of sacrifice has puzzled interpreters, who generally view the sacrifices as part of the ritual process of divination.⁵ This however misses the point. The whole course of the narrative thus far prepares us to view the sacrifices as attempts to change Yhwh's disposition toward Israel and authorize curses instead of blessing. The sacrifices should be seen, in short, as acts of *intercession* rather than *divination*.

Recognizing the sacrificial process as intercession explains why it is extravagant. The bulls and rams sacrificed on the seven altars are offered as gifts to Yhwh with the expectation that Yhwh may be cajoled into changing what he has declared concerning Israel.⁶ The sacrifices are lavish and excessive because Yhwh has been adamant that Israel is not to be cursed; it will take a great stock of gifts to get Yhwh to reconsider. By directing the sacrifices, Balaam intimates to Balak what he has implied earlier to the emissaries: although Yhwh has made his will known, he might be persuaded to say something different if the dialogue is extended and sufficient gifts are offered (22:19).

In directing the sacrifices, Balaam therefore functions as a mediator for Balak. This is why, after offering the sacrifices, Balaam tells Balak to wait while he goes away to meet Yhwh and receive Yhwh's response (23:1-3, 15). It is why Balaam points out the lavish array of sacrifices when God meets him the first time (v. 4). And it is why Balak, who understands the capricious exactitude by which gods must be approached, looks for a more opportune spot to sacrifice after each of the first

two attempts fail to produce the desired result. Balak takes a negative response as an indication that the deity wants more, just as Balak's emissaries took Balaam's initial refusal as a signal that he could be persuaded if Balak offered more (22:15-17). The intercessory process thus involves trying again, with increasing gifts and a search for just the right place to offer them.

Balaam's first two oracles confirm that the intent of the sacrifices is to change what Yhwh has decreed concerning Israel. The first oracle makes clear that Balaam cannot utter a curse when God has not authorized one, yet creates a sense of openness by rendering the message as a question: "How can I curse what God does not curse? How can I denounce what Yhwh won't denounce?" (23:8). The second oracle then builds indirectly on the first oracle (via questions) and responds directly to what Balaam is enticing Yhwh to do: "God is not human, that he should dissemble, nor a child of Adam that he should change his mind. Would he say something and not do it? Or declare something and not fulfill it?" (23:19).

The third time around is therefore an exercise in futility. Balak wants to try again, and Balaam goes along with him (23:27-30). Balaam, however, realizes that Yhwh is determined to bless Israel and no longer bothers to find a place for a meeting (24:1). After the third set of sacrifices, God stops the process altogether and takes control of it by moving upon Balaam by the power of his spirit (24:2). The resulting oracle makes it abundantly clear that the Lord will not change what God has spoken, reinforcing the declaration by echoing the promise that God gave Abram: those who bless Israel will be blessed, but those who curse Israel will be cursed (24:9b; cf. Gen 12:3). After costly sacrificing and accruing blessing for Israel, an enraged Balak gets the point and quits (24:10-11). Balaam then confirms the futility of the enterprise. This God is faithful to do what he has said and cannot be influenced by human manipulation (24:12-13).

Balaam and Moses

Neither Balaam nor Moses is a prophet. Moses is more than a prophet, and Balaam resembles one. Both however exhibit attributes that exemplify prophetic ministry. Both speak what Yhwh, and only what Yhwh, gives them to speak. Both manifest a tenacious steadfastness in God's service and a determination not to diverge from what God commands. Both give due deference to Yhwh. And both assume the role of intercessors and attempt to change divine decrees.

Intercession, however, is where the two prophetic figures differ profoundly. Balaam undertakes his intercession in response to human bidding,

specifically an attempt to curse a nation that is deemed a threat by the petitioner. Although Balaam knows what God has said and operates within divine parameters, he acts as if this deity can be persuaded to change if the right mechanism can be found. Moses, for his part, also attempts to change Yhwh's mind. Yet Moses intercedes within the context of a deep relationship with Yhwh, rather than by way of personal or magical power. Moses does not employ ritual or divination but issues a direct appeal for mercy when circumstances have prompted Yhwh to decree destruction (Num 12:13; 14:13-19; cf. Exod 32:11-14). Most importantly, Moses knows Yhwh to be a deity who is not capricious but rather is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and full of love and faithfulness (Exod 34:6).

Taken as a whole, the Balaam narrative presents its protagonist as a prophetic anti-type to Moses and thus provides guidance for discerning the trustworthiness of prophetic figures. Prophets may speak in the name of Yhwh and display exemplary integrity and obedience. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests, their trustworthiness is to be discerned in the way that they relate to and present the God of Israel, and specifically in the way they undertake intercession. If their way with Yhwh renders Yhwh little different than all other deities, they are not true prophets like Moses. The Balaam narrative thus expresses "the unrelenting vigilance of the Torah in denying man any share in the manipulation of divine power" (Milgrom 1990:454).

The story of Moses at Meribah sets the contrast in sharp relief. Both this and the Balaam narrative reveal that Yhwh will brook no word or interaction that is not faithful to treat him as holy, that is, truly and utterly different than all other deities. The difference in the case of Moses is that Moses' resort to a quasi-magical ritual issues from a momentary and exceptional eruption of anger, whereas Balaam's ritualistic scheme manifests an approach that views Yhwh as little different from the other deities that populated ancient pantheons.

"This deity," John Oswalt writes of Yhwh, "was *not* fickle, undependable, self-serving, and grasping. Instead he was faithful, true, upright, and generous — always" (Oswalt 2009:71). To borrow Oswalt's language, the Balaam narrative prompts readers to assess prophetic figures in terms of whether the practitioner manifests a sense of transcendence or continuity when relating to the God of Israel. Trustworthy prophets do not, in fact must not, use magical practices, nor attempt "to lay hold of divine power" to accomplish their purposes (2009:76). Yhwh is, above all, radically other and separate from all of creation, beyond manipulation, and totally free to decide, work and fulfill as he pleases. Yhwh is *holy*. His servants can be recognized therefore not so much by the gifts they display as by the way they express and honor this central truth about the God of Israel.

End Notes

¹ Jacob Milgrom (1990:448-455) notes the affinities between Moses' striking the rock and Mesopotamian magic, where spells were cast by uttering words while making conventional gestures. In all other miracles, he argues, Moses remains silent. In this case, Moses acts presumptuously and imitates the pagan cults, which presumed that the gods were subject to occult powers.

² See particularly Baruch Levine, who argues that the point of contention has to do with Balaam's acknowledgement that the power to curse was subject to a deity's authorization to do so rather than resident within himself (Levine 1993:212-16). The overlapping of these functions is attested in Syro-Palestinian sources, leading to the proposal that Balaam did not want to subordinate his role as soothsayer to that of sorcerer, in opposition to Balak's wishes (Chavalas 2003:78).

³ Jacob Milgrom (1990:472-473) considers this the major tension in the story. Balak wants Balaam to curse Israel, but Balaam can only divine for Balak. Noting that sorcerers nowhere curse the kings' enemies in Mesopotamian literature, Milgrom suggests that Balak should not have expected a resident of northern Mesopotamia to carry out that function.

⁴ An early prophetic tradition reports a similar test (1 Kgs 13:1-32). In this case a man of God delivers an oracle against Jeroboam I and the altar at Bethel and refuses payment for intercession in terms reminiscent of Balaam's refusal (v. 8; cf. Num 22:18). The man of God also discloses Yhwh's command that he not eat or drink, but return directly home by the way he came. An old prophet, however, entices the man to eat and drink at his house. The man initially refuses but is persuaded by the prophet's deceptive report that the angel of Yhwh told him to bring the man back. As the man is eating, the prophet accuses him of disobeying what God told him in the first place and pronounces a death sentence. When the man of God leaves, a lion attacks and kills him.

⁵ The conventional view is articulated by Martin Noth (1968:182), who writes that Balaam offers the sacrifices to prompt a meeting and get instructions. So also Thomas Dozeman (1998:185): "The sacrifices are part of a ritual of divination, perhaps intended to prompt God's appearance."

⁶ Studies of sacrifice across cultures reveal that they are often governed by the logic of mutual exchange, a sort of *quid pro quo* (Nelson 1993:62-63). Biblical texts attest that the mentality was present among some in Israel but flatly reject such an understanding of sacrifice (e.g. Psa 50:6-13; Mic 6:1-6).



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