

Balaam: Prophet or Sorcerer?

On their way to the promised land the Israelites encounter one obstacle after another: hunger, thirst, rebellion, war. Here we explore the story of how the Israelites are threatened by a Moab king (Balak) who employs a seer (Balaam) to curse his enemy, Israel. It is a colourful story, full of intriguing questions and complete with a talking donkey! We will leave the donkey aside for now and focus on Balaam and his futile attempts to curse Israel (see chapters 23 and 24).

Balaam: *“Rise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, O son of Zippor...”* (Numbers 23:18).

Jeremiah: *“Now the word of the Lord came to me saying...”* (Jeremiah 1:1).

Balak, king of Moab, engages Balaam to curse the Israelites. Yet each attempt by Balaam results in a blessing! The Jewish sages, reflecting on this text over the centuries, are fascinated by the question of the authenticity of Balaam, the seer. Was Balaam God’s chosen prophet, or a sorcerer? Why do you think he was suspect in the sages’ eyes?

To begin with, let’s compare Balaam’s oracles to the words of the Hebrew prophets. Jeremiah is quoted above. Read further into Jeremiah 1. Read too, the words below of Ezekiel and Hosea. What do you notice?

“The word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel...” (Ezekiel 1:3).

“The word of the Lord came to Hosea” (Hosea 1:1).

Like the sages, you will note an important contrast. Whereas the Hebrew prophets consistently acknowledge divine authority (*“Thus says the Lord”*) Balaam announces *himself* and his own powers. Says Ramban,¹ Balaam appears to run after prophecy, building seven sacrificial altars in an attempt to ‘force’ divine power from heaven, to shape the divine will for mortal purposes. By contrast, the Hebrew prophets don’t seek the job of prophet; rather they are sought out by God, and some, out of humility, need to be

coaxed into the role. Balaam is not filled with prophecy; rather, he is full of himself! Do you agree with this appraisal? Why or why not?

Despite their criticisms, the sages couldn’t ignore the fact that Balaam’s oracles work for the good of Israel. In fact, one of his phrases has found its way into contemporary Jewish prayer books: *‘How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel’* (Numbers 24:5).

And how are we to interpret 24:2 (*“Then the spirit of God came upon him”*) in Balaam’s third oracle? Rashbam holds that a development has taken place, taking note of 24:1 which tells us that at this point Balaam stopped seeking omens ‘but set his face towards the wilderness,’ a scene that suggests a new openness and humility before God. Hirsch is more explicit, saying that Balaam comes to the realisation that he cannot control God through sorcery. His third blessing, then, takes on a whole new quality, no longer awkwardly accomplished but freely flowing on the breath of unrestrained spirit-filled prophecy.

Are you convinced? Not all the sages are! Treasure the complex issues that emerge in this fascinating debate. In the light of this biblical story reflect on your faith journey and recall:

- A time when you attempted to ‘control’ God;
- A turning point when you began to trust God more deeply;
- A time when you had to discern between a true and false ‘prophecy’/message.
- How does the story of Balaam speak to you? •

1. The sages/commentators named here: Ramban (13th c), Rashbam (12th c), Hirsch (19th c), quoted in Leibowitz, 282-289.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.

© Teresa Pirola, 2012. lightoftorah.net Non-commercial reproduction permitted with acknowledgement of website.