

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Parashat Balaq Part I

### 1. General Remarks

Upon seeing what Israel did to the mighty Amorite kings Sihon and Og, and with the newly triumphant nation encamped on the plains of his country, Balaq, king of Moab, dreaded what Israel might do to his land. Together with emissaries from neighboring Midian he sent a delegation to "Pethor, on the river" to summon a famous soothsayer, Balaam, to come and curse Israel, thereby weakening it so that he may drive it from the region. Since Balaam stems from Aram (Num. 23:7; Deut. 23:5) and "the river," when unnamed, usually refers to the Euphrates, Pethor is probably the city known as *Pitru* in Mesopotamian documents, located in northern Syria on the Sagur River, a western tributary of the Euphrates. It is about four hundred miles from Moab, a distance then requiring several weeks to traverse.

Balaq was determined to bring the seer at any cost. When the latter did not come with the first delegation, he sent a larger and more dignified mission on the long journey with promises of riches and honor. Verily, "the chieftains of Moab were seized with trembling" (Ex. 15:15). Ironically, the Israelites had no intention of conquering Moab and were planning to merely pass through on their journey to the Promised Land. It was their intention to pay for whatever substance they might consume. Moshe had notified the leaders of the neighboring nations of this intention (Num. 20:17-19; 21:22) but they mostly chose to ignore or discredit it.\*

The three chapters that narrate the story of Balaq and Balaam and which include the latter's oracles (Num. 22-24) comprise a self-contained unit in the Torah. It is essentially a sidelight to the unfolding chronicle of Israel's experiences with no explicit link to the preceding or following narratives. It opens a window

on the thinking and character of these two non-Israelites of note and the inhabitants of the region in Biblical times.

In Deuteronomy, Moshe invokes the summoning of Balaam to the long-term opprobrium of Moab and cites the episode as an example of Hashem's love for Israel: "But Hashem your G-d would not heed Balaam and... turned the curse into a blessing for you, for Hashem your G-d loves you" (Deut. 23:4-7). In Micha, G-d adduces the episode with a slightly different emphasis: "My people, recall, please, what Balaq king of Moab devised [against you] and what Balaam the son of Beor responded to him... that you should recognize the righteous acts of Hashem" (Mic. 6:5). Later in Numbers, Moshe refers to Balaam as associated with the promiscuity that was linked with the *Ba'al Pe'or* idolatry that brought a great deal of backsliding to the Israelites and a Divine visitation of plague upon them (Num. 31:16).

The Balaam pericope contains four poetic oracles that bespeak blessings of all types for Israel and restatements of the Divine promises to the nation. It transmits to the reader a sense of Hashem maintaining his glorious plans for the Israelites even while they are mired in their unworthy behavior. This provided valuable optimism for the future, as there were many difficult periods to come in Israelite history. Attached to the fourth oracle are three additional visions of regional relevance.

Balaam is an enigmatic individual. The Torah presents him as gifted with psychic powers and capable of receiving oracles from Hashem. He describes himself as limited in his powers, bound by Hashem's will that he cannot contravene. Although his response to Balaq's first emissaries is somewhat ambiguous on this latter point, from his meeting with

Balaq's second delegation onwards he does make a major issue of his limitation, continually referring to it in his dialogues with Balaq. He faithfully transmits the messages he receives and it appears that eventually he received a full-fledged prophecy, if only for the occasion.

On a deeper level, however, and in a way probably even hidden from himself, it is clear that Balaam does, indeed, try to contravene G-d's will. When Balaq's emissaries first approached him, he received a Divine communication unambiguously instructing him not to go with them, not to curse Israel, for it is a blessed nation. So certain was he of the Divine intention that he sent the emissaries home. But he did not fully inform them of the content of the oracle, that Israel was blessed and that it was futile to try to curse it. Perhaps he intended to leave the door open for a subsequent request by Balaq and a subsequent attempt on his part to receive G-d's permission for the mission, as transpired.

When Balaq's second delegation approached him, offering great rewards, he responded that regardless of the size of the reward, he "cannot contravene the will of Hashem my G-d to do small or great, but please remain here overnight while I may find out what additional message Hashem may give me" (Num. 22:18-19). Enticed by the prospect of honor and material gain, he searched for an opening, hoping to find some loophole to justify what he already knew is prohibited.

G-d does appear to "acquiesce" to one aspect of Balaam's importuning – not concerning the essential matter of cursing Israel, of course, but in allowing him to accompany the messengers. Balaam's responsibility to obey G-d was shifted to a different plane and joined with a stipulation that he be careful to do as instructed. G-d will now "educate" him in the proper commitment to His will and transmit a message to Balaq. Obviously, Balaam thinks that just as he managed to get by the first hurdle with the Deity toward accomplishing his personal ends he might manage to get by subsequent ones.

Considering that Balaam truly knows the Deity's position on this matter, he should have understood

the Divine acquiescence to mean, "If you insist on going, I won't stop you, but be careful – and you should know I am unhappy with your decision." The Sages cite this verse as an illustration of the principle: "In the path a man wishes to go, in that path will he be led" (BT *Mak.* 10b). It is a profound commentary on the depth of man's free will. Divine directives do not overwhelm that fundamental freedom.

The following verse (Num. 22:21) deftly reveals Balaam's satisfaction with having wheedled permission to go. From the perspective of advancing the narrative it was unnecessary to state at length: "Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his ass, and accompanied the Moabite emissaries." The verse indicates eagerness. The Midrash, in what appears to be the *peshat*, points out this literary artifice and contrasts it with Abraham's arising in the morning and saddling his donkey (Gen. 22:3). In the latter case, the statement reveals Abraham's full commitment to Hashem's will even for what undoubtedly was to him personally, were it not for the command (which was a test of his commitment), a detestable act.

Not surprisingly, in the next verse we read that G-d really is angry that Balaam is going (Num. 22:22). His acquiescence – with the proviso that Balaam must observe G-d's will – had been a compromise, a reflection of Balaam's strong desire to accompany the emissaries. However, a man, especially one so gifted, should know better. This verse introduces the famous episode involving Hashem's angel, Balaam and his "talking" ass (Num. 22:22-35).

## 2. The Talking Ass

Abarbanel stated that "each commentator went his own way" in interpreting the matter of the "talking" ass. Some took it literally, despite the difficulties of understanding how an ass could talk and how Balaam could respond to its remarks in a matter-of-fact manner. Others viewed it as a prophecy, a vision granted to Balaam, occurring in his mind, in which G-d transmitted a relevant message to him (Rambam, Guide 2:42). Some understood it as a description of Balaam's dream that night, revealing his subconscious anxieties concerning his manner of

relating to the Deity. Others have seen the passage as a parable.

Since the episode is not introduced as a prophecy to Balaam or as his dream, and there is no hint that it should be so construed, it appears most likely that the Torah is presenting a parable. It is a sophisticated and multi-faceted parody that directs the reader to the essential message of the story; it derides Balaam's behavior and superficial service of G-d. This is a case in which the Torah's point can best be made through the use of humor, providing a satire that depicts all the important features of Balaam's pathetic situation. It illuminates while lampooning and foreshadows the upcoming events.

The ass' predicament in trying to negotiate the conflicting claims of G-d's angel with his sword drawn standing in its way on the one hand and its loyalty to its human master on the other, reflects Balaam's own dilemma. He was trying to accommodate the will of G-d, which he acknowledges and to which he feels bound (on a shallow level, to be sure), while at the same time pandering to his own material desires, which in a way represents his own master. As in each succeeding encounter the angel increasingly limits the ass' room for maneuver, in the unfolding of events Balaam's freedom to maneuver around G-d's will is also progressively restricted.

Moreover, Balaam's steadily increasing exasperation with his ass the three times it disregarded his will, his striking it, his ranting and raving, yet stubbornly proceeding, refusing to acknowledge what was really transpiring, closely parallels Balaam's reactions. The latter progressively expressed frustration with Balaam on the three occasions that he returned with oracles not to his liking, yet he had stubbornly pushed forward until he became enraged at Balaam and ranted and raved at him.

The ass sees what is happening but Balaam does not. It exposed the wretched reality of a person with great potential bent on an unholy venture, an endeavor predicated on spiritual blindness. He told the ass, "Had I a sword in my hand, כִּי עֲתָה הִרְגָתִיךָ, I would now have killed you." It bests him in the dialogue. It

points out how he was sentencing to death a long-term loyal servant, which he admits had never before deviated from his will, without considering the possibility that perhaps he, the master, was mistaken. Subsequently, with a play on the ass' words, the angel told Balaam, "Had she not swerved before me, כִּי עֲתָה גַם אֶתְּכָה הִרְגָתִי וְאוֹתָהּ הִחַיִּיתִי, "I would now have killed you and kept her alive." The Sages commented: The mind of his animal he did not understand, how could he claim to understand דַּעַת עֲלֵיוֹן? (BT AZ 4b). And they interpret the ass as saying, "You acknowledge you cannot slay me except if you have a sword in your hand, how do you intend to uproot an entire nation?" (*Bem. Rabbah*).

The ass' decision to yield to the superior power confronting it indicates that Balaam had an opportunity to learn an important lesson concerning his own decision to continue on his mission against G-d's wishes. Unfortunately, when Balaam is presented a message, he does not draw the appropriate conclusion so long as there is some way, any way, to construe it in a manner that is in harmony with his personal desires. This is sharply brought out in the two concluding verses of the parable, which are fused into the narrative proper.

After being granted the facility to see what had been happening, Balaam says to Hashem's angel: "I sinned, for I did not know you were blocking my way. Now if it is wrong in your eyes I will return" (Num. 22:34). Sadly, even after the overwhelming experience with the ass and Hashem's angel, he is still looking for a way to carry on! The angel's response allowing him to continue is expected and anticlimactic. Verse 35 concludes the parody while doing double duty by repeating the key words from verses 20-21 that immediately preceded it, thus also resuming the narrative.

### 3. Balaam and Balaam Compared

The Torah makes a point of the honor Balaam extended to Balaam upon the latter's arrival to Moab: Balaam went to greet him at the northern border, "to Ir Moab on the Arnon border, to the border's edge" (Num. 22:36). Together with this veneration, while convinced his nation is in great need of the

soothsayer's services, Balaq's ego and blatant haughtiness are also pointed out. The first utterance the narrative provides from him to Balaam is an expression of his pique at Balaam's not coming upon being summoned the first time! Did I not [previously] send for you? Why did you not come? Did you think I could not honor you enough? (One must bear in mind the four-hundred-mile journey.)

Balaam calmly responded: Here, I have come to you – but I can say nothing that G-d does not place in my mouth. The juxtaposition of Balaq's enormous pride with Balaam's external "modesty" and "religiosity" once again points to Balaam's failings. On the surface, Balaq is insensitive and crass while Balaam is respectful and refined; the latter's shortcomings are located deep within him. These include inordinate ambition for personal gain with self-deception in the religious sphere. The story is so artfully told that these failings can only be detected by reading between the lines; in this case, literally between the lines, as the text moves directly from his declaration of faithfulness to G-d to his attempt to circumvent His will with pagan-influenced practices.

#### 4. Pagan Vestiges

Balaam is depicted as using the Israelite name for G-d, Y-H-V-H, a term that connotes the revolutionary theological concepts of the Torah, and he is seemingly respectful of it. It may be that the Torah recognizes his "official" conception of the Deity, whatever term he may have employed in referring to Him, as compatible with the name "Hashem," and as articulating the basic elements of its connotations. However, he harbored within himself the vestiges of pagan practice.

When Balaq's first envoys approached him, they had קְסָמִים בְּיָדָם, articles of sorcery in their hands (Num. 22:7), in accord with Balaam's reputation of being associated with such practices. (In Joshua 13:22 he is referred to as "בְּלֵעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר הַקּוֹסִם" – "the sorcerer.") In his first two attempts at complying with Balaq's wishes he went off לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים, seeking omens (Num. 24:1), imagining that he could exploit them for his nefarious purpose, engaging in a practice prohibited to Israel (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10). As he

accompanied Balaq from site to site and called for constructing seven altars and sacrificing seven bulls and seven rams he manifested belief in a magical, mechanistic approach to G-d. It is a belief that G-d might look favorably on cursing from one location if not from another and that there is potency in certain mechanical acts. Balaq explicitly says, "I'll take you to another place, perhaps it will be fit in G-d's eyes that you curse them for me from there" (Num. 23:27). The single quotation the text provides of Balaam's words to G-d in his attempt to curse, are, "I have set up the seven altars and offered a bull and ram on each" (Num. 23: 4), as if such rites possess inherent efficacy.

All this is part of the fundamental flaw in Balaam's approach to the Deity, implied earlier in the text, namely, his belief that a skillful human being can maneuver around Him, manipulating Him to do what He might not have wanted to do or to allow such to happen. In paganism, men projected upon their gods characteristics associated with the realities of human society – as men could be persuaded or pressured to modify their thinking and renege on their commitments, so too could the gods. Those who rose above paganism did not necessarily fully eliminate all traces of their former beliefs.

The messages of Balaam's oracles proceed incrementally. The first one he received after meeting Balaq included confirmation of what he had been informed of before embarking on his expedition – that he cannot curse Israel for G-d does not want Israel to be cursed (Num. 23:8). Nevertheless, he tries again. In the second oracle, G-d addresses Balaam's religious orientation, teaching him that G-d is not like a man who can be made false to his promises or manipulated to change his mind. He is also informed that there is no נְחָשׁ or קְסָם (augury and sorcery) in Israel. When Balaam goes off for his third visionary encounter, the Torah indicates that he finally internalized at least part of the message and did not proceed as previously לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים. This time "the spirit of G-d" came upon him and he received a glorious prophecy about Israel and its future. In his fourth oracle – again received without consulting divination – he speaks of a future time when Israel, among its many successes, will crush Moab, meting

out to Balaq his just desserts for having brought the seer to curse Israel.

Some Sages considered Balaam as possessing the great capacity of Moshe Rabenu (Sifre, Deut. 34:10). The lesson is that even with the greatest potential his unrefined character led him to disaster. Subsequent to his failure to curse Israel he was involved in some manner in the insidious scheme to undermine Israel by enticing its men with the daughters of Midian, a matter connected to the idolatry at *Ba`al Pe`or*. We know about his playing some role in that matter through Moshe's mention of it (Num 31:16), but details are not provided. He was killed shortly thereafter in the war against Midian (Num. 31:8). In our coming study we plan to comment on the connection between the curse and the seduction.

## 5. Extra-Biblical Attestation

We now have some extra-Biblical information from an ancient inscription that reveals how Balaam was perceived in the ancient Near East. The inscription was discovered in 1967 at Deir Allah in the Jordan Valley, near the intersection of the Jabbok and Jordan Rivers, less than ten miles east of the latter. It was originally written on the plaster of a Temple wall or a monument that is dated to the eighth century BCE. As the plaster has fallen the inscription is not totally readable but a significant portion of it is.

It speaks of Balaam son of Be`or (his name is mentioned several times), using the Aramaic term "bar" for son, consistent with the Biblical statements that he derived from Aram (Num. 23:7; Deut. 23:5). As he is not introduced it appears that he was well-known. Referring to times long past, the inscription speaks of him as a prophet who receives oracles from the gods at night. The oracle that the inscription refers to was apparently granted to him in connection with a request that had been made of him by the king to seek a message from the gods. It states that Balaam received notice from the gods informing him of a coming famine, when darkness and wild creatures will overtake the land and the laws of nature will be overturned. This prompted him to fast and weep, beseeching the gods to reverse their decree, apparently successfully.

The inscription contains several word-usage parallels to the Biblical text and some descriptions reminiscent of imagery found in the visions of a number of prophets in Tanakh. It may be significant that two ancient Near Eastern fertility deities, Sheger and Ashtar appear in it, terms that in the Torah are used strictly for offspring, often as a pair referring to cattle and flock (Deut. 7:13; 28:4, 38, 51). Linking Balaam with them, in J. Milgrom's opinion, may reflect an association that helps explain the background of Moshe's accusation of Balaam having devised the scheme of seducing Israel's men to serve Pe`or (JPS Commentary on Numbers, Excurses 60).

## 6. Regarding a Talmudic Statement

In a discussion regarding authorship of the volumes that comprise the Tanakh, a *Baraita* cited in the Talmud states: "Moshe wrote his Book, *Parashat Balaam* and the Book of Job" (BT *B. Batra* 14b). Surely "his Book" refers to the Torah, but what is *Parashat Balaam*? It is surprising that it is not included in "his Book." Obviously, it is something well-known to the Sages of the *Baraita*, especially as everything else cited in that passage is part of Tanakh and as a *Parashat Balaam* is unattested elsewhere as an independent composition. It seems unlikely that it is an extra-Biblical work written by Moshe that the *Baraita* Sages possessed but was subsequently lost, that the Sages deemed appropriate to include in a discussion of the Books of Tanakh and about which the later Talmudic Sages do not comment. Also, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which basically reflect the national corpus as of the second century BCE do not contain any extra-Biblical work that can justify such a heading. Finally, the term *Parashat Balaam* points to our Torah portion, as many commentators on that Talmudic passage have suggested.

That *Parashat Balaam* is singled out from the rest of the Torah for the comment that Moshe wrote it may perhaps be because it is a self-contained unit embedded in the larger narrative as a sidelight, one which does not advance the action and does not directly connect with the preceding or following narratives. Of course it provides many lessons and serves important purposes, including revealing the thinking and doings of two prominent non-Israelites.

It seems that it may have been thought by some that Moshe did not write it. One may wonder: Can this theoretical possibility be reconciled with the Talmudic explanation concerning the verse, “Hashem’s word he spurned” (Num. 15:31), that the verse applies “even if one asserts the whole Torah is from heaven except for one verse that Moshe stated on his own” (BT *San.* 99a)?

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon addressed basically this question in relation to the view that Joshua wrote the last eight verses of the Torah (BT *B. Batra* 15a). Is that view in harmony with the above-quoted statement in tractate *Sanhedrin*? The rabbi stated: “In *Sanhedrin*, the statement’s emphasis is on the phrase ‘Moshe stated on his own.’ If one maintained that certain Torah verses were said by another prophet מפי הגבורה (lit.: “from the mouth of the Might”) acknowledging that the passage is מן השמים מפי הגבורה (from heaven, from the mouth of the Almighty), he would not be termed *apikoros*... [the latter term only applies] when one

maintained that it was stated from his own mind and on his own and that it is not *min hashamayim*” (Natan H<sup>o</sup>chmah Lishlomo, Heb. section p. 106.)\*\*

### Endnotes

\* In Deuteronomy 2:29 it appears that the descendants of Esav and the Moabites in `Ar had agreed to allow Israel passage with the understanding that they would pay for food and water, whereas in Deuteronomy 23:4-5 Moab is castigated for not having come forth with bread and water. In Yiftah’s message to the king of Ammon he cites the king of Moab as having refused to allow passage (Judg. 11:17).

\*\* For a recent discussion of this view and related matters see *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* by Marc B. Shapiro, Littman, 2004, p. 112.

©2008 Sephardic Institute