

Balaam and his Donkey

Numbers 22-24 tells the story of a pagan king (Balak) who commissions a magician (Balaam) to curse the people of Israel. Despite his best efforts, Balaam is unable to curse Israel. The power of the Lord's protection is such that the would-be curses are converted to blessings. The story's conclusion is anticipated in an episode in chapter 22 where, travelling along the road, Balaam is confronted by an angel and by a talking donkey.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" (Numbers 22:27-28)

We may be surprised to find a talking donkey here. After all, this is holy Scripture not Aesop's fables! The Jewish sages of old remind us that every word of Scripture has a divine purpose in directing our hearts and minds to the Lord. Read chapter 22, in the context of Balaam's story, and prayerfully ponder: how is God speaking to me through this unusual story? What purpose does a talking donkey serve in this sacred text?

Perhaps you noticed that not only is the donkey given a voice (a voice of protest), it is also given enhanced sight. Three times the text says "*the donkey saw the angel of the Lord*" (22:23,25,27) although it is not until verse 31 that "*the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand.*" In the Bible, references to 'seeing' and 'speaking' often convey more than a physical-sensory action. Why is the narrative interrupted by this seemingly ridiculous image of a donkey who sees and speaks in ways that his human master cannot?

Turning to traditional Jewish sources we find this comment in Midrash Rabbah:

And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass. This was done to make known to him that the mouth

and tongue are in the Lord's power and that if he wished to curse his mouth was in His power... And the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam. But had he been blind? No; it merely served to inform him that the eye also is in His power.¹

From King Balak's words in 22:6 we know that in the pagan world Balaam is esteemed as a sorcerer with immense powers to impart blessings and curses as he wills. Yet in this story a mere donkey, miraculously given speech and the capacity to see angels, is able to challenge Balaam who is unseeing and brought to silence (v.30). Communicated here, say the sages, is the Torah's scorn for human arrogance that would esteem human wisdom over the sovereignty of the Creator. Through Balaam's dialogue with a beast, the reader is reminded that a human being's wisdom, power, eyes and tongue are subject to the authority of the Lord God who is the unique source of blessing, and to whom is entrusted the soul of every living thing.²

The Midrash quoted offers one interpretation of the donkey's significance. What other reflections and questions arose as you pondered this text? You may like to consider also 'donkey' characters in non-biblical literature (e.g., Shakespeare, CS Lewis).

Balaam in the Bible

Balaam's story is told in the Book of Numbers 22:1—24:25. He is also mentioned in Numbers 31:8,16; Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 24:9-10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; 2 Peter 2:15-16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14.

1. Numbers Rabbah 20:14-15.
2. See Leibowitz, 302.

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol. 2 (London/New York: Soncino Press, 1983); Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2000); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York). Scripture: NRSV.

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