The Lampooned Prophet: 
On Learning From (and With) Balaam

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The story of Balaam, the famed gentile seer hired to curse Israel, is complex and elusive. What kind of man is Balaam—a villain, a saint, or something in between? What are the three long chapters dedicated to his story (Numbers 22-24) intended to teach us? And what, readers often wonder, is the purpose of the talking donkey?¹

Read the story of Balaam and skip over the donkey episode and you might well come away with the impression that Balaam is a good, upstanding man, perhaps even a righteous one. The Moabite king Balak offers him great financial reward for cursing Israel, but Balaam repeatedly insists that he will not defy God, not even for “a house full of silver and gold” (22:8,18,38). Much to Balak’s frustration, Balaam ends up blessing Israel extravagantly and never expresses an iota of remorse for letting down the Moabite ruler: He says and does what God tells him and will not apologize for his unwavering loyalty to God. “The Balaam story presents Balaam,” many scholars conclude, “as a saint who intended from the beginning to do nothing other than obey [God’s] word.”²

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And yet a crucial part of the story is the episode with the donkey, in which Balaam is brutally lampooned. Balaam wants to

¹ In the interests of space, I will not recount the story of the Moabite king Balak and the gentile prophet Balaam in any detail. In order to follow the details of the following analysis, readers are advised to review Numbers 22 in particular.

subdue Israel with words, but he can’t even subdue his own donkey without a stick; he seeks
to slay a whole people with words, but would need a sword to kill his own donkey. Balaam
claims prophetic sight (24:4,17), but he cannot even see what his donkey sees clearly (three
times!); he proudly declares that God places words in his mouth (22:38, 2:12; cf. also 23:5, 16),
yet God does the same for his donkey (22:28). Balaam asserts that he “obtains knowledge
from the Most High” (24:16), yet he is forced to admit that he did not even know that God’s
angel was standing right in front of him (22:34). Balaam, a self-described wise prophet,
cannot even win an argument with a donkey, often assumed to be the dumbest of animals.
He announces that he would kill his donkey if only he could find a sword (22:29), but does
not see the angel extending a sword before him (22:23). ³ The mocking critique of Balaam cuts
even deeper. As Bible scholar Gordon Wenham astutely notes, Balaam is to Balak as
Balaam’s donkey is to Balaam: Just as Balaam drives his donkey to do his bidding until the
latter is brought up short by the angel of God, so also Balak drives Balaam to do his bidding
until he, too, is stopped by an encounter with God.⁴ “In truth,” Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom
writes, “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.”⁵

Why the burlesque? In order to answer this question properly, we should ask: Is the Balaam
of these chapters (minus the encounter with the donkey) really a saint, or does the Torah
perhaps offer subtle clues that we are faced with a far more complex and ambiguous
character?


⁵ Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 469.
When Balak first sends a group of emissaries to Balaam in the hopes of inducing him to curse Israel, Balaam turns to God for instructions on how to respond. God answers definitively: “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed” (22:12).

Appropriately, Balaam sends the Moabite dignitaries away. Undeterred, Balak sends another delegation, this one “more numerous and more distinguished than the first” (22:15). Balak seems to imply that Balaam can name his price (22:17). Again, Balaam turns to God for guidance, but first declares to Balak’s envoys: “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God” (22:18). At first glance, at least, we could take this second encounter as unambiguous proof of Balaam’s unassailable integrity. And yet upon closer inspection Balaam’s actions evoke suspicion. Why does Balaam not simply dismiss Balak’s messengers? He announces very dramatically that he will not stray even an iota from the will of God, yet God has already told him, definitively, that the reason he may not curse Israel “is not a particular issue of time or circumstance, which might readily change, but a fundamental principle—‘they are blessed.’”\(^6\) Why, then does Balaam feel compelled to ask again?

This is perhaps the first clue to Balaam’s failure: Faulty theology. When Balaam finally does answer Balak’s summons, he has the king perform an elaborate ritual in the hopes (presumably) that God will allow him to curse Israel. Instead, God places a word of blessing in Balaam’s mouth. To Balak’s annoyance, Balaam duly blesses Israel. But what Balaam does next is telling: Instead of unambiguously recognizing—at last—that God really will not permit Israel to be cursed, Balaam suggests to Balak that they move to a different location and try again. God responds by placing further blessing in Balaam’s mouth. As part of that blessing, God says something

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critical, clearly directed as much (if not more) to Balaam than to Balak: “God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change God’s mind. Would God speak and not act, promise and not fulfill?” (23:19). Balaam apparently thinks that the God of Israel is “like any other deity whom he imagine[s] he might manipulate by mantic acts.” But crucially, “God cannot be manipulated by magic or dictated to by seers, even by those of the stature of Balaam.” When God changes God’s mind, it is because God responds to changes in the quality of human behavior (cf. Jeremiah 18:7-10)—not because God has somehow been outsmarted or controlled by a sorcerer or diviner. Yet Balaam still does not understand what God is telling him. He attempts another change of location, with similar results: More blessings for Israel.

But it would be a mistake to decide, in light of all this, that Balaam is nothing more than a dark and villainous figure. Perhaps we can dig even deeper: Like his theology, Balaam’s very character is called into question by his decision to turn to God again when faced with Balak’s second group of envoys. Recall that Balaam boldly declares that he will not be bought even for a house full of silver and gold. Bible scholar Walter Moberly argues that “the fact that Balaam goes again to consult God suggests that he does not mean what he says… Balaam is acceding to Balak’s construal of his earlier refusal, that it was not a genuine refusal but a negotiating ploy… The language of religious vocation, which is preserved unchanged, is becoming a tool of self-interested financial negotiation.”

But it would be a mistake to decide, in light of all this, that Balaam is nothing more than a dark and villainous figure. Moberly rightly insists that we “resist any facile or moralistic tendency to assume that a person who becomes corrupt must always have been so.” A better, more sophisticated reading would understand, Moberly contends, that “the text is portraying

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8 Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 197.
the more complex situation of a person who is genuinely a prophet (in that he knows he can practice the responsibilities of such a vocation) but who may yet go astray. When a serious divine test, serious because of its genuine allure, confronts Balaam, he wavers from his initial faithfulness to his vocation and succumbs to temptation.”

Balaam, it seems, has two intertwined lessons to learn: First, that God cannot be manipulated by sorcery or divination; and second, that the person of faith—let alone the prophet—must always be vigilant lest her theology be put to self-serving ends. Bible scholar Jacqueline Lapsley captures this point beautifully: “If our exegesis is to be faithful… we… must exercise enormous self-awareness on the occasions where our interpretation leads to our material gain, even when, perhaps especially when, the interpretive moves are subtle.” The bottom line for any teacher or interpreter is that you “cannot exegete for God and line [your] pockets at the same time.”

We should add that money is not the only corrupting incentive a person of faith can encounter: The lure of power or prestige—not to mention the fear of opprobrium—can also lead us to sell our souls while convincing ourselves that we are acting with great piety and devotion.

What are we to learn from God’s utilization of the complex, deeply imperfect figure of Balaam to bless Israel? Perhaps the Torah wants us to know that one can be inspired, and can even be a prophet, without necessarily being a blameless saint. More, the Torah wants us to internalize the reality that God can make use even of people who are deeply flawed to achieve significant and important ends.

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holy ends. This is neither a trite claim nor a truism; on the contrary, it is the reality that makes covenant possible, since we are all fragile, broken, and sometimes corrupt. God uses (only!) imperfect people to achieve God’s ends in the world.

We are so often tempted, upon discovering people’s shortcomings, to dismiss them altogether, to reject the possibility that they can accomplish anything truly important in the world. But Jewish theology insists otherwise. People can have profound flaws and still do powerful, even awesome things to further God’s ends in the world. The fact that we have no use for someone does not mean that God feels the same way. When we learn that someone has feet of clay, we learn only that they are human; we may not rashly conclude that God has no purpose for them. To be absolutely clear: None of this is to say that people are free from the task of working on themselves. Balaam, after all, is judged very harshly both for his bad theology and for his giving in to greed. Yet the underlying message of God’s use of Balaam is crucial: You do not need to be perfect in order to be God’s vessel.

What is true of our perception of others ought to be true of our self-perception as well. Confronted with the reality of our struggles and limitations, many of us have been tempted to decide that we are worthless and cannot possibly do anything of value in the world. Perhaps, we convince ourselves, our issues are just so great that they will always get in the way. But the Torah will have none of it: If God chooses to bless through Balaam, then God can choose to bless through us as well. We are forbidden to write ourselves off, just as we are forbidden to write off others. I can be deeply flawed and still be called to serve. If God could not make use of limited people, God would have no one to make use of at all.

Shabbat Shalom.
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