

*Exegetical and Theological Motives
in Early Christian Readings of the Balaam Narrative*

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The figure of Balaam appears first in a biblical narrative dedicated to him in Num 22-24. The story, in short, tells of Balak, King of Moab, who sends for Balaam to come and curse Israel. Following a vision from God, Balaam refuses the first delegation, and joins the second. On his way, an angel stops him with a sword. Balaam does not see the angel, but his jenny does and stops [**STOP. EXPLAIN THE USAGE OF TERM JENNY, FOLLOWING LEVINE**]. Balaam hits it, and the jenny miraculously speaks to him and rebukes him. Then Balaam proceeds to Balak, delivers four prophecies, most of which are blessings of Israel, and is sent back home by a disappointed Balak.

The text as we have it today is already very ambiguous in its relation to Balaam. This is a result of several editorial processes, as demonstrated by various scholars. Though some questions still remain open, we may assert the following: based on linguistic considerations, the earliest stratum of the narrative lies in the prophecies, or what is commonly misnamed as "Balaam's Oracles". The fact that the poetic stratum includes the name of Balaam and epithets that designate him as a prophet or a visionary, verifies that the origin of the Balaam tradition reflects a favorable view of him. The opposite view is reflected in the later addition of the tale of his jenny, discrediting him of any prophetic powers, and in several other traditions found in the Hebrew Bible, labeling him a magician (Joshua 13:22) and attributing to

him the sin of the Israelites in Peor (Num 31:16). These negative additions are not powerful enough to annul the effects of his prophecies which later commentators still wished to utilize. Hence the ambiguity regarding the character of Balaam: Was he a prophet of the Lord or a villain?

Another ambiguity, related to the former one but still distinguished from it, lies in the nature of Balaam's actual vocation or talent. If the prophecies are to be understood as the true word of God, then it follows that he is a true prophet, a prestigious ordination few humans have attained. However, the overt labeling of Balaam as a magician (in Joshua 13:22) points to a talent of a completely different nature with opposing religious implications.

Both ambiguities, regarding his character and his talent, do not derive only from the later additions. Once the ambiguity has been established, several passages which appeared to be neutral may be interpreted in different ways in order to highlight one view or the other regarding Balaam. Thus, for example, Numbers 22 has Balaam asking Balak's emissaries to spend the night a second time to see how God will respond to their request, even though God had already told Balaam that he is not to curse the Israelites. Thus, a very small action on Balaam's part, which could have been read as mere hospitality or politeness is taken by some later interpreters as a sign to his own eagerness to curse the Israelites. The same is true of Balak's repeated mentioning of the reparation Balaam would have been paid for his curse. At no point in the narrative does Balaam ask for money and he even goes as far as stating: "even if Balak gave me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more" (Num 22:18). Nevertheless, later interpreters took him to be greedy, wanting to curse Israel for Balak's payment.

Balaam's portrayal as a diviner rather than a prophet also has its background in the narrative found in Numbers. Verse 7 in chapter 22 describes the first envoy to Balaam leaving for the journey with "divinations in their hands". The meaning is unclear, as can be seen from the translation of NRSV which substitutes "fees of divination" for clarification. However, there is no reference to fees in the masoretic text, nor in the Septuagint (kai. ta. mantei.a evn tai/j cersi.n auvtw/n). What is important for our purposes is that already in this stratum of the tradition, Balaam is associated with magic (קסמים in Hebrew, mantei.a in the Greek).

Another ambiguous reference to Balaam and divination is in the scene before the third prophecy. Num. 24:1 states that "Balaam saw that he pleased the Lord to bless Israel, so he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens". This description implies that though the narrative did not specify it beforehand, the two preceding prophecies were involved with some attempt of Balaam to use omens or other forms of divination. Thus, the portrayal of Balaam as a figure between diviner and prophet is not only the result of his labeling in Joshua 13, but reflects the ambiguity grounded in his own narrative in the book of Numbers. This is a rare case in which two semantic fields of terms overlap in biblical narrative. Though several prophets in the Hebrew Bible could be said to practice divination, omens or oracles, they are never labeled as such. The terms reserved for them are "Prophet", "Visionary", "Seer", "Man of God" and "Man of the Spirit". The opposite array of terms is "Magician" or "Diviner", "Soothsayer", "Augur", "Sorcerer", "Caster of Spells" or "Consulter of Ghosts and Spirits".¹ The contrast is very clear, and again – not necessarily referring to the nature of the actions in question, but definitely in regard to the terms used.

¹ See Dt 18:10-11.

The ambiguities of Balaam's figure were a matter for various commentators. But in addition to the problems lying in the text, commentators also addressed problems pertaining to ideology and theology. Thus, we find for example in post-biblical Jewish writings a discomfort with the idea of a Prophet of God who does not belong to the people of Israel. The problems in the text and the fact that Balaam may have intended to curse Israel were obviously a concern for them, but the idea of a non-Israelite prophet only heightened their polemical tone. Thus we find Balaam to be the first in a list of false prophets from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q339), and several rabbinic midrashim label him as "Balaam the Wicked".

But labeling Balaam a false prophet brings new problems, especially for those who wish to maintain his prophecies as true. This, in a nutshell, is the exegetical problem that the Balaam figure poses to later interpreters, Jews and Christians alike.

The New Testament makes three explicit references to Balaam: 2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11 and Revelation 2:14. All three references are negative, and none relates to any special powers whether divinatory or prophetic. In Jude he is likened to Cain, the first murderer and to Korah, who contested Moses's leadership (Num 16). The association of Balaam with Korah may have been inspired by the cryptic appearance of their names in Genesis 36, as part of the list of Edomite kings.

The charges Balaam is accused of in the verses from the New Testament are the following: First, he was greedy, willing to curse the people of Israel for the sake of money. This is stated both in 2 Peter 2:15 as in Jude 11. This reading, as mentioned above, is derived from Balak's statements toward Balaam, not Balaam's statements or actions. Balaam makes it clear beforehand that the payment has no consequence to him, because he can only speak the words of God. After three prophecies in favor of Israel, Balak "fires" Balaam, telling him ironically: "Now be off with you! Go home! I

said I would reward you richly, but the Lord has denied you any reward" (Num 24:11). This is to be read ironically because Balak doesn't seem to understand the nature of Balaam's prophetic experience. In more than one instance he states that Balaam possesses the power of cursing and blessing people. Thus, when Balak says to Balaam "the Lord has denied you any reward", he is actually blaming Balaam for what he perceives to be Balaam's reluctance to curse Israel. Considering that this is the final exchange of words between Balak and Balaam, it is surprising that Jude and 2 Peter raise once more the claim of his greediness. Of course, one may argue for a differentiation between Balaam's intent and the eventual outcome. Such a reading would suggest that Balaam did indeed come in order to curse Israel, hoping to receive a generous compensation from Balak, and the Lord would not allow him to utter those words. Thus, despite the fact that he didn't receive the money, Balaam's greediness would still be an aspect of his character. In relation to this point it is also worth mentioning that the motif of greediness and of wrongdoing for the love of wages, evokes a parallel between Balaam and the portrayal of Judas in the Gospel of Matthew. Like the figure of Balaam in Jude and 2 Peter, we see here a villain who betrays those favored by God for the love of money, and eventually does not succeed in gaining or keeping the money (Mt. 27:3).

An important aspect in analyzing the relation to Balaam in Jude and 2 Peter is the fact the 2 Peter is borrowing from Jude. As a literary and rhetorical device, 2 Peter ignores Cain and Korah and focuses only on Balaam, emphasizing his avarice as well as his fall. The tone of irony depicting the rebuke from a "speechless donkey" is also found in rabbinic literature: "woe to the Day of Judgment! Woe to the Day of Rebuke! Balaam was the wisest of the gentiles and could not respond to the rebuke of his

jenny."² The choice of Balaam alone might be to stress the fact that 2 Peter is arguing against "false prophets", or "false teachers" as they are called in the opening of the chapter,³ people who claim they have prophecy when actually they do not.⁴

Another interesting feature in the passage from 2 Peter is the rephrasing of the tale of the Jenny. Two points are noteworthy here. First of all, the mere fact that it is mentioned is interesting, as several authors who were influenced by the Greco-Roman world felt uneasy with this story. Both Josephus and Philo reflect discomfort regarding this part of the story. Philo obscures the wording or could be said to even completely omit the fact the jenny spoke. He states that "the animal showed a superior power of sight to him",⁵ and then has the rest of the dialogue between Balaam and the angel, on which Philo is also obscure, saying it was "evidently a divine vision".⁶ Josephus does tell the story of the jenny speaking, but concludes that "On this narrative readers are free to think what they please",⁷ implying that it is dubious.

In light of such comments, it is therefore somewhat surprising that the author of 2 Peter has no reservations in stating that "a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice". Read against the writings of Josephus and Philo, it manifests a different attitude to the idea of breaking laws of nature, with no sign of apologetics when doing so. This is in line with some Early Christians' loose commitment to the Hellenic view of the world when in conflict with that of their scripture and the Hebrew Scriptures. [As can be seen in relation to the idea of resurrection, Justin's Dialogue with Trypho].

² *Gen. Rab.* 93.

³ Note that Revelation 2:14 also speaks of Balaam as a teacher (cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 63), rebuking those who hold the teaching of Balaam (th.n didach.n Balaam). Aune, *Revelation*, 185-6, notes that these are the earliest references to sinners as disciples of Balaam.

⁴ Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 210-216; Reicke, *Epistles*, 169-70. See also H. C. C. Cavallin, "The False Teachers of 2 Peter as Pseudo-Prophets," *NT* 21,3 (1979): 263-70.

⁵ Philo, *De Vit. Mos.* 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Josephus, *Ant.* 4.158. Cf. Feldman 1998, p. 128.

The other point of interest in 2 Peter 2:15 is the designation of Balaam as a prophet. This verse preserves the ambiguity of the Balaam narrative by calling him "prophet" on the one hand, but accusing him of "love of wages" on the other.

The third text, Revelation 2:14, accuses Balaam of suggesting to Balak the plan of seducing the Israelites to sin with the Moabite women. The biblical narrative at this point does not suggest anything of the sort. Balaam and Balak seem to part on an angry tone without saying a word to each other, leaving no room for such a consultation. Furthermore, the sin of the Israelites is not presented as a result of a devised plan, but as a regrettable course of events. However, this comment in Revelation is based on another passage from the Hebrew Bible, Num 31:16, where Balaam's consultation to Balak is implied though the full argument is not made. In Revelation the accusation becomes more explicit. The women of Moab not only seduced Israel to fornication, but also to endorse sacrifices to idols. This, again, is in opposition to the basic narrative of Balaam in Num 22-24, where all sacrifices are offered to YHWH.

To sum up the discussion of Balaam in the New Testament, we may state the following: none of the texts refers to him as a diviner, and none relates to him as a legitimate prophet of God. 2 Peter bears some ambiguity regarding his character, but the overall tone is negative there, too. The attitude to Balaam follows the Balaam narrative in the book of Numbers, and is aware of his portrayal overall in other sources of the Bible. In addition to the choice of interpretation based on the Hebrew Bible, there is also a clear appropriation of Christian motifs incorporated in Balaam.

In the apocryphal work of the Acts of Thomas we find a story that is explicitly patterned after Balaam.⁸ A "colt of a she-ass" approaches Thomas as he is speaking to the crowd, and opens its mouth speaking in praise of Jesus. Thomas is too astonished to speak, and the colt tells him: "I am of that stock that served Balaam, and thy lord also and teacher sat upon one that appertained unto me by race. And I also have now been sent to give thee rest by thy sitting upon me".⁹ Thus the biblical addition of the tale of the jenny intended to mock Balaam is employed here in a clear positive sense. The comparison of Balaam to Jesus seems to reflect a favorable view of Balaam, and certainly shows that the tale of the jenny is not conceived of as being negative.

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, on the other hand, there is a clear negative undertone with the mere mention of the jenny. A midrash in Genesis Rabbah (which I just quoted) stresses the contrast between Balaam who was considered clever among the nations and couldn't respond properly to his own jenny,¹⁰ and the Aramaic rendition of the Balaam narrative found in Targum pseudo-Jonathan has the jenny accuse Balaam of sexual intercourse with it.

The Acts of Thomas doesn't consider the tale of the jenny lowly at all. The fact that Jesus rode a donkey when entering Jerusalem makes the donkey a commendable animal, a point that isn't found in Jewish tradition. This motif is also found in Origen's likening of Balaam to the Scribes and Pharisees of the Jews, riding and oppressing the Donkey, the favored underdog for Origen: "The angel...saved the ass which saw and revered him... The ass came led by the disciples, and where

⁸ *Acts of Thomas*. The Fourth Act (concerning the colt), 39-40. (based on M.R. James' translation. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924. Retrieved from: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actstthomas.html>

⁹ Ibid. 40.

¹⁰ Gen. Rabbah 93: אוי לנו מיום דין, אוי לנו מיום תוכחה, בלעם חכם הגוים היה ולא יכול לעמוד בתוכחתו של אתונו

previously sat Balaam, desirous of wealth, now sits Jesus".¹¹ In the "lost fragments" of Irenaeus, we read that: "

The ass was the type of the body of Christ, upon whom all men, resting from their labours, are borne as in a chariot. For the Saviour has taken up the burden of our sins. Now the angel who appeared to Balaam was the Word Himself; and in His hand He held a sword, to indicate the power which He had from above".¹²

Origen's main interest in relation to Balaam is determining whether he was a true prophet or not. This is important not only in relation to the questions that arise from the biblical narrative, but also in light of the fact that some of Balaam's prophecies were especially useful to the Christian movement.

Tertullian, and other Christian authors as well, solve this problem by dissociating the prophecies from Balaam. Balaam is only a tool:

The prophet Balaam, in Numbers, when sent forth by king Balak to curse Israel, with whom he was commencing war, was at the same moment(12) filled with the Spirit. Instead of the curse which he was come to pronounce, he uttered the blessing which the Spirit at that very hour inspired him with; having previously declared to the king's messengers, and then to the king himself, that he could only speak forth that which God should put into his mouth.¹³

Thus, the prophecies are true, being the word of God, but Balaam is still the false prophet, mocked by his jenny, by Balak, and by God.

Origen offers a different solution. The clearest example for a prophecy of Balaam significant to Christianity is found in Num 24:17: "A star shall come out of

¹¹ Origen, *Homily on Numbers* 14,4. Cf. Baskin 1983 (in *VC*), pp. 28-9 on this.

¹² Irenaeus, *Fragments*, xxi. Printed in W. Wigan Harvey (ed). *Sancti Irenaei. Libros quinque adversus Haereses*. Cantabrigiae: Typis academicis, 1857. II: 490.

¹³ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*. Book iv, chapter 28.

Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel". This verse was taken to be both about Jesus himself,¹⁴ but also of the star that foretold his birth (Mt. 2:2). According to Origen the Magi had a tradition of Balaam's prophecy, "inasmuch as Balaam was celebrated for such predictions",¹⁵ and that this was how they recognized the star as a sign of the birth of Jesus.¹⁶ In what would seem to be a later tradition, he goes even further to suggest that the Magi were biological descendants of Balaam:

From the fact that Balaam says "Let my seed be as the seed of the righteous," we can discern that these Magi who came from the East to be the first to adore Jesus are seen to be from his seed, whether through the succession of his seed, or through the disciples of his tradition.¹⁷

Thus, Origen explains how Balaam, who began as a diviner and as a caster of spells, could have delivered such significant prophecies. First of all, he was a tool by the Lord to convey these prophecies. On its own, it is not enough according to Origen. Had nothing else happened, the prophecy would have remained something technical, with Balaam being merely a vessel and "no one should be extolled because he prophesies",¹⁸ to quote Origen once more. However, this "technical" experience of prophesying made Balaam repent, according to Origen, and this led to his prayer that his seed be like the seed of Israel, and for his prayer to be fulfilled through the Magi.

This interpretation, it is interesting to note, is in stark contrast to the rabbinic tradition, according to which Balaam began as a prophet but was degraded to a magician.¹⁹ The rabbinic motive for such a claim is clear: since God is said to have spoken to Balaam, he can be nothing other than a prophet. But since Num 31 and Josh 13 tell of Balaam being slaughtered and accuse him of being responsible for the sin at

¹⁴ See, for example, Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, book iv.

¹⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus*. Chap. LX.

¹⁶ Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, book ix, chap. 1.

¹⁷ Origen, *Homily on Numbers* 15,4. Cf. Baskin 1983 (in VC), pp. 30 on this.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 15,1.

¹⁹ b. San 106a.

Peor (Num 25), he cannot be a true prophet of God. Besides the exegetical benefit, there is also a strong ideological motive: by offering this reading, the rabbis are disowning prophecy from the only non-Israelite said to prophesy in the Pentateuch.

Origen goes in the opposite direction, since his motives are the opposite. His portrayal of Balaam stresses that prophecy, or any relation with God for that matter, is not restricted to the Jews, but is universal. He also emphasizes the idea of repentance and salvation. Balaam began wicked, intending to curse Israel for money, but because of his repentance, rather late in the narrative, he gains the stature of the prophet, and his descendants will have the privilege of being associated with the birth of Jesus. He also seems to solve the ambiguity of the biblical narrative with this solution. His previous chastising of Balaam for his greediness is still in place, and is not in opposition with the fact that Balaam did not receive the money, because this was part of his repentance. The ambiguity of a negative side of someone who delivered such important prophecies is also clarified, and furthermore, serves to convey a theological message on repentance which goes far beyond the interpretation of the story of Balaam.

In addition to the theological and exegetical motives of Origen's interpretation, there is perhaps also a polemical motivation that might be discerned in an undertone. Origen lived in early Byzantine Palestine, in the town of Caesarea. In the past few decades, more and more scholars have suggested that Origen was in contact with his contemporary rabbis, and that Jewish traditions are reflected in his writings.²⁰ This

²⁰ The earliest reference to this issue is probably in E.E. Urbach, "Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories," *Tarbiz* 25,3 (1956).. Schäfer points out to Urbach's implication. See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 109, 180 n. 51. For other early references to the connection of Origen with rabbis see Braverman, "Balaam in Rabbinic and Early Christian Traditions"; David Daube, "Origen and the Punishment of Adultery in Jewish Law," *Studia Patristica* 2 (TUGAL 64; 1957): 109-113; Marc Hirshman, "Learning as Speech.

does not mean that he accepted those traditions, but that he was aware of them and employed them or argued against them as suited his purposes.

In his recent book, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Peter Schäfer examines a midrash in the Talmud, that tells of Balaam's punishment in hell, which is to boil in semen.²¹ Schäfer notes that the punishment is in a framework of measure for measure, correlating with what the rabbis would have thought to be one of Balaam's sins, his advice to Balak to seduce Israel to fornication.

The word for "semen" used in this midrash is זרע (*zera'*), the same word that appears in Balaam's prophecy (Num 24:7) which Origen employs for his interpretation on Balaam's seed being the Magi. Since Origen is quoting from the Septuagint, it is no surprise that the Greek word he is using to describe Balaam's seed – *σπερματόζωον* – is also the Septuagint's equivalent for the biblical *zera'*.

It is possible, though in no way indisputable, that Origen's interpretation linking Balaam with the Magi, carries with it a polemic with this Jewish tradition. If this is the case, Origen is playing with the motif of seed or semen, to cleanse the figure of Balaam and to accept whole-heartedly his equation with Jesus.

In the midrash, Balaam is equated with Jesus as the greatest sinners who suffer eternally for their transgressions against Israel. Origen would then be replying that not

Tosefta Peah in Light of Plotinus and Origen," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* (ed. Howard Kreisel; Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006); idem., "Protocol for Prayer: Origen, the Rabbis, and the Greco-Roman Milieu," in *Essays on Hebrew Literature in Honor of Avraham Holtz* (ed. Zvia Ben-Yosef Ginor; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 3-14; Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs. A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," *HTR* 73,3-4 (1980): 567-95.

²¹ *b. Git 57a*. See Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 84-94. Cf. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb. Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 55-56.

only does he accept the association of Balaam with Jesus, he will even make a further link, associating him with the nativity story.

While this undertone remains somewhat open for speculation, there's one fact that might prove that this is the right direction of reading this passage: Origen's interpretation offers a reading according to which Num 24:7 is speaking of Balaam himself, of his seed and his fate. This is clearly not the message of the prophecy, which refers to Israel. Another talmudic midrash associates this verse with Israel, claiming that from the blessings one may reconstruct the original curses Balaam was planning to curse.²² The fact the Origen takes a verse said on Israel and "robs" it to adorn Balaam with it, is a proof that his intentions are polemical. If so, we may be willing to go a step further to claim that his polemics are not coincidentally employing the motif of *spe, rmatoj*.

²² *b. San 105b*. See more on the interpretations of this verse in Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 159-61.