

31. Balaam

Num 22-24

This popular tale in Num 22-24 exists in two forms, now combined as one. Earlier than either are hostile memories of Balaam.

There was a real Balaam.¹ He could channel blessings and curses from several gods, including El Shaddai or “El the Almighty,” the god of Canaan, *but not Yahweh*. In Numbers, he is called by Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites, as El might perhaps have done, but he is “turned” by Yahweh and blesses them. His story in Num 22-24 is an intrusion; when it is over, Num 25 picks up where Num 21 had left off. This Balaam story exists *in two forms*, an earlier one inserted into a later one. Here is the later one.

Balak fears the approaching Hebrews, and sends for Balaam to curse them. Balaam refuses. Balak, desperate, asks again:

Num 22:15. And Balak sent yet again princes, more, and more honorable, than they, [16] and they came to Balaam, and said to him, Thus saith Balak the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me, [17] for I will promote thee unto very great honor and whatsoever thou sayest unto me I will do; come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people. [18] And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of Yahweh my God, to do less or more. [19] Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what more Yahweh will speak into me. [20] And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men are come to call thee, rise up, go with them; but only the word which I speak unto thee, that shalt thou do. [21] And Balaam rose up in the morning and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

[36] And when Balak heard that Balaam was come, he went out to meet him unto the City of Moab, which is on the border of the Arnon, which is in the utmost part of the border. And Balak said unto Balaam, Did I not earnestly send into thee to call thee? Wherefore camest thou not unto me? Am I not able indeed to promote thee to honor? And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to speak anything? The word that God putteth into my mouth, that shall I speak. And Balaam went with Balak, and they came unto Kiriath-huzoth. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent to Balaam, and to the princes that were with him. And it came to pass . . .

There is no problem. Balaam accepts this time because, in a dream received the night before Balak’s envoys must leave, Yahweh has *permitted him to do so* – on condition that he speak only what Yahweh tells him. And he disappoints Balak by repeatedly blessing the approaching Hebrews (Num 23:1-24:25).

¹For the Tell Deir inscription which documents him, see van Kooten et al **Balaam**.

So far so good. But between 22:21 and 22:36, we have an earlier version, in which Balaam sets out *without* getting Yahweh's permission:

Num 22:22. And God's anger was kindled against Balaam because he went, and the angel of Yahweh² placed himself in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. [23] And the ass saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand, and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field, and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way. [24] Then the angel of Yahweh stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. [25] And the ass saw the angel of Yahweh, and she lay down under Balaam, and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with his staff . . . [28] And Yahweh opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? [29] And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I had killed thee. [30] And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden all thy life long unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

[31] Then Yahweh opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand, and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. [32] And the angel of Yahweh said unto him, Wherefor hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? Behold, I am come forth for an adversary, because thy way is perverse before me; [33] and the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three times; unless she had turned aside from me, surely now I had even slain thee, and saved her alive. [34] And Balaam said unto the angel of Yahweh, I have sinned, for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. [35] And the angel of Yahweh said unto Balaam, Go with the men, but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

This is inconsistent. When did Yahweh permit Balaam to go to Balak? Before he left, or on the way? The latter is more dramatic, and with its scary invisible Angel of Yahweh, it is also nearer to popular style. The other is more dignified, and so probably later a later version. Why add the older version? Perhaps we see the hand of the Completist (p19). And the story *is* appealing: Balaam's talking ass is the one detail in Numbers that most readers remember, and the late Biblical writers were generally concerned to make their stories not only theologically correct, but attractive to readers.

What the Balaam story does *not* go on to tell is what the king of Moab did when Balaam's curse (turned by Yahweh into a blessing) failed to repel the foe. For that real-life outcome, we must wait until the story of the War with Moab is told all over again, in §55.

²Better "messenger." Some of these messengers, like the one who comforted Hagar in Gen 16:7, are very early; see again §3.

The Larger Story

There are also accounts of Balaam in which he is killed as an enemy. Later in Numbers, we have this:

Num 31:7. And they warred against Midian, as Yahweh commanded Moses, and they slew every male. [8] And they slew the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain: Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword. . . . [15] And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? [16] Behold, these cause the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against Yahweh in the matter of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of Yahweh . . .

And in Joshua, these:

Josh 13:20. . . . and Beth-peor, and the slopes of Pisgah, and Beth-jeshimoth, [21] and all the cities of the plain, and all the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, whom Moses smote with the chiefs of Midian, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, the princes of Sihon, that dwelt in the land. [22] Balaam also the son of Beor, the soothsayer, did the children of Israel slay with the sword among the rest of their slain.

Josh 24:9. Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel; and he sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse ou; [10] but I delivered you out of his hand.

In post-Exilic writings, echoes of Balaam continue to appear, as a ground of ongoing enmity against Balaam and the Moabites:

Deut 23:3 An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of Yahweh, even to the tenth generation shall none belonging to them enter into the assembly of Yahweh for ever . . . [4] . . . and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee. [5] Nevertheless Yahweh thy God would not hearken unto Balaam, but Yahweh thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because Yahweh thy God loved thee . . .

Neh 13:1. On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that an Ammonite and a Moabite should not enter into the assembly of God for ever, [2] because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, to curse them; howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.

Mic 6:5. O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him; remember from Shittim unto Gilgal, that ye may know the righteous acts of Yahweh.

Of these eight stories, the latest will be the Num 22-24 two, where Yahweh approves Balaam's mission. Of them, the talking ass version, where Yahweh is at first hostile, is earlier than the one where he gives his approval in advance. The Num 22-24 two are Yahwized remakes, included for their appeal as stories, of what had earlier been regarded as not only hostile, but as alien.

Here again, we see old material gradually made part of the Yahweh story, with that older form still persisting, alongside the later revised versions.