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BALAAM AND ABRAHAM

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I. *Introduction*

The Tale of Balaam's Ass (Num. xxii 22-35), today an episode within the Balaam Narrative (Num. xxii 2-xxiv 25), has long been considered part of the J-source's version of Balaam's journey to Moab and his attempts to curse Israel at the behest of King Balak.[1] Several recent examinations of the Balaam Narrative have tended to the conclusion that the Tale is a distinct literary entity, alien to the original Balaam Narrative and oracles as a whole—in other words, an interpolation.[2] The main point of disagreement between these studies lies in the origin ascribed to the Tale: while Gross and Sturdy regard it as an adaptation of an originally independent folktale,[3] Rofé views it as a piece specially composed to fit into the existing Balaam Narrative. The Tale of Balaam's Ass is a "burlesque" of Balaam as presented in the main Balaam Narrative, and reflects the late, hostile evaluation of Balaam common to other biblical passages (with the exception of Micah vi 5).[4]

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[1] See, e.g., G. B. Gray, *Numbers* (Edinburgh, 1903), pp. 307-22. For a convenient survey and critique of scholarship in the last 100 years, see A. Rofé, *The Book of Balaam* (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 10-30 (Hebrew).

[2] H. Rouillard, "L'ânesse de Balaam", *RB* 87 (1980), pp. 19-35, 238-9; W. Gross, *Bileam* (München, 1974), pp. 333-69; Rofé, pp. 49-57, followed by Y. Zakovitz, *For Three...and for Four* 1 (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 101-9 (Hebrew); J. Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 157, 165. This position was already taken a century ago by M. M. Kalisch, *Bible Studies*, Part I: *The Prophecies of Balaam* (London, 1887), pp. 41, 126-7; and later reached independently by P. Volz, "Bemerkung von A. von Gall, 'Zusammensetzung und Herkunft der Bileam-Perikope in Num 22-24', Giessen, 1900", *TLZ* 26 (1901), pp. 383-5; and M. Löhr, "Bileam, Num 22,2-24,25", *AfO* 4 (1927), pp. 88-9. Mainstream biblical scholarship seems to have ignored these scholars.

[3] Gross, p. 368; Sturdy, pp. 157, 165.

[4] Rofé, pp. 45-52. Rouillard, who, unlike the other scholars mentioned in n. 2, accepts the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis for the Balaam Narrative as a whole, suggests that the Tale may belong to a late stratum of J, born in reaction to the earlier J-version of the Balaam Narrative; see Rouillard, p. 239.

The present study will go a step further and demonstrate that this parody of Balaam was purposely modelled so as to evoke comparison, and at the same time contrast, with the Binding of Isaac (Akedah, Gen. xxii 1-19). The Tale can in fact be considered a "reflection story" of the Akedah.

A reflection story, as defined by Zakovitz, is one in which can be discerned the outlines of another narrative, but in inverse form, as one's reflection in the mirror. The "reflected" character and his actions are perceived as the antithesis of the original figure and his actions. The reader, appreciating the affinity between the original and its reflection, gains new insights in evaluating the characters—both the original and the invert—and their actions.[5]

In defining the Tale of Balaam's Ass as a reflection story of the Binding of Isaac, I am only following in the footsteps of the Rabbis, who detected both the similarity and the inverse relationship of the two narratives.

II. *Setting, Characters and Plot*

A. The setting of both tales is a journey by ass. But while Abraham sets out for Mt Moriah in obedience to God's command, Balaam saddles up for Moab in opposition to the divine will: "God's anger was kindled because he went" (Num. xxii 22). The Rabbis, commenting on both Gen. xxii 3 and Num. xxii 21, took repeated notice of this inverse relationship, understanding these verses as evidence of zeal on the part of both figures: that of Abraham, born out of love of God, and that of Balaam, arising from hatred of Israel.[6]

B. In both narratives an angel reveals himself to the protagonist at the climax of the plot (Gen. xxii 11; Num. xxii 31).[7] Angels are

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However, she provides no evidence to support this proposal. On the figure of Balaam in later biblical tradition, see J. Liver, "The Figure of Balaam in Biblical Tradition", *Eretz-Israel* 3 (1954), pp. 97-100 (Hebrew).

[5] Y. Zakovitz, "Reflection Story—Another Dimension of the Evaluation of Characters in Biblical Narrative", *Tarbiẓ* 54/2 (1985), pp. 165-76 (Hebrew, with English summary); see pp. 165-6 and the English summary for the definition of this literary device.

[6] B. Sanhedrin 105b; Gen. Rabbah 55. 8; Num. Rabbah 20. 12.

[7] On the literary structure of the Akedah, see G. W. Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith", *Interpretation* 27 (1973), pp. 389-400; on that of the Tale, see Gross (n. 2). pp. 333-69; Zakovitz (n. 2), pp. 100-9.

certainly not unusual in the Bible. But, as the Rabbis saw, it is only in these two instances that an angel reverses God's intention as it has previously appeared to the protagonist (Num. Rabbah 20.15). Abraham, ordered to slaughter Isaac (Gen. xxii 2), is now told to stay his hand (*v.* 12). God had sent an angel to withstand Balaam (Num. xxii 22, 32), and Balaam, belatedly realizing this, understands that he is to return home (*v.* 34). But instead, the angel allows him to go on to Moab (*v.* 35). Here too there is an inversion, which can best be expressed by the following formulae: Abraham: action > inaction; Balaam: inaction > action.

C. Both Abraham and Balaam are "prophets".[8] Though the only title ever given Balaam is *qōsēm*, "diviner", and this only in later biblical tradition (Josh. xiii 22), his mantic powers are obvious from his oracles.[9] Abraham is expressly called *nābī'*, "prophet", in Gen. xx 7, as are all the Patriarchs in Ps. cv 15. "Later periods naturally thought of Abraham by analogy with their own contemporary charismatic officials", writes G. von Rad,[10] and the author of Num. xxii 22-35 was no exception. So it would not have seemed unnatural to him to compare the heathen seer to the Israelite Patriarch. And, in line with the author's aim of negating the existence of heathen prophecy (see Rofé [n. 1], pp. 53-4), Balaam comes off poorly by comparison to Abraham: acting against, and not in accordance with, God's will, Balaam is checked by an angel. But, unlike Abraham, Balaam is unable to detect the presence of that angel. Only after an argument with his ass is he allowed to see the angel and perceive his folly.

D. The donkey in the Binding of Isaac is a dumb beast, left behind with the servants before the ascent to Mt Moriah. It is a mere prop, dispensed with when no longer needed. Abraham is the main figure, arousing our compassion by his poignant compliance with God's command. In the Tale of Balaam's Ass, the she-ass herself is a major character, possessing will and intelligence, able to discern divine revelation, evoking our sympathy by her suffering and protestation of loyalty. By comparison, Balaam is the "dumb

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[8] My thanks are due to Professor Sarah Japhet for calling my attention to this point.

[9] The Rabbis do call Balaam *nābī'*, "prophet"; see Baba Bathra 15b; Num. Rabbah 20. 1.

[10] *Genesis* (revised edn, London, 1972), pp. 228-9 = *Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis* (5th edn, Göttingen, 1958), p. 195.

beast'', who, through his blindness, insensitivity and cruelty, arouses our scorn and ridicule.

III. *Stylistic Devices*

A. *Num. xxii 21a // Gen. xxii 3aαβ*

Num. xxii 21 is not, properly speaking, part of the Tale of Balaam's Ass. It belongs to the original Balaam Narrative, forming the conclusion to one of its episodes. Balaam, having received divine permission to accompany the second delegation of Moabite dignitaries (Num. xxii 20), saddles his ass and rides off with them. Transfer or removal of characters is a well-known device for concluding biblical narratives and episodes.[11]

The author of the Tale, however, has used this verse as a ''hinge'' to which his interpolated narrative is attached and upon which it revolves. Rofé has pointed out the stylistic features linking the Tale with *v.* 21 and establishing it as a late interpolation: (1) the ''resumptive repetition'' of *vv.* 20-1 in *v.* 35 and (2) what Rofé terms ''related expansion''. *V.* 22aα. ''But God's anger was kindled *because he went* (*kī hōlēk hū*)'', both refers back to and expands *v.* 21b, ''*and he went* (*wayyēlek*) with the princes of Moab''.[12]

What caused the author of the Tale to append it after *v.* 21? And what gave him the idea of writing a reflection story of the Binding of Isaac? It was the remarkable similarity, noted by the Rabbis (see n. 6), between Num. xxii 21a and Gen. xxii 3aα.

Num. xxii 21a: And Balaam rose (*wayyāqom*) in the morning and saddled his ass (*ʾatōnō*).

Gen. xxii 3aα: And Abraham rose early (*wayyaškēm*) in the morning and saddled his ass (*ḥamōrō*).

Now the expression *wayyaškēm/wayyaškīmū babbōqer*, ''and he/they rose early in the morning'', is common in biblical narrative.[13] The related *wayyāqom/wayyāqūmū babbōqer*, ''and he/they rose in the morning'', though considerably less common, still occurs several

[11] See, e.g., Gen. xviii 33; 1 Sam. xxiv 23; 2 Sam. xv 37, xvii 23.

[12] Rofé, pp. 55-7. He gives additional examples of 'related expansion'' on p. 56.

[13] See, e.g., Gen. xix 27, xx 8; Ex. xxiv 4, xxxiv 4; Num. xiv 40; Josh. iii 1. Judg. vi 28; 1 Sam. xv 12; 2 Kings iii 22; 2 Chr. xx 20.

times,[14] and may be considered a stylistic variant of the former expression. The idioms *ḥābaš ḥᵃmōr/ʾātōn*, "saddle an ass/a (she-) ass", are likewise used repeatedly.[15] But the expressions for rising (early) in the morning and saddling a (she-)ass appear in tandem only in the verses under discussion.

The author of Num. xxii 22-35, being well acquainted with the Hebrew literature of his day and its stylistic devices, and knowing a version of the Binding of Isaac in which Gen. xxii 3 appeared in its present form, would have been struck by the unique similarity between the two verses, as were the Rabbis in a later period. Inspired by this, and fueled by his hostility towards Balaam, he resolved to compose a tale belittling Balaam, and attached it here.

B. *Num. xxii 22b // Gen. xxii 3aβγ*

Ignoring for a moment the similarities and inverse relationship in setting, characters and plot, one could claim that the above argument alone is insufficient to prove a literary relationship between the two narratives. After all, the resemblance of Num. xxii 21a to Gen. xxii 3aαβ is most probably due to chance.[16] Our case is considerably strengthened when we note that each of the two protagonists is accompanied by two manservants:

Num. xxii 22b: and he was riding on his ass and his two servants (were) with him (*ʿimmō*).

Gen. xxii 3aβγ: and he saddled his ass and he took his two servants with him (*ʾittō*).

Other eminent personages in the Bible have a retinue of two: Abimelech is accompanied by two senior officials on his visit to Isaac in Beer-sheba (Gen. xxvi 26). Saul steals off to the Witch of Endor with two of his men (1 Sam. xxviii 8). The Ugaritic deity

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[14] Gen. xxiv 54; Num. xxii 13, 21; Judg. xix 27, xx 19; 2 Sam. xxiv 11. The verb *qām* is more common in expressions containing words denoting parts of the night: *layᵉlāh*, Gen. xxii 23; Ex. xii 30; Judg. ix 34; 1 Sam. xxviii 25; 2 Kings vii 12; *baḥᵃṣī hallayᵉlāh*, Judg. xvi 3; *bᵉtōk hallayᵉlāh*, 1 Kings iii 20; *bᵉʿōd layᵉlāh*, Prov. xxxi 13; *bannešep*, 2 Kings vii 5.

[15] Gen. xxii 3; Num. xxii 21; Judg. xix 10; 2 Sam. xvi 1, xvii 23, xix 27; 1 Kings ii 40, xiii 13, 23, 27; 2 Kings iv 24.

[16] The Rabbis, however, view the similarity as intentional, with the goal of underscoring the difference between Balaam and Abraham; see above, p.2 and n. 6.

Baal has a retinue of two messengers,[17] indicating that this is a literary convention that did not originate in Israel. So the fact that Balaam and Abraham are likewise accompanied by two manservants would seem at first glance to be unremarkable.[18] However, comparison of the formulation of Num. xxii 22b and Gen. xxii 3a reveals both the uniqueness of the former and its dependence on the latter.

In Gen. xxii 3 there is a long string of verbs in the imperfect: Abraham "rose early", "saddled" up, "took" the two servants and Isaac, "chopped" wood, "rose" and "went". This staccato series of actions may serve to heighten the rhythm of the narrative,[19] pushing Abraham's unspoken thoughts into the background.[20] Abraham's alacrity and zeal in carrying out the preparations for his heartbreaking task are made manifest.[21]

The manservants appear again at two junctures in the narrative—once, when Abraham takes leave of them and goes on alone with Isaac to the place of sacrifice (Gen. xxii 5-6); and again, when, his ordeal over, he returns to them (*v.* 19).[22] The two servants are woven into the warp of the language and the woof of the plot of the narrative, though they take no part in the main proceedings.[23]

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[17] *UT* 51 (*CTA* 4) vii 54, viii 47; 67 (*CTA* 5) i 12; *ʿnt* (*CTA* 3) iii 33.

[18] The Rabbis learn a rule of proper conduct from the examples of Abraham, Balaam and Saul: when a prominent person goes on a journey, two people should attend to him; see Gen. Rabbah 55. 8; Num. Rabbah 20. 13. What we consider today to be literary convention took on for the Rabbis actual significance.

[19] On this device, see D. B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph, SVT* 20 (Leiden, 1970), p. 76.

[20] Z. Adar, *The Biblical Narrative* (Jerusalem, 1959), p. 42.

[21] This was well understood by the Rabbis; see p. 2 above and the references of n. 6.

[22] "The young men stop at the borderline of normal human experience, while Abraham crosses this frontier together with Isaac, and later returns to that experience"—Adar, p. 43.

[23] Similarly, Saul's two retainers are mentioned when he goes off to Endor (1 Sam. xxviii 8) and when he returns (*v.* 25). Abimelech's army commander accompanies him to Beer-sheba (Gen. xxi 22) and returns with him (*v.* 32). In the parallel narrative of Gen. xxvi 26-32, Abimelech's two courtiers Phicol and Ahuzzath, though only mentioned by name in the opening verse (*v.* 26), take a more active part in the proceedings. For example, all verbs referring to Abimelech's actions are in the third person plural, thus including his two escorts. On this, see J. D. Safren, "Ahuzzath and the Pact of Beer-sheba", *Beer-sheba* 2 (1985), pp. 121-30 (Hebrew, with English summary).

In the Tale of Balaam's Ass, the "hinge" verse Num. xxii 21, like Gen. xxii 3, is built of a series of imperfect verbs: Balaam "rose", "saddled" up, and "went". Here too the pace of the narrative is speeded up; the details of the journey are unimportant. Mention of Balaam's servants is not part of this sequence of actions; after the rising and saddling, Balaam straightaway departs. Then begins the Tale proper in *v.* 22a, first describing God's anger at Balaam (exposition), then the stationing of an angel in the way (complication). Both verbs used are in the narrative imperfect, and they are each followed by explanatory clauses (why God was angry, why the angel stood in the way) slowing down the pace of the narrative. *V.* 22b goes on to depict Balaam riding his ass, and only then are the two servants mentioned.

Here a participle (*rōkēb*) describes the riding, while the presence of the servants is indicated with the *waw* conjunctive alone. *V.* 22b stops the progress of the narrative, and is a device for connecting the Tale with the "hinge" verse 21. Like *v.* 22aα, it can be considered a "related expansion", in Rofé's terminology ([n. 1], pp. 56-7). Balaam is seen to be riding the ass which he had saddled upon rising in *v.* 21a. The "picture" is further detailed by addition of the two manservants. Thus, *v.* 22b is intended, by resuming and expanding the narrative of *v.* 21a, to establish the sequence: rising, saddling, (taking) manservants, and so is a device used by the author of the Tale deliberately to evoke association with the Binding of Isaac:

Gen. xxii 3a: And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took his two servants with him...

Num. xxii 21a: And Balaam rose in the morning *and saddled his ass*

22b: *and he was riding on his ass* and his two servants (were) with him.

This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the servants now disappear from sight and are no longer mentioned. This is unlike the function of the servants in the Akedah, and of accompanying retinue in other biblical narratives, in which such secondary figures appear again further on, and form an integral part of the plot structure (see n. 23). In the Tale their disappearance means that, having played their part and established the link with Gen. xxii 3, they are no longer needed and may be discarded.

C. *Words Reminiscent of the Akedah*

1. The "key word" *rāʾāh*

The root *rāʾāh*, "see", occurs five times in the Binding of Isaac (Gen. xxii 4, 8, 13, 14 twice). There it points towards the name of the place of the Akedah and a saying common in the author's day.[24] In the Tale of Balaam's Ass, the root likewise appears five times, each time in connection with the revelation of the angel: four times (Num. xxii 23, 25, 27, 33) it is stated that the ass saw the angel; and once (*v.* 31) it is stated that Balaam did not. Here the key word is used to disparage Balaam's mantic powers. The renowned seer, who supposedly "sees the vision of the Almighty" (Num. xxiv 4, 16), cannot even "see" an angel which is perfectly visible to his ass. In Genesis the key word points to the sublime; in Numbers it underlines the ridiculous.

2. The sword

A sword is mentioned twice in each story. Abraham unhesitatingly takes up his sword (*maʾakelet*) to fulfil the Divine command, bizarre and horrifying though it may be (Gen. xxii 6, 10). As a result he is vindicated and rewarded. Balaam wishes he had a sword (*ḥereb*)[25] to kill his ass (Num. xxii 29), who is acting only out of fear of the divine being. Then, in retribution, the angel, with drawn sword, appears to Balaam himself (*v.* 31). The proud seer, now shamed and cowed, grovels in the dust, and is made to appear ludicrous. The contrast between the arrogant, godless heathen and the humble, godly Abraham is thus heightened.

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[24] On the "key", "theme", or "basic" word, all translations of the German "Leitwort", see M. Buber, "Leitwortstil in der Erzählung des Pentateuchs", in M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig (ed.), *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1938), pp. 211-38; idem, "Abraham the Seer", *On the Bible* (New York, 1968), pp. 41-2; S. Bar-Efrat, *The Art of Narration in the Bible*, second edition (Tel Aviv, 1984), pp. 22-5 (Hebrew). Cf. also von Rad (n. 10), p. 242 (E. tr.) = p. 207.

[25] Note the parallel *ḥaʿrābōt* // *maʾakālōt* in Prov. xxx 14. In Num. xxii 29, 31, the author may have used *ḥereb* instead of the *maʾakelet* of Gen. xxii 6, 10, because it is a more common word. Alternatively, the change of word may resemble stylistic variation of vocabulary upon repetition. Cf. also *ʿimmō* (Num. xxii 22b) and *ʾittō* (Gen. xxii 3a).

IV. *Conclusions*

The evidence for the "mirror" relationship of Num. xxii 22-35 to Gen. xxii 1-19 is cumulative. Each point of comparison, taken by itself, would not necessarily lead to such a conclusion. Nor is every such point of equal weight. Mere mention of a sword in each narrative, even with its proposed function in each context, is unremarkable. The most telling contacts between the two narratives are most definitely the resemblance of Num. xxii 21a, in conjunction with the "related expansion" and association-arousing device of *v.* 22b, to Gen. xxii 3a; and the phenomenon of an angel reversing Divine intention as perceived by the protagonist (Num. xxii 34-5; Gen. xxii 11-12). Each of these two points alone led the Rabbis, who knew nothing of modern literary theory, but who knew their Scriptures and had a keen appreciation of their theological contiguities and niceties, to draw an analogy between Balaam and Abraham (see n. 6, and Num. Rabbah 20.15).

The author of the Tale, by comparing and contrasting Balaam and Abraham, enhances the reader's appreciation of the character and actions of both. This is entirely in keeping with Zakovitz's definition of the mirror narrative (see n. 5). For the purpose of heaping scorn and ridicule on the figure of Balaam, and of denigrating his vaunted mantic prowess, what better foil could be found than the revered ancestor Abraham, that rock of Israelite faith, the epitome of virtue, the receiver of manifold divine revelations? And how Abraham appears all the more worthy of divine election and of Israelite (and later Jewish) veneration when compared to the arrogant but blind and foolish heathen seer Balaam!