

# A talking donkey

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## Preface

The Balaam<sup>1</sup> (Hebrew *Bil‘ām*<sup>2</sup>, approximately “bill-‘AHM”) narrative or “cycle” initially appears to invite dismissal as an inconsistent and even absurd tale. It involves a god who tells a seer to return with the entourage of a Moabite king, and then immediately becomes so angry with that seer that he sends an angel to kill him. The angel, armed with a sword, moves to block the seer’s path, but then acts rather like a divine mousetrap, apparently unable to kill the seer unless the seer actually runs into him. The seer cannot see the angel, and it is the seer’s talking she-donkey that avoids this divine mousetrap three times: First, she simply walks around the angel. The second time, she squeezes past the angel along one side of a narrow walled path, crushing the seer’s foot against the wall in the process. Finally, when the angel positions himself where there is no way past on either side, the donkey simply sits down. This study began as an attempt to identify and catalogue what appeared to be obvious absurdities and contradictions in the narrative, with the expectation that the episode would require only a brief discussion. Instead, a close reading revealed something considerably more interesting. Although genuine tensions remain, they proved to be illuminating rather than merely dismissive, raising questions about the preservation of multiple traditions, editorial activity, and the remarkable distinctiveness of the Balaam cycle within the Tanakh.

I was raised in a tradition in which the biblical text was generally approached with the assumption that it must be internally consistent. Apparent contradictions therefore required reconciliation. I have increasingly found a different approach more illuminating: to begin with the text as it stands, to acknowledge its tensions rather than immediately attempting to resolve them, and to ask whether those tensions themselves may tell us something about the history of the text. This does not require dismissing the biblical narrative. On the contrary, in the case of Balaam, taking its difficulties seriously transforms what can initially appear to be an absurd story about a talking donkey into a remarkably interesting window into the traditions that may lie behind the Torah. The objective is therefore not to find contradictions for their own sake, but to ask whether apparent contradictions preserve information that a harmonizing reading necessarily obscures.

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<sup>1</sup>The name appears in the Septuagint as Greek Βαλαάμ (*Balaam*, approximately “ba-la-AHM”). Greek had no equivalent of the Hebrew ‘*ayin*, and the Greek form subsequently passed through Latin as *Balaam* and into English, where it is conventionally pronounced “BAY-lam”.

<sup>2</sup>The ‘ represents the Hebrew ‘*ayin*, a consonant pronounced in the throat.

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# 1 Introduction

The story of Balaam occupies an unusual position within the Torah. Balaam is not an Israelite, nor is he presented as a descendant of Abraham. He is a celebrated foreign diviner summoned by Balak, king of Moab, from Pethor “on the River,” elsewhere identified with Pethor in Aram-Naharaim and therefore conventionally located in the Euphrates region. Nevertheless, in Numbers 22–24 he repeatedly receives divine revelation, acknowledges Yahweh’s authority, refuses to speak anything other than the divine words placed in his mouth, and ultimately delivers some of the Torah’s most eloquent blessings upon Israel. His oracles speak not of Abraham, Isaac, Judah, Jerusalem or the house of David, but consistently and collectively of Jacob and Israel. They also employ divine designations such as *El* and *Shaddai*, giving the poetry a character noticeably different from much of the surrounding prose.

Yet the Balaam cycle is also filled with tensions. Elohim initially prohibits Balaam from accompanying a delegation sent to summon him, subsequently permits him to accompany another delegation on the stated condition that they have come to summon him, and then becomes angry when Balaam goes. An angel of Yahweh then attempts to prevent his journey, but after the intervention of a talking donkey, the angel again permits Balaam to continue under essentially the same restriction that had previously been imposed. Only shortly afterward, one of Balaam’s oracles declares that El is not human that he should change his mind. At the conclusion of the cycle Balaam returns to his place and Balak goes his own way, yet later passages place Balaam among the Midianites, attribute the disaster at Peor to his counsel, and ultimately have him die during Israel’s war against Midian.

These difficulties become particularly interesting when considered alongside the unusual character of Balaam himself. A figure called “Balaam son of Beor” is independently attested in the Deir Alla inscription, demonstrating that traditions concerning a celebrated seer of this name circulated outside Israel. The biblical oracles likewise preserve distinctive language and imagery and contain a number of striking parallels with other ancient poetic and narrative traditions concerning Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, Samuel and Saul. Even where closely related biblical imagery is explicitly associated elsewhere with Judah, the Balaam oracles continue to speak of Jacob and Israel. Read independently of the later biblical references to Balaam, moreover, Numbers 22–24 provides remarkably little indication of the greedy, sexually immoral and implacably hostile enemy of Israel who becomes familiar from later biblical and rabbinic interpretation. Instead, much of that characterization emerges retrospectively as later passages and interpreters attempt to explain his actions and reconcile the tensions within the received narrative.

This study therefore approaches the Balaam cycle not as a single seamless story but as a text that may preserve several traditions concerning the same remarkable figure. It first examines the apparent contradiction surrounding Balaam’s journey and considers whether the duplicated elements of [Numbers 22](#) can be separated into two coherent narratives. It then considers the sharply different portrayals of Balaam elsewhere in the Torah and Tanakh, the Samaritan textual tradition, the literary and theological distinctiveness of the oracles, the independent evidence from Deir Alla, and the parallels between Balaam’s poetry and other biblical traditions. Finally, it considers how later rabbinic interpreters confronted many of the same difficulties and sought to reconcile them by constructing the consistently wicked Balaam familiar from later Jewish interpretation.

No single observation can establish the compositional history of Numbers 22–24. Taken together, however, the evidence suggests that the Balaam cycle may preserve the combination and reinterpretation of older traditions whose origins and portrayals of Balaam were more diverse than the

final form of the Torah might initially suggest. The tensions within the received text, the later biblical transformation of Balaam into an enemy of Israel, and the efforts of subsequent interpreters to reconcile those portrayals are therefore not merely difficulties to be explained away; they may themselves preserve evidence concerning the history through which the extraordinary figure of Balaam entered and developed within the biblical tradition.

## 2 The talking donkey of Numbers 22

[Numbers 22](#) recounts the story of Balaam, a non-Israelite diviner, and his encounter with the angel of Yahweh, an episode made famous by the speech of Balaam's talking donkey. In the Masoretic text, however, the animal is consistently identified as a female donkey (*'ātôn*), or *jenny*. The narrative begins when Balak, king of Moab, seeks Balaam's assistance in cursing the Israelites, who are encamped on the plains of Moab between his territory and the Jordan River, opposite Jericho.

An official delegation is therefore sent from Moab and Midian to Pethor on the Euphrates. When they arrive at Balaam's home, the narrative reveals something entirely unexpected. Balaam, a renowned Mesopotamian diviner living far beyond the borders of Israel, immediately seeks the will of Yahweh. This is striking. At this point in the biblical narrative there is as yet no Israelite kingdom, no Temple in Jerusalem, and Israel has not even crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. Nevertheless, Yahweh is presented not merely as Israel's God but as a deity already known to, and consulted by, a celebrated foreign seer hundreds of miles from Canaan. The text further implies that this is not Balaam's first encounter with Yahweh. He tells the delegation that he will inquire of Yahweh just as he has done before, and later refers to "Yahweh my Elohim", suggesting an established relationship through which his celebrated blessings and curses are believed to possess their efficacy. Thus, despite being a Mesopotamian rather than an Israelite, Balaam is introduced in [Numbers 22:7–13](#)<sup>3</sup> as one who already acknowledges Yahweh's authority:

So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand, and they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message.

He said to them, "Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as Yahweh speaks to me";  
so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam.

Elohim came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?"

Balaam said to Elohim, "King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.' "

Elohim said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the officials of Balak, "Go to your own land, for Yahweh has refused to let me go with you."

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<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken or interpreted from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVue), accessed through [Bible Gateway](#). Phrases such as "the LORD" and "God" are replaced with Yahweh and Elohim or El, and to emphasize the Hebrew, it is a she-donkey who is the central character.

When Balaam refuses, Balak sends a second, larger delegation composed of more distinguished officials. Once again, in [Numbers 22:14–19](#), Balaam asks them to remain overnight so that he may learn Yahweh’s will.

So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me, for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me.”

But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yahweh my Elohim, to do less or more. You also stay here overnight, so that I may learn what more Yahweh may say to me.”

That night, in [Numbers 22:20–21](#) Yahweh again speaks to Balaam:

That night Elohim came to Balaam and said to him, “If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them, but do only what I tell you to do.”

So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his she-donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

Thus, during the night, Yahweh tells Balaam to “get up and go with them.” The following morning, Balaam does precisely what he has been commanded: in [Numbers 22:22](#) he gets up and accompanies the officials of Moab.

Elohim’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of Yahweh took his stand in the road as his adversary.

The narrative therefore presents an apparent contradiction. Yahweh explicitly instructs Balaam to go with the officials, Balaam obeys without deviation, yet Yahweh’s anger is then said to have been “kindled” because Balaam was going. The Hebrew verb translated “was kindled” is *ḥārâ*, whose primary meaning is “to burn” or “to become hot”. When used of anger, it is the standard idiom for anger flaring up or becoming inflamed.

The final clause is also noteworthy. The “adversary” in the Hebrew text is *śāṭān*, which literally means “adversary”, “opponent”, or “one who obstructs”. Here it is not a proper name referring to Satan as a cosmic evil being. Rather, the angel of Yahweh is described as acting as a *satan*—that is, as an adversary or obstacle placed in Balaam’s path. This is one of the earliest occurrences of the word in the Tanakh, where it still retains its ordinary meaning rather than functioning as the name of a supernatural opponent of God.

[Numbers 22:22–27](#) describe Balaam’s journey on his donkey:

Now he was riding on the she-donkey, and his two servants were with him.

The she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand, so the she-donkey turned off the road and went into the field, and Balaam struck the she-donkey, to turn it back onto the road.

Then the angel of Yahweh stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. When the she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh, it scraped against the wall and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck it again.

Then the angel of Yahweh went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.

When the she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh, it lay down under Balaam, and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the she-donkey with his staff.

This satan ("adversary") appears with a drawn sword and simply stands in the middle of the road. Curiously, the donkey can see the angel, but Balaam cannot. On the first occasion, the donkey merely leaves the road and goes into a field, avoiding the angel entirely. After Balaam beats her and forces her back onto the road, the angel again moves ahead of the party.

The second encounter takes place on a narrow path between two vineyard walls. Once again, the angel stands in Balaam's path. This time, the donkey manages to squeeze past the angel, although in doing so she crushes Balaam's foot against the wall. Balaam again responds by striking the donkey.

The angel then moves farther ahead to a place where the road is so narrow that there is no room to turn either to the right or to the left. Having no remaining avenue of escape, the donkey simply lies down beneath Balaam.

One curious feature of the narrative is that the angel never attempts to strike Balaam while the donkey is manoeuvring around him. Instead, he repeatedly advances farther along the road, each time choosing a location that is progressively more difficult to bypass. Only at the final, impassable location does Balaam have no means of continuing.

Another awkward feature of the narrative concerns the Moabite delegation. The text states that Balaam departed with "the officials of Moab", and it also mentions that his two servants accompanied him. Yet, during these three encounters with the angel, the delegation disappears from the story. The text neither describes their reactions nor indicates whether they saw the angel. Did they simply pass by unhindered? Did they wait while Balaam repeatedly left the road? Or was the angel's opposition directed exclusively at Balaam? The narrative offers no explanation, leaving these obvious questions unanswered.

One further observation is that the Hebrew uses the common noun *śāṭān* ("adversary") rather than a proper name. The figure opposing Balaam is therefore "the angel of Yahweh acting as an adversary", not the later supernatural figure commonly called Satan. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the narrative, this angel functions precisely as Balaam's adversary, obstructing his progress along the road.

The story now takes an even stranger turn. In [Numbers 22:28-30](#), Yahweh opens the donkey's mouth, and it begins speaking intelligible human language:

Then Yahweh opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

Balaam said to the she-donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!"

But the she-donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your she-donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?”

And he said, “No.”

Remarkably, Balaam shows no surprise whatsoever that his donkey has begun speaking. Rather than marveling at the miracle or questioning what has just occurred, he simply argues with the donkey and chastises her as though such conversations were perfectly ordinary. Balaam explains that the donkey has embarrassed him by first leaving the road, then scraping his foot against the vineyard wall, and finally refusing to continue by lying down in the middle of the path. Indeed, Balaam is so enraged that he declares that, if he had a sword, he would kill the donkey immediately.

The donkey then responds with a simple rhetorical question. She reminds Balaam that he has ridden her throughout his life and asks whether she has ever behaved in this fashion before. Balaam can only answer, “No.” The implication is that Balaam should have recognized that the donkey’s unusual behavior had an extraordinary cause rather than assuming stubbornness or disobedience.

At this point, in [Numbers 22:31–35](#) Yahweh intervenes once more:

Then Yahweh opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand,  
and he bowed down, falling on his face.

The angel of Yahweh said to him, “Why have you struck your she-donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary because your way is perverse before me. The she-donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live.”

Then Balaam said to the angel of Yahweh, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.”

The angel of Yahweh said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you to speak.” So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

The angel explains that the donkey had not been acting irrationally; rather, she had saved Balaam’s life on three separate occasions. Had the donkey not repeatedly turned aside, the angel declares that he would have killed Balaam while allowing the donkey to live. Balaam immediately admits that he had not seen the angel and offers to abandon the journey and return home.

What follows is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the narrative. The angel does not tell Balaam to return home. Instead, he repeats essentially the same instruction that Yahweh had already given the previous night: Balaam is to continue with the delegation but must speak only the words that Yahweh gives him. Thus, the story concludes this episode with Balaam proceeding exactly as he had originally been instructed.

The sequence of events may be summarized as follows:

1. Yahweh first tells Balaam not to accompany Balak’s officials.
2. After a second, more distinguished delegation arrives, Yahweh tells Balaam that, if the men have come to summon him, he should get up and go with them, but that he must speak only

the words Yahweh gives him.

3. The following morning Balaam obeys this command by setting out with the officials of Moab.
4. Nevertheless, Elohim's anger is kindled because Balaam is going, and the angel of Yahweh stands in the road as Balaam's *śātān* ("adversary").
5. Three times the donkey sees the angel while Balaam remains unaware of his presence. Each time the donkey avoids the angel, and each time Balaam strikes the donkey.
6. After the third beating, Yahweh opens the donkey's mouth, and the donkey reminds Balaam that its behavior is entirely out of character.
7. Yahweh then opens Balaam's eyes, allowing him to see the angel with the drawn sword.
8. The angel explains that the donkey has saved Balaam's life and that, had it not repeatedly turned aside, Balaam would have been killed.
9. Balaam confesses that he did not know the angel was standing in the road and offers to return home.
10. The angel nevertheless instructs Balaam to continue with the delegation, repeating the same restriction given previously: Balaam is to speak only the words that Yahweh gives him.

Taken at face value, the narrative presents an apparent tension. Yahweh instructs Balaam to go with the delegation, Balaam obeys by setting out the next morning, yet Elohim's anger is immediately said to have been kindled because Balaam is going. After a lengthy interruption involving the angel and the speaking donkey, the angel ultimately instructs Balaam to continue the very journey that had provoked the confrontation. The text itself offers no explicit explanation for this apparent contradiction, and it has therefore been the subject of discussion and interpretation for centuries.

One of the most striking features of this narrative is its reversal of a familiar biblical pattern. Throughout much of the Tanakh, Yahweh commands individuals to act, and they hesitate, object, or openly disobey. Balaam, by contrast, repeatedly insists that he cannot go beyond Yahweh's command and appears to carry out precisely what he is told. Yet it is this unusually obedient figure who finds himself confronted by the angel of Yahweh and nearly put to death. This is all the more remarkable because Balaam is neither an Israelite nor a descendant of Abraham. Rather, he is portrayed as a renowned Mesopotamian diviner who nevertheless speaks of Yahweh as "my Elohim" ("my god") and appears to receive direct revelations from him. Indeed, within the narrative, Balaam is the only person introduced in Mesopotamia who acknowledges Yahweh's authority. Despite this unique relationship, Balaam is opposed and nearly killed by Yahweh's angel while carrying out what appears to be Yahweh's own command. Even more ironically, Balaam contributes nothing to his own deliverance: he neither perceives the danger nor takes any action to avoid it. Instead, his salvation depends entirely upon his donkey, whose repeated evasive actions preserve Balaam's life until Yahweh finally opens his eyes to the angel standing in the road.

Several extraordinary elements are woven together in the story. A donkey speaks, Yahweh instructs Balaam to undertake a journey, Balaam obeys, yet Yahweh's anger is nevertheless said to be kindled because Balaam is going. Yahweh then sends his angel to oppose Balaam, declaring that Balaam would have been killed had the donkey not repeatedly avoided the angel. Ironically, the celebrated seer remains completely unaware of the danger, while the donkey perceives it immediately and

becomes the instrument of Balaam's deliverance from imminent divine judgment. Although animals elsewhere in the Tanakh sometimes preserve human life at Yahweh's command—for example, by feeding, protecting, or rescuing his servants—the donkey occupies a unique role. Here, she repeatedly frustrates what the angel himself declares would otherwise have been Yahweh's immediate judgment, preserving Balaam's life until Yahweh finally opens Balaam's eyes to the danger. Finally, after rebuking Balaam for striking the donkey, the angel instructs him to continue the very journey that had apparently provoked Yahweh's anger, provided that Balaam speaks only the words that Yahweh gives him. The resulting tension has led commentators for centuries to ask why Balaam is opposed for doing what he had apparently been instructed to do.

### 3 The four oracles of Balaam

The remainder of the Balaam cycle (Numbers 22–24) unfolds in a strikingly different manner from what Balak had intended. Three times the king of Moab brings Balaam to a high place overlooking the Israelite encampment, hoping that the famous diviner will pronounce a curse upon the nation before battle. On each occasion Balaam insists that he can utter only the words placed in his mouth by Yahweh. Instead of cursing Israel, he repeatedly blesses them, frustrating Balak's plans and provoking his growing anger.

Before each oracle, Balaam instructs Balak to construct seven altars and to sacrifice a bull and a ram on each altar. Only after these elaborate rituals does Balaam pronounce his message. At Bamoth-baal, the first oracle immediately overturns Balak's expectations. Instead of cursing Israel, Balaam declares that no one can curse a people whom Elohim has already blessed:

“Balak has brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:  
'Come, curse Jacob for me. Come, denounce Israel!'

How can I curse whom Elohim has not cursed?  
How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?”

The oracle concludes with Balaam expressing envy for Israel's destiny, wishing that his own life might end as blessedly as theirs:

Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like [that of Israel]!”

Balak next takes Balaam to the Field of Zophim, on the top of Pisgah. Once again, seven altars are built, and on each altar a bull and a ram are sacrificed. Yet the elaborate ritual changes nothing. Balaam begins the second oracle by declaring that El neither lies nor changes his mind:

Rise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, O son of Zippor:

El is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.  
Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

Placed within the surrounding prose narrative, this produces perhaps the most ironic tension in the entire Balaam cycle. In [Numbers 22:5](#), Balak sends his first delegation specifically to “call” or “summon” Balaam (Hebrew *liqrō*). Elohim nevertheless refuses permission: “You shall not go with

them” ([Numbers 22:12](#)), and Balaam accordingly sends the delegation home. Balak then sends a second, more distinguished delegation. This time Elohim tells Balaam: “If the men have come to call you (*liqrō*’), get up and go with them” ([Numbers 22:20](#)). The same Hebrew verb is used in both passages.

The stated condition for the second permission therefore appears already to have been satisfied by the first delegation. They too had been sent by Balak to *call* Balaam. Had Elohim given Balaam on the first occasion the instruction subsequently given on the second (“If the men have come to call you, get up and go with them”) there is no apparent reason within the narrative why Balaam would not have gone. Indeed, his response to the first refusal demonstrates precisely the opposite: when Elohim says not to go, Balaam does not go.

The sequence is therefore difficult to reconcile with the declaration that follows only shortly afterward:

|                               |                                                                          |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Numbers 22: 5</a> | Balak sends men to <i>call</i> Balaam;                                   |
| <a href="#">Numbers 22:12</a> | Elohim says, “You shall not go with them.”                               |
| <a href="#">Numbers 22:20</a> | Elohim says, “If they came to <i>call</i> you, get up and go with them.” |
| <a href="#">Numbers 22:22</a> | Elohim becomes angry because Balaam goes;                                |
| <a href="#">Numbers 23:19</a> | “El is not a human being . . . that he should change his mind.”          |

It is possible to argue that Elohim’s circumstances or purposes have changed between the two delegations, and therefore that this is not a “change of mind” in precisely the sense intended by the oracle. Nevertheless, the prose narrative supplies no new condition in [Numbers 22:20](#) that was not already true in Numbers 22:5. On a straightforward reading, Elohim first refuses Balaam permission to accompany men who have come to summon him and subsequently permits him to accompany men who have come to summon him. Whatever theological distinction might subsequently be constructed between these two decisions, the instruction given to Balaam has plainly changed.

The irony becomes especially striking if the oracle is read independently of the surrounding prose. Within the oracle itself, the meaning is perfectly coherent: Balak cannot induce El to reverse the blessing that has been pronounced over Israel. “He has blessed,” Balaam continues, “and I cannot revoke it” ([Numbers 23:20](#)). El is contrasted with a human ruler who says one thing and subsequently does another. It is only when this independent poetic declaration is placed within the present narrative that the tension appears: immediately before Balaam declares that El does not change his mind, the reader has watched Elohim apparently do precisely that concerning Balaam’s journey.

Returning to the oracle, Balaam then reiterates that the divine blessing upon Israel is irrevocable:

See, I received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.  
He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The oracle concludes by portraying Israel as a lion preparing to devour its prey, foretelling not merely Israel’s security but its triumph over its enemies:

Look, a people rising up like a lioness and rousing itself like a lion!  
It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.”

Despite two failed attempts, Balak takes Balaam to a third vantage point, “the top of Peor, which

overlooks the wasteland". Once again, seven altars are constructed, and on each a bull and a ram are sacrificed. Yet, as before, the ritual proves futile. Balaam introduces himself as one who hears the words of God and receives visions from the Almighty before delivering a third blessing upon Israel. He extols the beauty of Israel's encampment, likening it to well-watered gardens and mighty cedar trees, and foretells the nation's prosperity, declaring that its king shall be exalted. The oracle concludes with Israel's triumph over its enemies and reiterates the covenantal promise first given to Abraham:

"Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you."

Only after twenty-one altars have been built, and twenty-one bulls and twenty-one rams sacrificed, does Balak finally abandon hope. Furious that Balaam has repeatedly blessed rather than cursed Israel, he dismisses him without payment. Balaam replies that he could never have spoken anything other than what Yahweh had commanded him to say.

Before departing, however, Balaam delivers one final oracle. Unlike the previous three, this prophecy looks beyond Israel itself to its future kings and to the fate of the surrounding nations. It opens with the famous declaration:

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

The oracle continues by foretelling Israel's triumph over Moab, Edom, Amalek, and other neighbouring peoples before concluding with a series of obscure predictions concerning Asshur, Eber, and Kittim.

The important point for the present study is that Balaam concludes by announcing, "So now, I am going to my people", before departing. This detail becomes significant because later biblical traditions portray Balaam quite differently: rather than returning home, he is said to have remained with Balak, advised him how to lead Israel into idolatry, and ultimately been killed by the Israelites.

## 4 One possible resolution

There is significant repetition in this passage:

1. Two delegations are sent by Balak.
2. Twice Balaam spends the night seeking the will of his Elohim.
3. Twice Balaam is given permission to go.
4. Twice Balaam is instructed to “do only what I tell you to do.”

In addition, the passage alternates between the divine names *Yahweh* and *Elohim*. The following analysis explores whether these repetitions reflect the interweaving of two narratives. As a literary exercise, the duplicated episodes are separated so that each reconstructed narrative contains only one delegation, one overnight consultation, and concludes with Balaam being permitted to go, subject to the command that he speak only the words given to him.

First, consider the block of verses [Numbers 22:15–21](#). Removing the repeated elements yields the following reconstruction:

~~Once again~~ Balak sent officials, ~~more numerous and more distinguished than these~~. They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me, for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me.”

But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yahweh my Elohim, to do less or more. You ~~also~~ stay here overnight, so that I may learn what ~~more~~ Yahweh may say to me.”

That night Elohim came to Balaam and said to him, “If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them, but do only what I tell you to do.”

So Balaam got up in the morning, ~~saddled his she-donkey,~~ and went with the officials of Moab.

This forms a coherent narrative in its own right. Balaam is approached by a delegation from Balak, spends the night seeking the will of Elohim, receives permission to accompany the delegation, and departs the following morning. The narrative is complete without the episode of the talking donkey, which is not required for its internal coherence. Although the name Yahweh appears in Balaam’s speech (“Yahweh my Elohim” and “that I may learn what Yahweh may say to me”), the narrative action itself is attributed to Elohim: “That night Elohim came to Balaam...”

Consider now the remainder of the narrative. It contains a second delegation from Balak, a second overnight consultation, and a second divine response. In this account, however, Balaam is instructed not to accompany the delegation. If these repeated elements are regarded as a parallel version of the consultation already considered and are removed, Balaam simply departs with the delegation. His journey is therefore undertaken without the divine authorization found in the previous reconstruction, providing an immediate narrative explanation for the divine opposition that follows.

The resulting narrative is reproduced below:

So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand, and they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. ~~He said to them, "Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as Yahweh speaks to me";~~

~~so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam.~~

Elohim came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?"

Balaam said to Elohim, "King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.'"

Elohim said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

So Balaam [*saddled his she-donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.*] ~~rose in the morning and said to the officials of Balak, "Go to your own land, for Yahweh has refused to let me go with you."~~ So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us."

Elohim's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of Yahweh took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the she-donkey, and his two servants were with him.

The she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand, so the she-donkey turned off the road and went into the field, and Balaam struck the she-donkey, to turn it back onto the road.

Then the angel of Yahweh stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. When the she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh, it scraped against the wall and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck it again.

Then the angel of Yahweh went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the she-donkey saw the angel of Yahweh, it lay down under Balaam, and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the she-donkey with his staff.

Then Yahweh opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

Balaam said to the she-donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!"

But the she-donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your she-donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?"

And he said, "No."

Then Yahweh opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand, and he bowed down, falling on his face.

The angel of Yahweh said to him, “Why have you struck your she-donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary because your way is perverse before me. The she-donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live.”

Then Balaam said to the angel of Yahweh, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.”

The angel of Yahweh said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you to speak.”

So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

This reconstruction also exhibits a striking pattern in its use of the divine names. Apart from the introductory statement, “Elohim’s anger was kindled because he was going, ...” every subsequent divine action is attributed to Yahweh or to the angel of Yahweh. The angel blocks Balaam’s path, Yahweh opens the donkey’s mouth, Yahweh opens Balaam’s eyes, the angel rebukes Balaam, and finally the angel grants permission to continue, subject to the familiar restriction that Balaam speak only the words given to him.

Thus, the narrative forms a coherent account in its own right. Balaam sets out without divine approval, Yahweh opposes him through the angel, the donkey preserves Balaam’s life, Balaam repents, and only then is permission granted for him to continue. The sole remaining reference to Elohim—that “Elohim’s anger was kindled”—may therefore represent the editorial seam connecting this account with the parallel narrative reconstructed above.

One noteworthy distinction emerges from these two reconstructed narratives. In the permissive narrative, Balaam is already portrayed as a worshipper of Elohim: he seeks the divine will before acting and receives permission to accompany the delegation. In the reconstructed Yahwist narrative, however, Balaam is not introduced as a worshipper or prophet of Yahweh. Instead, his first encounter with Yahweh occurs only when Yahweh opens his eyes to see the angel standing in the road.

If this reconstruction is correct, the Yahwist narrative may have been intended as a satire of Balaam’s reputation as a celebrated seer. A man renowned for supernatural insight is unable to perceive the divine messenger directly before him, while his faithful donkey sees the angel immediately and repeatedly acts to preserve his life.<sup>4</sup> The irony reaches its climax when Yahweh enables the donkey to speak before Balaam himself is granted the ability to perceive the angel.

## 5 A false prophet and diviner

This negative portrayal of Balaam is consistent with that found elsewhere in the Torah. Deuteronomy, for example, recalls Balaam only as the foreign diviner whom Balak hired to curse Israel. In Moses’s address to Israel in [Deuteronomy 3:3–5](#), the people are reminded that

“No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of Yahweh even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of Yahweh forever,

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<sup>4</sup>The observation was made by Baruch A. Levine in *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 4A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), p.154.

because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet Yahweh your Elohim refused to heed Balaam; Yahweh your Elohim turned the curse into a blessing for you, because Yahweh your Elohim loved you.)”

The passage assumes Balaam’s hostile intent, even though Yahweh ultimately frustrates it by turning the intended curse into a blessing. By contrast, the narrative in Numbers 22–24 never depicts Balaam cursing Israel. On the contrary, Balaam blesses Israel repeatedly, insisting that he can speak only the words placed in his mouth by Yahweh. If the reconstruction proposed here is correct, the Yahwist narrative may preserve an earlier, more critical tradition in which Balaam is ridiculed as a seer incapable of perceiving the divine messenger before him, while the parallel narrative presents him in a considerably more favourable light as one who faithfully seeks and obeys the will of Elohim.

This prohibition is reiterated in [Nehemiah 13:1–2](#):

On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing.

Similarly, in [Joshua 24:9–10](#), it again suggests that Balaam cursed Israel and that this curse was ignored:

Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, **but I would not listen to Balaam**; therefore he blessed you, so I rescued you out of his hand.

This later portrayal of Balaam stands in marked tension with the conclusion of the Balaam cycle itself. After delivering his four oracles, Balaam explicitly announces, “So now, I am going to my people”, and the narrative gives every impression that he departs and returns home. There is no indication that he remains with Balak, continues to advise the Moabites, or plays any further role in the events that follow. Yet only a few chapters later, the same book presents a dramatically different picture. Balaam is now found among Israel’s enemies during the war against Midian and is killed alongside the Midianite kings in [Numbers 31:6–8](#):

Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for sounding the alarm in his hand. They did battle against Midian, as Yahweh had commanded Moses, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian, in addition to others who were slain by them, and **they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword**.

The tension is heightened still further in [Numbers 31:16](#), where Balaam is blamed for advising the Moabites and Midianites to entice the Israelites into the worship of Baal at Peor. This accusation is absent from the Balaam cycle itself. Instead of returning home after faithfully delivering the words placed in his mouth by Yahweh, Balaam has become the architect of Israel’s apostasy.

The same negative tradition appears again in [Joshua 13:22](#), where the Israelites are said to have killed “Balaam son of Beor, who practiced divination.” Whether these passages preserve a different tradition about Balaam or represent a later reinterpretation of the Balaam cycle remains debated.

What is clear is that the Balaam who leaves after blessing Israel is not easily reconciled with the Balaam who later appears among Israel's enemies and dies by the sword.

## 6 A possible historical setting for the Balaam traditions

The literary observations above suggest the possibility that the Balaam traditions preserve differing attitudes toward the figure of Balaam. In one strand, Balaam appears as a faithful servant of Elohim who seeks the divine will before acting and ultimately blesses Israel. In another, he is portrayed more critically: he is opposed by the angel of Yahweh, ridiculed through the episode of the donkey, and elsewhere remembered as one who sought Israel's destruction.

If these traditions originated in different communities, one possible explanation is that they reflect differing regional memories of Balaam. The positive tradition may preserve an Israelite account in which Balaam was remembered as a genuine prophet of El, while the more hostile tradition reflects a Judahite perspective that regarded him as a foreign diviner and an enemy of Israel. Such differing memories need not be surprising, particularly if traditions from the northern kingdom were incorporated into Judean literature following the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the eighth century BCE.

This possibility may help explain an otherwise striking feature of the Pentateuch. In [Numbers 22](#), [23](#) and [24](#) Balaam consistently refuses to curse Israel, insisting that he can speak only the words given to him by God. Yet immediately afterward, [Numbers 25](#) recounts Israel's apostasy at Peor without mentioning Balaam at all:

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and Yahweh's anger was kindled against Israel.

Only much later, after the defeat of Midian, is Balaam unexpectedly reintroduced in [Numbers 31:13–18](#):

Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war.

Moses said to them, "Have you allowed all the women to live? These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against Yahweh in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of Yahweh. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves..."

Here Balaam is blamed for the very apostasy described in [Numbers 25](#), even though the earlier narrative never attributes such advice to him. This retrospective accusation suggests that another tradition concerning Balaam remained influential alongside the more favourable account preserved in [Numbers 22–24](#). Similar negative portrayals appear elsewhere in the Tanakh, particularly in [Deuteronomy 23:4–5](#), where Balaam is remembered as the foreign diviner hired to curse Israel.

If the introductory consultation in [Numbers 22](#) belongs to a separate narrative, the remaining Yahwist account aligns naturally with the broader biblical tradition. Elsewhere in the Torah and other writings, Balaam is remembered not as a faithful prophet but as an enemy of Israel: he is hired to curse the nation, is blamed for the apostasy at Peor, and becomes a symbol of opposition to Israel. Against this background, the favourable portrayal of Balaam in Numbers 22–24 as one who faithfully seeks and obeys “Yahweh his Elohim” stands as a remarkable exception and suggests that the present text preserves the harmonization of differing traditions concerning Balaam.

## 7 A Samaritan variation

An intriguing variation occurs in the Israelite Samaritan Torah. Whereas the Judean text has Elohim grant Balaam permission to accompany the delegation, the Samaritan text instead attributes this permission to the angel of Elohim:

**Judean Torah:**

That night [Elohim](#) came to Balaam and said to him, “If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them, but do only what I tell you to do.”

**Israelite Samaritan Torah:**

And [the angel of Elohim](#) came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them, but only the word that I speak to you shall you do.”

This variant is noteworthy because it makes the initial commissioning correspond more closely to the second commissioning in the donkey narrative:

**Judean Torah:**

The [angel of Yahweh](#) said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you to speak.”

Although the Samaritan reading cannot by itself establish the literary history of the passage, it does produce a striking symmetry. In both narratives, Balaam ultimately receives permission to proceed from an angelic messenger, accompanied by the same restriction that he speak only the words placed in his mouth. If the passage is indeed the result of the combination of two originally independent narratives, the Samaritan reading may preserve—or perhaps intentionally create—a closer parallel between them.

## 8 Literary character of the Balaam cycle

The Balaam cycle occupies a unique place within the Tanakh. While the Tanakh contains many miracles, visions, and divine interventions, the Balaam narratives combine a remarkable collection of literary features that are rarely, if ever, found together elsewhere in Scripture. None of these features is individually unprecedented; rather, it is their combination that distinguishes the Balaam cycle from nearly every other biblical narrative.

One of the most memorable features of the narrative is Balaam's donkey. Across both the Tanakh and the Christian Scriptures, there are only two animals that engage in human conversation: the serpent in the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3](#)) and Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22). In both narratives, the speaking animal dramatically redirects the course of events. Even in a body of literature filled with miracles, divine visions, and angelic appearances, an animal carrying on a rational conversation with a human being is extraordinarily rare.

The two narratives also share a striking literary pattern. In each case, the animal perceives a reality that the human protagonist does not and thereby alters the direction of the story. The serpent persuades Eve to eat from the forbidden tree, while Balaam's donkey alone perceives the angel of Yahweh standing in the road. Three times the donkey prevents Balaam from advancing toward the angel's drawn sword before rebuking its master, after which Yahweh vindicates the animal by opening Balaam's eyes to what it had seen all along. In both stories, the human is the one who lacks understanding, while the animal proves to possess the clearer perception. This should be contrasted with the balance of the Tanakh: animals throughout its narratives frequently act as instruments of Yahweh's will. Ravens bring food to Elijah, a great fish swallows and later releases Jonah, lions spare Daniel, and countless sacrificial animals serve ritual purposes. In all these other cases, the animals simply obey divine command.

The image of a heavenly being standing with a drawn sword to bar a person's path is remarkably rare in the Tanakh. Apart from Balaam's encounter with the angel of Yahweh, the closest parallels occur in Joshua's encounter with the commander of Yahweh's army ([Joshua 5:13–15](#)), David's vision of the angel over Jerusalem ([1 Chronicles 21:16](#)), and, more distantly, the cherubim with the flaming sword guarding the entrance to Eden ([Genesis 3:24](#)).

Elsewhere in the Tanakh, angels or heavenly messengers carrying out divine judgment complete their task without hindrance. In [Numbers 22](#), however, the angel of Yahweh repeatedly fails to reach Balaam because the prophet's donkey continually diverts him from the path. Indeed, the angel later acknowledges that, had the donkey not turned aside, Balaam would have been killed. No other biblical narrative appears to depict an angelic mission being repeatedly interrupted in this manner.

The Balaam cycle also presents a foreign diviner proclaiming blessings upon Israel. Although Balaam is not an Israelite, the narrative nevertheless portrays him as one who already acknowledges Yahweh and repeatedly seeks his counsel before acting. Summoned by Balak because his blessings and curses are believed to be effective, Balaam instead becomes the instrument through whom Yahweh repeatedly blesses Israel. He declares that God's blessing cannot be revoked, extols the beauty and prosperity of Israel, and foresees the rise of a future ruler from Jacob. The irony is striking: one of the Pentateuch's most eloquent affirmations of Israel comes not from Moses or an Israelite prophet, but from a renowned foreign diviner.

Closely related to this is Balaam's repeated reception of divine revelation. The Tanakh certainly records occasions when Yahweh speaks to foreigners, such as Abimelech or Laban. Balaam, however, is unusual in the frequency and directness of these revelations. On several occasions Yahweh comes to him during the night, places words in his mouth, and commands precisely what he is to say. Balaam thus occupies an unusual position within the biblical narrative: although remaining outside Israel, he nevertheless functions as a genuine recipient of repeated divine revelation.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Balaam cycle is Balaam's unwavering obedience. Throughout Numbers 22–24 he repeatedly insists that he can speak only the words that Yahweh gives him,

and every action within the narrative confirms this claim. When instructed to accompany Balak's messengers, he goes. When warned by the angel, he offers to return home. When commanded to continue, he proceeds. At each oracle he faithfully delivers Yahweh's message despite Balak's repeated demands for a curse. This obedience is particularly striking because so many of the major narratives of the Tanakh revolve around human resistance to the divine will. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, Cain murders Abel, the generation of the Flood embraces violence, Pharaoh refuses to release Israel, the Israelites repeatedly rebel in the wilderness, Saul disregards Yahweh's commands, David commits adultery and murder, Solomon turns to other gods, and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are ultimately judged for persistent disobedience. Against this backdrop, Balaam's consistent insistence that he can neither act nor speak contrary to Yahweh's command makes him a remarkably unusual figure. It is therefore all the more surprising that later biblical traditions transform him into the very opposite: the foreign diviner who remains behind, counsels Israel's enemies, and ultimately dies by the sword of the Israelites.

The Balaam cycle also bears an intriguing resemblance to the Book of Job in several respects. Both narratives centre upon a non-Israelite protagonist who nevertheless stands in direct relationship with Yahweh, and neither character is introduced as converting to Israel's religion. Instead, Yahweh is presented as already known beyond the boundaries of Israel. Likewise, both narratives unfold largely outside the land of Israel and involve characters drawn from the wider ancient Near Eastern world rather than from Israelite society itself. Their language and themes similarly preserve elements that resonate with this broader cultural setting. Job is portrayed as a righteous man from the land of Uz, while Balaam is introduced as a celebrated foreign seer whose reputation extends across the Transjordan and whose existence is independently attested in the Deir Alla inscription. Both books also employ a rich and comparatively archaic divine vocabulary. In Balaam's oracles, the deity is referred to not only as Yahweh and Elohim, but also as *El* and *Shaddai*, the latter title occurring especially in the patriarchal narratives and throughout the Book of Job. Both books also occupy a somewhat distinctive literary position within the Tanakh. The poetic speeches of Job differ markedly from the surrounding historical narratives, while Balaam's oracles constitute one of the Pentateuch's most distinctive poetic corpora, differing markedly in style and structure from the surrounding prose narrative. These similarities do not imply a common origin or literary dependence. Rather, they suggest that both narratives preserve traditions that were at home within the wider Northwest Semitic world before being incorporated into the Tanakh, where they retain a character noticeably different from much of the surrounding biblical literature.

Taken together, these literary features help explain why the Balaam cycle has attracted so much attention from both religious interpreters and modern scholars. A talking donkey, a foreign seer who blesses Israel, repeated divine revelation granted to a non-Israelite, and a prophet whose exemplary obedience stands in tension with his later portrayal combine to create one of the most distinctive narratives in the Tanakh. Whatever its compositional history, the Balaam cycle remains unlike almost any other story preserved in Scripture.

## 9 Historic attestation to Balaam

While there are no contemporary inscriptions, seals, letters, or other archaeological finds that can be confidently associated with King Solomon, we do possess an independent extra-biblical attestation to Balaam.

In the fertile plains of the eastern side of the Jordan Valley lies the ancient settlement of Deir Alla, near the point where the Zarqa River empties into the Jordan. The Zarqa is generally identified with the biblical River Jabbok (*Yabboq*), the stream along which Jacob wrestled with the mysterious divine figure before meeting Esau ([Genesis 32](#)). The site had been occupied for millennia and, during excavations in 1967, archaeologists uncovered the remains of what appears to have been a cultic building. Among its ruins were fragments of plaster that had fallen from the walls, preserving inscriptions written in both black and red ink.

When painstakingly reconstructed and deciphered, these fragments revealed an extraordinary text. Although much of the inscription has been lost, it unmistakably refers to “Balaam, son of Beor” (*bl'm br b'r*), the same name given to the prophet in the Book of Numbers. The text presents Balaam as a renowned seer who receives visions from the divine world. He is described as a man to whom the gods reveal the future, and the inscription refers both to the high god El and to a council of divine beings (*elohin*), reflecting the religious world of Iron Age Transjordan rather than the theology of the Tanakh.

The inscription is generally dated to the eighth century BCE, although a minority of scholars have argued for a slightly earlier, late ninth-century date. Consequently, it cannot establish when Balaam himself lived. The text may preserve traditions about a figure who lived only a generation or two earlier, or it may preserve memories of a much older legendary seer. The inscription itself does not allow us to distinguish between these possibilities.

Nevertheless, the Deir Alla inscription is of enormous historical significance. It demonstrates that Balaam was not merely a literary creation of the biblical authors. Rather than being a literary creation of the Tanakh, the Deir Alla inscription demonstrates that Balaam belonged to a wider Northwest Semitic tradition. A celebrated seer named “Balaam son of Beor” was known independently in the Transjordan, and this reputation was subsequently incorporated into Israel’s own sacred literature. Whether the Balaam of Numbers is identical to the Balaam commemorated at Deir Alla cannot be determined, but the inscription strongly suggests that the biblical authors adopted a figure whose fame already extended across the southern Levant.

The inscription also provides an intriguing glimpse into Balaam’s religious background. Unlike the Book of Numbers, where Balaam ultimately speaks only the words that Yahweh places in his mouth, the Deir Alla text portrays him within a broader Northwest Semitic religious milieu centred on El and a divine assembly. This suggests that the biblical authors adopted a figure who was already well known in the religious traditions of Transjordan and incorporated him into Israel’s own sacred history.

The Deir Alla inscription also exhibits several striking parallels with the shorter Balaam narrative in Numbers. In both accounts, Balaam is portrayed not as an Israelite prophet but as a renowned seer whose reputation extends beyond his own homeland. In the biblical account, Balak summons Balaam because he believes his blessings and curses are effective; similarly, the Deir Alla inscription presents Balaam as a celebrated visionary whose revelations are sought by others. Both texts also

emphasize that Balaam receives his messages through nocturnal divine encounters. In Numbers, *Elohim* comes to Balaam at night and places words in his mouth, while in the Deir Alla inscription Balaam receives visions during the night from the divine assembly (*elohin*) headed by El. Although the theological settings differ—the biblical text has Balaam speaking only what Yahweh commands, whereas the Deir Alla inscription reflects the broader Northwest Semitic pantheon—in both traditions Balaam functions as a diviner who faithfully proclaims messages received from the divine realm rather than speaking on his own authority. These shared features strongly suggest that the biblical narrative preserves and adapts an older tradition concerning a well-known Transjordanian seer.

## 10 Parallels between Balaam and other speeches

The traditions preserved in the Tanakh did not all originate in the same place or period. Some are particularly associated with the northern Kingdom of Israel and the central highlands, while others are more closely associated with Judah and Jerusalem in the south. Jacob and Joseph, for example, are strongly connected with northern locations such as Bethel and Shechem, while the descendants of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, became major tribes of Israel. David and the Davidic monarchy, by contrast, are inseparably associated with Judah, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem. These distinctions are not absolute: traditions could travel, be shared, and be incorporated into texts produced elsewhere. Nevertheless, they provide useful clues when several independent features of a text point in the same direction.

The Balaam oracles consistently call the people Jacob and Israel. They never mention Abraham or Isaac, nor do they name Judah, Joseph, Ephraim, Manasseh or any other individual tribe. It is therefore worth asking whether the closest biblical parallels to the language of the oracles show any geographical pattern.

1. The oracle says, “Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the dust cloud of Israel?” This parallels the blessing of Jacob by Yahweh at Bethel in [Genesis 28:14](#): “your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth.” The association is particularly interesting because Bethel was one of the principal religious centres of the later northern Kingdom of Israel. An even closer verbal parallel occurs in the earlier promise to Abraham in [Genesis 13:16](#), where Yahweh similarly speaks of the impossibility of counting “the dust of the earth”; however, in the Balaam oracle it is specifically the “dust of Jacob” that cannot be counted.
2. The oracle says, “El is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.” A remarkably close parallel appears later among the Former Prophets. Samuel, a prophet associated with the central Israelite highlands, says to Saul, an Israelite king, in [1 Samuel 15:29](#): “Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not deceive or change his mind, for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.” The wording and argument are strikingly similar: unlike a human being, the deity will neither deceive nor change his mind. The parallel occurs within the traditions of Samuel and Saul rather than those of David and the Judahite monarchy.
3. The oracle twice describes the exodus from Egypt: “El, who brings them out of Egypt, ...” and, in the following oracle, “El, who brings him out of Egypt, ...”. This recalls the familiar description of the exodus in [Exodus 20:2](#): “I am Yahweh your Elohim, who brought you out of

the land of Egypt.” The difference in divine names is noteworthy: the familiar prose formula identifies the deity as Yahweh, while both occurrences in the Balaam poetry explicitly identify him as El. The change from “them” in the first occurrence to “him” in the second reflects the ability of Hebrew poetry to describe Israel either as a plurality of people or collectively as a single person.

4. The oracle twice describes El as having the strength or “horns of a wild ox.” Similar symbolism appears elsewhere in the Torah, particularly in Moses’s blessing of Joseph in [Deuteronomy 33:17](#): “A firstborn bull—majesty is his! His horns are the horns of a wild ox; with them he gores the peoples, driving them to the ends of the earth.” The passage then explicitly identifies these forces with “the myriads of Ephraim” and “the thousands of Manasseh”. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two tribes descended from Joseph, with Ephraim eventually becoming sufficiently prominent that its name could be used for the northern Kingdom of Israel itself.
5. Twice the imagery of a lion and lioness is used in the oracles: “Look, a people rising up like a lioness and rousing itself like a lion!” and “He crouched; he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?” Here we encounter one of the most interesting parallels, because essentially the same imagery is specifically associated with Judah in Jacob’s blessing in [Genesis 49:9–10](#): “Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness—who dares rouse him up?” Yet the Balaam oracle does not identify the lion with Judah. Instead, the lion is Jacob–Israel collectively. This distinction becomes still more interesting because the following verse in Genesis declares that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah”, whereas Balaam will later declare that “a scepter shall rise out of Israel”.
6. Next, the oracle names a king called Agag: “his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.” The most conspicuous biblical bearer of this name is the Amalekite king defeated by the Israelite King Saul. In [1 Samuel 15:7–8](#), “Saul defeated the Amalekites, ... He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive but utterly destroyed all the people.” The correspondence is striking: the Balaam oracle declares that Israel’s king will surpass Agag, while the historical narrative describes Israel’s first king defeating and capturing Agag. This does not establish that the oracle was composed during Saul’s reign, but once again its closest historical association is with an Israelite king rather than with David or the later kings of Judah.
7. The lines “It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain” and “he shall devour the nations that are his foes and break their bones. He shall strike with his arrows” have a strong parallel in the Song of Moses in [Deuteronomy 32:42](#), where Moses says, “I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh—with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired enemy.” Here the correspondence includes not merely the general image of victory in battle, but the distinctive combination of devouring, arrows, blood, and the slain. The Song of Moses is itself one of the major poetic compositions embedded within the Torah.
8. Finally, the declaration “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you” has an exceptionally close parallel in Isaac’s blessing of Jacob in [Genesis 27:29](#): “Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” Earlier in the Balaam oracles the same underlying idea is expressed when Balaam declares that he has received a blessing that he cannot revoke. Thus the sequence ends where several of its other parallels began: with traditions concerning Jacob himself.

None of these parallels by itself demonstrates that the Balaam oracles originated in northern Israel. Taken together, however, they form a striking pattern. The poems repeatedly speak of *Jacob* and *Israel*, while their closest parallels lead us to traditions concerning Jacob, Joseph and his descendants Ephraim and Manasseh, the Israelite king Saul, and some of the oldest poetic traditions preserved in the Torah. Even the named king Agag finds his most conspicuous biblical counterpart in the story of Saul's defeat of the Amalekites. By contrast, David, Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty are conspicuously absent.

The absence of Judah is particularly noteworthy because the oracles provide obvious opportunities to mention it. The lion and lioness imagery closely parallels Jacob's blessing of Judah in [Genesis 49](#), yet Balaam applies the imagery to Jacob-Israel as a whole. More strikingly, Genesis 49 declares that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah", whereas Balaam declares that "a scepter shall rise out of Israel". Even when the fourth oracle predicts a coming ruler, it does not say that he will arise from Judah:

a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the foreheads of Moab and the heads of all the Shethites. Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. One out of Jacob shall rule and destroy the survivors of Ir.

A Judahite author could, of course, speak of the whole people as Jacob or Israel, so none of this establishes a northern origin. Nevertheless, if these poems had originated as, or been substantially reshaped into, specifically Judahite royal poetry, the complete absence of Judah is striking. At precisely the points where the closely related tradition in Genesis 49 identifies the lion and the scepter specifically with Judah, the Balaam oracles retain *Jacob* and *Israel*. The anticipated king belongs to Israel, the scepter rises from Israel, and the coming ruler arises from Jacob. Nowhere is this royal expectation narrowed to Judah, David or the Davidic dynasty.

## 11 Balaam in later Jewish interpretation

As a brief introduction for non-Jewish readers, Judaism, like Christianity and Islam, contains numerous traditions and communities whose beliefs and interpretive practices differ. Nevertheless, much of rabbinic Judaism shares a large body of literature through which the Hebrew scriptures have been interpreted over many centuries. This includes the Mishnah and Talmud, collections of midrash, and later commentaries—as well as commentaries upon those commentaries. These writings can carry considerable religious and interpretive authority, although their status varies substantially between Jewish traditions and should not be equated with that of the Torah itself. Nor should every interpretation encountered in this literature be understood as representing a universally accepted Jewish belief. Rather, these texts provide a record of how generations of Jewish scholars and interpreters understood, debated and expanded upon the biblical text.

Later rabbinic interpretation generally takes a considerably more hostile view of Balaam than one might obtain from reading Numbers 22–24 in isolation. In the oracles themselves Balaam repeatedly insists that he can speak only what Yahweh his Elohim permits him to speak, refuses to alter the divine message despite Balak’s increasing frustration, and ultimately blesses Israel rather than curses it. The later biblical references to Balaam, however, increasingly portray him as an enemy of Israel, and rabbinic literature develops this characterization much further. Balaam consequently becomes not a false prophet, but something perhaps more interesting: a genuine and exceptionally capable prophet whose abilities are accompanied by thoroughly wicked intentions.

The Mishnah provides a particularly stark example. In *Pirkei Avot* 5:19, Balaam is presented as the moral opposite of Abraham. The disciples of Abraham possess a good eye, a humble spirit and moderate desires, whereas the disciples of “Balaam the wicked” possess an evil eye, a haughty spirit and excessive desires. Later commentators developed this contrast still further. Maimonides, for example, in his [commentary](#) on the above discussion discusses Balaam’s greed:

“And Bilaam the evildoer’s zeal for money was publicized and that is his coming from Aram Naharaim for the sake of the money with which he was hired to curse Israel.”

This, however, should be contrasted with the statement Balaam made to the delegation: “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yahweh my Elohim, to do less or more.” Maimonides also connects the immorality of Balaam with his advice:

“And, indeed, his great desire in sexual matters is the reason for his advice to Balak that he set loose the women to be promiscuous with [the men of] Israel and to place known harlots [in front of them]. As were it not for the great desire that he had and that harlots were good in his eyes, he would not have commanded this—since the commands of people are only according to their opinions.”

Again, here, however, this, too is a weak argument: even if Balaam’s alleged advice in [Numbers 31:16](#) may tell us what strategy he supposedly thought would work against Israel; it does not, however, follow that the strategy reveals his own sexual appetites, any more than Moses’s commands in [Numbers 31:17–18](#) to “Now therefore, **kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.**” establish corresponding personal desires in Moses.

Now, this hostility of the rabbinic traditions does not require them to deny Balaam's extraordinary abilities. On the contrary, Balaam could be understood as an exceptionally powerful gentile prophet whose problem was not an inability to perceive the divine, but the purposes for which he wished to use that ability. This makes the episode of the donkey particularly effective as satire. The great seer sets out intending to curse an entire people, yet repeatedly fails to see the angel directly in front of him while his she-donkey sees the danger perfectly well. *Bamidbar Rabbah*<sup>5</sup> 20:14 and 20 explicitly exploits this humiliation: when the donkey finally speaks, Balaam is unable to answer when the donkey observes the absurdity of Balaam's threat to kill her if only he had a sword:

“So, the donkey said to Bilam: ‘You are unable to kill me unless you have a sword in your hand. How do you seek to uproot an entire nation?’ He was silent and did not find an answer.”

While humorous, this interpretation is not derived from the dialogue in Numbers but substantially rewrites it. The biblical she-donkey never makes this argument: she does not ridicule Balaam for requiring a sword, does not ask how he consequently expects to destroy an entire nation, and does not silence him with this observation. Instead, she asks whether, during all the years Balaam has ridden her, she has ever behaved in this manner, to which Balaam simply replies, “No” (Numbers 22:30). The midrash therefore provides valuable evidence for how later Jewish interpreters understood and developed the Balaam narrative, but essentially no assistance in determining what the narrative itself is attempting to communicate.<sup>6</sup> In this instance, the interpretation depends upon newly created dialogue and an argument absent from Numbers, and then draws conclusions from that additional material.

Rabbinic interpretation also attempts to explain one of the more conspicuous difficulties in the narrative: Elohim tells Balaam to go with Balak's representatives in Numbers 22:20, only to become angry when Balaam does precisely that in Numbers 22:22. Rather than treating this as evidence of different narrative traditions, the midrash supplies Balaam with an underlying wicked intention. *Midrash Tanchuma*, Balak 8:1 interprets Elohim's permission essentially as a reluctant concession: Balaam is determined to go, despite the warning that he may speak only what Elohim commands, and his eagerness in saddling his donkey reveals his hatred of Israel:

“Did he not have a male or female slave [to saddle his donkey]? It was simply that his hatred for Israel was so great that he beat [his servant] to it and arose quickly all by himself.”

There are several difficulties with this interpretation. First, it should be compared with Maimonides's claim that Balaam came “for the sake of the money”. The two motives are not inherently incompatible—Balaam could conceivably have desired both Balak's payment and Israel's destruction—but neither is given in Numbers 22–24 as the reason for his departure. Most importantly, the narrative itself portrays Balaam as waiting for divine authorization. He explicitly instructs Balak's representatives to remain overnight so that he may learn “what more Yahweh may say to me” (Numbers 22:19), and he departs only after Elohim subsequently tells him to go. The text therefore provides no obvious indication that Balaam was determined to make the journey regardless of Elohim's response. Nor does Numbers 22:21 emphasize that Balaam personally saddled

<sup>5</sup>This translation uses the spelling “Bilam”.

<sup>6</sup>It would be comparable to inventing a speech in which John F. Kennedy declared that the top priority for Americans was to land astronauts on Mars, and then citing that invented speech as evidence that a Mars programme was the reason he insisted upon reaching the Moon before the end of the decade. The invented speech could then be used to construct an explanation of Kennedy's ambitions, but it would tell us nothing about Kennedy's actual intentions.

the donkey. The Hebrew simply states that Balaam “saddled his donkey”. Biblical Hebrew possesses constructions by which the subject’s personal involvement could have been emphasized had the author wished to make this point clear, but no such emphasis appears here. This does not mean that Balaam did not saddle the animal himself; he certainly may have done so. It means only that the text does not distinguish between Balaam personally performing the task and Balaam being responsible for having it done. In this respect, the statement is no more decisive than saying that a wealthy person “prepared a dinner”, which does not by itself establish whether that person prepared the food personally or had servants do so. Although Balaam’s two servants are mentioned in the following verse, nothing in the text states that they would ordinarily have saddled his donkey, that Balaam displaced them from this task, or that his supposed decision to perform it himself resulted from hatred of Israel.

The interpretation therefore depends upon a series of details supplied by the later interpreter: Balaam was determined to go regardless of Elohim’s wishes; his servants would normally have saddled the donkey; Balaam instead performed the task personally; and he did so because his hatred of Israel made him unusually eager to depart. None of these details is stated in Numbers, and the first is arguably in tension with Balaam’s explicit decision to await God’s response. The resulting explanation may provide valuable evidence for how later Jewish interpreters sought to understand the abrupt transition from divine permission to divine anger, but it provides little assistance in determining why that transition occurs in the narrative itself, since the explanation depends upon a motivation and sequence of events introduced by the interpreter rather than established by the text.

Even more interestingly, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:14 preserves an interpretation that recognizes the odd behaviour of the angel. It explicitly asks why the angel does not simply pursue Balaam: “Could he not have gone after him?” The answer is that a divine executioner does not need to chase his victim:

“The executioner stands in his place, and one who incurred liability for death comes to him on foot. So that the angel would not be troubled to go after Bilam, he preceded him to the road.”

However, this explanation appears to be ad hoc: a general principle concerning divine executioners is introduced specifically to explain why the angel waits for Balaam rather than pursuing him. Elsewhere, divine messengers actively go forth to kill or destroy: the destroying agent passes through Egypt in *Exodus* 12, the angel of Yahweh strikes the Assyrians in *2 Kings* 19:35, and the destroying angel advances against Jerusalem in *2 Samuel* 24:16. Yet there appears to be no other instance in which a divine executioner must remain in place and wait for the intended victim to approach. The peculiar behaviour that *Bamidbar Rabbah* explains as a general rule therefore appears, within the biblical narratives themselves, to be unique to *Numbers* 22.<sup>7</sup>

Again, there is a sustained effort in later rabbinic interpretation to villainize Balaam, but the explanations tend to be piecemeal: one difficulty is explained here and another there. I have not,

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<sup>7</sup>It would be comparable to a messenger from El being sent to deliver a message to Balaam, but instead of seeking Balaam out, the invisible messenger simply stands outside his house and waits for Balaam to stumble upon him. Asked why the messenger behaves this way, one then explains: “This is how the messengers of El operate: the messenger does not go to the recipient; the recipient comes to the messenger.” The explanation certainly accounts for the peculiar behaviour, but it does so by turning the very peculiarity requiring explanation into a general rule—a rule for which there appears to be no independent support and which is not reflected in the ordinary behaviour of divine messengers elsewhere in biblical literature.

however, encountered an interpretation that satisfactorily accounts for all of the peculiar details of Balaam's behaviour throughout Numbers 22–24. Read consecutively, the narrative repeatedly portrays Balaam as recognizing Yahweh's authority and submitting himself to it:

1. Balaam explicitly identifies Yahweh as the deity whose permission determines whether he may accompany Balak's representatives. He is not portrayed as consulting Baal, another Canaanite deity, or the gods of his homeland.
2. When Yahweh initially refuses permission, Balaam obeys and dismisses the delegation: "Go to your own land, for Yahweh has refused to let me go with you."
3. When the second delegation arrives, Balaam again states the limits of his own freedom of action: "Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yahweh my Elohim, to do less or more."
4. The subsequent permission to travel is not expressed as a concession to Balaam's desires. The stated condition concerns the purpose of the delegation: "If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them, but do only what I tell you to do."
5. When the angel finally confronts Balaam and declares, "I have come out as an adversary because your way is perverse before me", Balaam immediately confesses wrongdoing and offers to abandon the journey: "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home." The angel nevertheless tells him to continue.

One can certainly adopt the later interpretation that Balaam secretly intended to curse Israel and that Yahweh repeatedly prevented him from doing so, ultimately forcing curses to emerge as blessings. But this raises a larger narrative problem rather than resolving it. If Balaam's intention from the beginning was simply to curse Israel, why construct the elaborate sequence of two delegations and two nocturnal consultations? Why twice emphasize that Balaam may speak or act only according to the divine command? Why grant him permission to travel, become angry when he travels, send an armed angel to oppose him, and then have that same angel command him to continue the journey? Most importantly, if the ultimate purpose is simply for Yahweh to compel a hostile prophet to pronounce a predetermined blessing, much of the preceding narrative becomes unnecessary. Yahweh could simply place the required words in Balaam's mouth when he stands before Balak.

The rabbinic interpretation can therefore supply motives that explain particular difficulties, but those explanations do not necessarily explain the structure of the narrative as a whole. Indeed, explaining Balaam's obedient statements as externally compelled creates a further question: why does the narrative devote so much attention to portraying Balaam repeatedly consulting Yahweh, accepting Yahweh's refusals, acknowledging the limits of his own authority, and even offering to return home when confronted by the angel?

There are other instances in the Hebrew Bible in which Elohim overrides the intentions of a hostile individual and causes him to behave or speak contrary to his purpose. A particularly useful comparison occurs in [1 Samuel 19:18–24](#). Saul's hostility toward David is never in doubt: he has already attempted to kill David, and in this episode he sends men specifically to seize him. When the spirit of Elohim comes upon these messengers, however, they prophesy instead. Saul sends additional groups, with the same result, before finally going himself; he too is overcome by the spirit of Elohim

and prophecies. The reader therefore encounters no ambiguity concerning what has happened: Saul intends harm, Elohim intervenes, and Saul is prevented from accomplishing what he intended.

This provides an illuminating contrast with Balaam. If Numbers 22–24 is read in isolation, Balaam’s supposed hostility toward Israel is never stated and is difficult even to infer from his behaviour. He does not announce an intention to curse Israel; Balak asks him to do so. Balaam instead consults Yahweh, accepts Yahweh’s initial refusal, tells the second delegation that even unlimited payment cannot permit him to exceed Yahweh’s command, travels only after receiving divine permission, offers to return home when confronted by the angel, and repeatedly warns Balak that he can speak only what Yahweh gives him to speak. Even after Balak becomes furious that the anticipated curses have become blessings, Balaam reminds him that this was precisely the limitation he had stated from the beginning.

Nor does Numbers 22–24 provide an obvious reason why Balaam should harbour such hostility. Within the narrative world of the Torah, Balaam is a foreign seer summoned from Pethor on the Euphrates, while Israel has spent the preceding forty years wandering in the wilderness and has only now arrived in the Transjordan on its approach to the promised land. No previous encounter between Balaam and Israel is related, and no personal grievance against Israel is attributed to him.

Indeed, the narrative presents the more curious fact that this distant foreign seer already knows and consults Yahweh, refers to “Yahweh my Elohim,” and accepts Yahweh’s authority over what he may do and say. Within at least one of the Torah’s own accounts of Israel’s religious history, this is particularly striking. Moses first encounters Yahweh only some forty years earlier while living in Midian, and [Exodus 3](#) presents the divine name as something that must be disclosed to Moses and subsequently to the Israelites in Egypt. Exodus 6:2–3 goes further, explicitly declaring that although God appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, he was not known to them by the name Yahweh:

Elohim also spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name ‘Yahweh’ I did not make myself known to them.”<sup>8</sup>

Although this claim sits awkwardly beside other passages in Genesis that do use the name Yahweh, within this particular tradition the identification of Israel’s god as Yahweh is presented as a comparatively recent revelation associated with Moses and the exodus.

Against that background, Balaam is extraordinary. A foreign seer living far from Israel already knows this same deity, calls him “Yahweh my Elohim,” expects Yahweh to communicate with him during the night, and regards Yahweh’s word as binding upon his actions. Numbers 22–24 offers no explanation of how Balaam came to know Yahweh, just as it offers no explanation of why a man who apparently recognizes and obeys the same deity should nevertheless possess the intense pre-existing hatred of Israel attributed to him by later interpretation. If such hatred exists, its origin lies outside the narrative of Numbers 22–24.

The difficulty largely disappears only if Balaam is assigned the role of an almost archetypal villain:

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<sup>8</sup>The English translation in the NRSVue is actually rather obfuscating: “God also spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name “The Lord” I did not make myself known to them.’ ” It is rather like translating a king’s declaration as: “The ruler spoke to his subject and said, ‘I am the King. I appeared to your parents as the Almighty Ruler, but by my name “the King” I did not make myself known to them.’ ” The translation is superficially intelligible, but it obscures the fact that the original passage is explicitly distinguishing between particular divine designations: Elohim, El Shaddai, and Yahweh.

a man whose hatred of Israel requires no particular cause because wickedness is itself an essential feature of his character. This is essentially the direction taken by the later rabbinic portrayal, particularly when Balaam is constructed as the moral antithesis of Abraham. For a modern literary analogy, the relationship becomes something like Saruman to Gandalf: two figures possessing comparable extraordinary abilities, but with the character and purposes of one constructed as the corruption or inversion of the other. Such a characterization can certainly explain why Balaam would secretly desire Israel's destruction despite his repeated professions of submission to Yahweh. The difficulty is that this characterization must first be supplied from outside Numbers 22–24; it is not the characterization of Balaam that naturally emerges from those chapters when read in isolation.

The hostile Balaam familiar from later biblical and rabbinic tradition therefore does not emerge naturally from Numbers 22–24 considered by itself. Rather, that characterization becomes necessary when the Balaam cycle is read together with subsequent passages, particularly [Numbers 31:8, 16](#) and [Deuteronomy 23:4–5](#), which explicitly associate Balaam with Israel's enemies and describe him as having been hired to curse Israel or as having counselled the events at Peor. Once those later statements are accepted as descriptions of the same character, the reader must effectively work backward and reinterpret the earlier narrative: Balaam's repeated professions of obedience become reluctant submission, his consultations with Yahweh conceal a desire to obtain permission to curse Israel, and his blessings become words forced from the mouth of an unwilling prophet. In contrast to Saul, therefore, the hostile intention is not established before the divine intervention; it is supplied by later passages and then read backward into the earlier narrative.

The rabbis likewise connect Balaam with the disaster at Baal-peor, although here it is especially important to distinguish what is narrated at the time of the event from what is asserted retrospectively. [Numbers 25](#) itself never mentions Balaam. Israelite men become involved with Moabite women, participate in sacrifices to their gods and attach themselves to Baal-peor. Yahweh's anger is consequently kindled against Israel, and Moses is commanded to have the leaders of the people executed. The narrative then abruptly introduces an Israelite man who publicly brings a Midianite woman into the camp. Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, follows the couple and kills both with a spear. Only then does the narrator state that "the plague was stopped among the people of Israel", adding that twenty-four thousand had died.

Curiously, the beginning of this plague is never actually narrated. The text does not explicitly say, "Yahweh sent a plague", describe its outbreak, or explain its nature; the reader first learns of its existence when told that Phinehas's act has stopped it. Nevertheless, the verses immediately following make the intended connection with divine anger reasonably clear. Yahweh declares that Phinehas has "turned back my wrath from the Israelites" by being zealous with Yahweh's own zeal, and says that Phinehas has thereby "made atonement for the Israelites" ([Numbers 25:11–13](#)). The text therefore attributes the cessation of divine wrath to Phinehas's killing of the Israelite man and Midianite woman, although it does not explain the mechanism in detail, describing only the zeal of Phinehas actions and the resulting atonement.

More important for the Balaam narrative, none of this is attributed to Balaam in [Numbers 25](#). A reader proceeding consecutively from [Numbers 24](#) has just been told that Balaam "went back to his place." [Numbers 25](#) then relates the catastrophe at Peor without mentioning him at all. Indeed, the conclusion of the Balaam cycle seems remarkably final. After Balaam has frustrated Balak three times by blessing Israel rather than cursing it, Balak angrily tells him to flee back to his own country and declares that Yahweh has deprived him of the promised reward. Balaam delivers his remaining

oracles and the narrative concludes: “Then Balaam got up and went back to his place, and Balak also went his way” ([Numbers 24:25](#)).

This makes the subsequent attribution of the Peor episode to Balaam particularly unexpected. Why would Balak or his Midianite allies, after Balak had expended twenty-one bulls and twenty-one rams in three unsuccessful attempts to obtain a curse, and had instead dismissed the seer who repeatedly blessed Israel, now seek or accept his advice concerning another means of destroying Israel? More importantly, Numbers 25 gives the reader no indication that such a conversation ever occurred. Balaam and Balak have gone their separate ways, and Balaam disappears entirely from the account of Peor.

Only much later, following the war against Midian, does Moses announce in Numbers 31:16 that the Midianite women, “on Balaam’s advice”, caused the Israelites to trespass against Yahweh in the affair of Peor. This introduces yet another discontinuity. Balak is the king of Moab, and throughout Numbers 22–24 it is Balak and his Moabite officials who summon Balaam and negotiate with him. Although Midianite elders accompany the Moabite elders in the initial delegation (Num. 22:4, 7), the narrative never describes Balaam entering the service of the Midianites, advising their leaders, or even speaking with them separately. At the conclusion of the episode, Balaam returns to his place and Balak goes his own way.

[Numbers 31:16](#) therefore supplies retrospectively a relationship and an episode that Numbers 22–25 never narrates: at some point Balaam must have advised Israel’s enemies—now specifically associated with Midian—to use women to induce the Israelites to trespass against Yahweh. This retrospective statement provides the textual basis for the later tradition that, after Yahweh prevented Balaam from cursing Israel directly, Balaam devised another means of destroying it: if Israel could be induced to sin, Yahweh himself would punish the people.

Rabbinic literature greatly expands the missing narrative between these statements. *Midrash Tanchuma Buber*, [Balak 23:5](#), notices another difficulty created by the resulting chronology. [Numbers 24:25](#) has already sent Balaam home, yet [Numbers 31:8](#) finds him among the Midianites, where he is killed. The midrash therefore supplies an otherwise unreported return journey: after Balaam learned that twenty-four thousand Israelites had died through his counsel, he returned to Midian to collect his reward. Thus the reconstructed sequence becomes

Balaam advises the scheme → Balaam returns home  
→ Peor occurs  
→ 24,000 Israelites die  
→ news reaches Balaam  
→ Balaam returns to Midian, not Moab, for payment

Only a small portion of this sequence is actually narrated in Numbers. [Numbers 31:16](#) attributes the Peor affair to Balaam’s counsel and [Numbers 31:8](#) places Balaam among the Midianites when they are defeated. The intervening events—that Balaam had already given this particular advice before leaving, that news of its success travelled back to him after his departure, and that he then made the return journey in order to collect payment—are supplied by the later interpreter in order to connect passages that otherwise sit rather awkwardly beside one another. The narratives describing these events could easily be significantly longer than the relatively brief biblical passages whose discontinuity they are intended to explain.

The characterization is subsequently extended still further. It is not enough that Balaam suppos-

edly proposed the use of sexual temptation as an effective strategy against Israel; his willingness to propose it becomes evidence concerning his own personality. As mentioned above [Pirkei Avot 5:19](#) constructs Balaam as the moral opposite of Abraham: Abraham is characterized by a good eye, humility and restrained appetite, while “Balaam the wicked” possesses an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a limitless appetite. Also, as mentioned above, Maimonides attempts to derive this characterization from the biblical tradition where in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 5:19, he argues that Balaam’s supposed advice that the women be used to entice Israel demonstrates Balaam’s own excessive sexual appetite: in effect, a person recommends conduct corresponding to his own desires.

This represents another substantial interpretive step. [Numbers 31:16](#) may be read as asserting that Balaam advised the strategy at Peor, but it says nothing about Balaam’s own sexual behaviour or desires. The action attributed to him is therefore converted into evidence of an underlying personality, which in turn helps support the larger rabbinic portrait of Balaam as an archetype of wickedness. The resulting Balaam is not merely an enemy who makes a malicious suggestion; he increasingly becomes the inversion of Abraham himself—a figure whose greed, arrogance, lust and hatred of Israel are treated as inherent characteristics.

This construction certainly produces a coherent villain. Indeed, without such a characterization, many of the later interpretations become much more difficult to sustain: Balaam must secretly desire the curse that Yahweh prevents him from uttering, must personally hate Israel despite Numbers 22–24 providing no origin for that hatred, must devise the catastrophe at Peor after his curses fail, and must return from his homeland to collect payment after hearing of its success. The moral antithesis between Abraham and Balaam provides an overarching explanation for these otherwise disconnected inferences: Balaam does these things because Balaam is, by definition, the wicked counterpart to Abraham.

As evidence for the history of Jewish interpretation, this development is extremely valuable. It demonstrates how later readers attempted to reconcile the remarkably obedient seer of much of Numbers 22–24 with the hostile Balaam of [Numbers 31:16](#) and [Deuteronomy 23:4–5](#). It is much less useful, however, as evidence for what Numbers 22–24 originally communicates about Balaam, since many of the characteristics required by the later portrait become visible only after the later passages have been read backward into the earlier narrative.

The rabbinic Balaam is therefore significantly different from the figure one might construct from the oracles alone. The rabbis accept the received narrative as a unified story and consequently seek moral explanations for its tensions. Balaam really can communicate with Yahweh and really does pronounce divinely inspired blessings, but his obedience is interpreted as externally imposed rather than internally desired. His repeated declarations that he can say only what Yahweh places in his mouth become demonstrations of Yahweh’s control over a hostile prophet rather than evidence of Balaam’s faithfulness. The talking donkey similarly becomes not merely a miraculous animal but a deliberate humiliation of a celebrated seer: before Balaam can proclaim that he “sees the vision of the Almighty” in [Numbers 24:4](#) and [16](#), he must first be shown that his own donkey can see what he cannot.

These interpretations are particularly useful because they demonstrate that the difficulties in the Balaam narrative did not go unnoticed by ancient readers. Rabbinic interpreters did not respond to those difficulties through source criticism or by proposing that different traditions had been combined. Instead, they preserved the unity of the narrative by supplying Balaam with the consistently hostile motivation that the immediate narrative does not always make explicit. The result is the

familiar rabbinic figure of *Balaam the wicked*: an extraordinarily gifted prophet whose words may come from God even though his intentions decidedly do not.

The cumulative effect is revealing. Individual difficulties can be explained: Balaam travels because he desires money or secretly hates Israel; he saddles his own donkey because that hatred makes him impatient; the angel waits in the road because divine executioners supposedly wait for their victims; Balaam advises the use of women after his curses fail; and, having returned home, he later returns to Midian to collect his reward. Taken together, however, these explanations require an increasingly elaborate reconstruction of Balaam's motives and actions, much of which is never narrated in Numbers 22–24. The rabbinic portrait is therefore enormously valuable for understanding how later Jewish readers reconciled the received Balaam traditions, but it must be distinguished from what can be inferred from the earlier narrative itself. Read independently, Numbers 22–24 presents a considerably more enigmatic figure: a foreign seer who knows Yahweh, repeatedly submits to divine instruction, pronounces extraordinary blessings upon Israel, and whose supposed hatred of that people is never explained and scarcely even expressed.

I confess to finding this particular body of rabbinic interpretation somewhat disappointing. Elsewhere, rabbinic discussions of difficult moral questions can be remarkably perceptive, identifying ethical problems in biblical narratives and exploring them with considerable subtlety. I had therefore expected the peculiarities of the Balaam narrative to produce similarly probing engagement with the text. Instead, much of what I encountered here resembles the harmonizing arguments familiar from Christian apologetics: the unity and moral coherence of the received narrative are assumed in advance, and additional motives, events or principles are then supplied as necessary to preserve them. The rabbinic interpretations have the considerable advantage of greater antiquity and are extremely valuable evidence for the history of interpretation, but antiquity does not by itself give an interpretation greater explanatory force.

## 12 Summary

The Balaam cycle is considerably more complex than the story of a foreign diviner and his talking donkey might initially suggest. Numbers 22–24 preserves an extraordinary portrayal of Balaam: a renowned non-Israelite seer who receives repeated divine revelations, acknowledges Yahweh’s authority, refuses to speak beyond what he has been commanded, and ultimately blesses the very people he was hired to curse. Yet this favourable portrayal exists alongside substantial literary tensions and alongside other biblical traditions in which Balaam is remembered not as a faithful prophet but as a hostile diviner and enemy of Israel.

The most immediate tension occurs in the account of Balaam’s journey. Numbers 22 contains two delegations, two overnight consultations, repeated instructions concerning what Balaam may say, and what appear to be two permissions to proceed. In the final text Balaam is explicitly permitted to accompany Balak’s officials, obeys that instruction, and is immediately opposed by the angel of Yahweh because he is going. Separating the duplicated consultation scenes produces two independently coherent narratives. In one, Balaam seeks the will of Elohim, receives permission to accompany the delegation, and departs. In the other, Balaam sets out without such authorization, encounters the angel of Yahweh, is repeatedly saved by his donkey, and only then receives permission to continue under the restriction that he speak only the words given to him. In this second narrative, the seer appears to be mocked, as his donkey can see the angel that he does not. This reconstruction cannot establish how [Numbers 22](#) was actually composed, but it offers a straightforward explanation for one of the narrative’s most persistent difficulties.

A second tension concerns Balaam’s character and fate. Within Numbers 22–24 he never curses Israel and repeatedly insists upon speaking only what Yahweh commands. After delivering his final oracle he announces, “So now, I am going to my people”, apparently bringing his role in the story to an end. Elsewhere, however, Balaam is remembered as the diviner hired to curse Israel, is blamed for advising Israel’s enemies to entice the people into apostasy at Peor, and is killed among the Midianites. These traditions are not easily reconciled with the Balaam portrayed in the oracles and suggest that differing memories of the same figure were preserved within the biblical tradition.

There are also tensions within the portrayal of the divine itself. Elohim first prohibits Balaam from accompanying a delegation that has come to summon him, but subsequently permits him to accompany a second delegation precisely on the stated condition that the men have come to summon him—a condition that was already true of the first. Elohim then becomes angry when Balaam acts upon this permission. The irony becomes particularly striking in the second oracle, where Balaam declares that “El is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19). Within the oracle this declaration is entirely intelligible: El has blessed Israel and Balak cannot persuade him to reverse that blessing. Within the combined narrative, however, the declaration follows almost immediately upon a prose account in which the divine instruction to Balaam has apparently changed. This tension does not prove that the oracle once circulated independently, but it is readily explained if poetic material concerning the irrevocability of El’s blessing was incorporated into a prose narrative with a different compositional history.

That Balaam was known beyond the biblical tradition is demonstrated by the Deir Alla inscription. Written centuries before the final form of the Torah, it independently attests a celebrated seer named “Balaam son of Beor” who receives revelations from the divine world. The inscription cannot establish when Balaam lived, nor can it demonstrate that the biblical and Deir Alla figures are historically identical. It does, however, demonstrate that Balaam was not simply a character

invented for the Book of Numbers. He belonged to a wider Northwest Semitic tradition from which Israel could adopt and reinterpret his reputation.

The oracles themselves provide further reason to consider whether some of these traditions circulated independently before their incorporation into the Torah. Their language repeatedly concerns *Jacob* and *Israel*, while several of their closest biblical parallels lead to traditions associated with Jacob, Joseph and his descendants Ephraim and Manasseh, Samuel and Saul, and older Israelite poetry. None of these parallels proves a northern origin, but their cumulative pattern is noteworthy. David, Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty remain absent, and even where the Balaam oracles closely parallel imagery elsewhere explicitly associated with Judah, they continue to apply that imagery to Jacob and Israel. [Genesis 49](#) associates the lion and the scepter specifically with Judah; Balaam associates the lion with Israel and declares instead that “a scepter shall rise out of Israel”. The anticipated king is Israel’s, the scepter rises from Israel, and the coming ruler arises from Jacob.

The history of interpretation provides an unexpected final piece of evidence for the difficulty of the received narrative. Rabbinic interpreters clearly recognized many of the same peculiarities considered in this study: the strange transition from divine permission to divine anger, the behaviour of the angel, Balaam’s willingness to travel, his failure to perceive what his donkey sees, his subsequent association with Peor, and his unexpected presence among the Midianites. Their solutions differ fundamentally from the compositional approach pursued here. Rather than asking whether different traditions had been combined, they generally assume the unity of the received narrative and supply the motives and intervening events necessary to make that narrative coherent. Balaam therefore becomes greedy, lustful, arrogant and consumed by hatred of Israel; his obedience is reluctant, his journey is motivated by money or malice, his advice produces the catastrophe at Peor, and after returning home he travels back to Midian to collect his reward. The resulting portrait is coherent, particularly once Balaam has been made the moral antithesis of Abraham, but much of the characterization must be read backward into Numbers 22–24 from later biblical passages or supplied by the interpreter.

The evidence considered here therefore does not yield a single certain reconstruction of the history of the Balaam cycle. It points instead toward the preservation, combination and continuing reinterpretation of multiple traditions surrounding an unusually prominent foreign seer. Balaam could be remembered as a diviner of the wider Northwest Semitic world, as a recipient of genuine divine revelation, as the foreign prophet who blessed Israel, as the ridiculous seer who could not see what his donkey plainly perceived, and as the enemy who sought Israel’s destruction. The final form of the Torah preserves these portraits together without completely reconciling them, while later biblical and rabbinic traditions increasingly attempt to impose upon them a consistent characterization of Balaam as Israel’s enemy.

The resulting tensions should therefore not simply be dismissed as inconsistencies requiring ingenious explanations. They may themselves be evidence. Deir Alla demonstrates that traditions concerning Balaam existed outside Israel; the distinctive oracles suggest that poetic traditions about him could circulate in forms different from the surrounding prose; the duplicated journey narrative may preserve the joining of different accounts; later biblical passages preserve a markedly more hostile memory of his character and fate; and rabbinic interpretation demonstrates how still later readers attempted to reconcile these inherited traditions. What initially appears to be an oddly inconsistent story about a foreign diviner and a talking donkey may therefore preserve something considerably more interesting: traces of the long process by which different communities remembered, appropriated, combined and reinterpreted the figure of Balaam.

## 13 What this study proposes

This paper does not argue for the existence of multiple literary sources within [Numbers 22](#); that possibility has long been recognized by biblical scholars. Nor does it claim to establish with certainty how the present text was compiled. Rather, it brings together several observations that may help explain some of the unusual features of the Balaam cycle.

First, the repeated consultation scenes in [Numbers 22](#) can be separated in a way that yields two independently coherent narratives. In one, Balaam appears as a faithful servant of Elohim who seeks the divine will before acting and receives permission to accompany Balak's delegation. In the other, Balaam departs without such authorization, encounters the angel of Yahweh, is repeatedly saved by his donkey, and only then receives permission to continue under the restriction that he speak only the words given to him. This separation also draws attention to the heavier concentration of Yahwistic language in the donkey episode and to the possibility that the statement "Elohim's anger was kindled because he was going" functions as a seam between the two accounts.

Second, the study considers whether the sharply different portrayals of Balaam elsewhere in the Tanakh may preserve differing traditions concerning the same figure. The Balaam who faithfully blesses Israel and then announces his departure is difficult to reconcile with the Balaam who is subsequently blamed for the apostasy at Peor and killed among Israel's enemies. The independent attestation of Balaam son of Beor at Deir Alla makes the possibility of multiple traditions concerning a widely known seer especially interesting.

Third, the study draws attention to the cumulative pattern formed by the biblical parallels to Balaam's oracles. Individually, these parallels cannot establish the geographical origin of the poems. Collectively, however, they repeatedly lead toward Jacob-Israel, Joseph and his descendants, Samuel and Saul, and older Israelite poetic traditions, while Judah, David, Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty remain absent. Particularly noteworthy is the comparison with [Genesis 49](#): where that poem associates the lion and the scepter specifically with Judah, the Balaam oracles retain Jacob and Israel. This raises the possibility that at least some of the Balaam material preserves traditions with stronger affinities to Israel than to the later Judahite monarchy.

Fourth, the study considers the later rabbinic interpretation of Balaam not merely as reception history, but as evidence for the persistence of the narrative difficulties identified above. Rabbinic interpreters recognized many of the same peculiarities: Elohim permits Balaam to travel and then becomes angry when he does so; the angel waits for Balaam on the road; the great seer fails to perceive what his donkey can see; Balaam apparently returns home but is subsequently found among the Midianites; and the Peor episode is attributed retrospectively to advice that [Numbers 22–25](#) never narrates. Their solutions differ fundamentally from the compositional explanations considered in this study. Rather than allowing the difficulties to reflect the combination of differing traditions, they generally preserve the unity of the received narrative by supplying Balaam with additional motives, actions and, in some cases, substantial unreported events.

This provides an instructive comparison. The rabbinic explanations cannot establish that the difficulties arose through literary combination, but they demonstrate that those difficulties do not depend upon modern source-critical assumptions in order to be perceived. Ancient readers encountered them as well. Where the present study asks whether such tensions may preserve traces of differing traditions, the rabbinic interpreters generally resolve them by constructing an increasingly consistent characterization of "Balaam the wicked." The contrast between these approaches illus-

trates how the same textual phenomena can generate very different explanations depending upon whether the unity of the received narrative is assumed in advance.

None of these observations by itself determines the compositional history of Numbers 22–24, nor is it assumed that each is unprecedented in the scholarly literature. The more limited proposal of this study is that, considered together, they provide a coherent explanation for several otherwise puzzling features of the Balaam cycle and are consistent with the preservation and later combination of differing traditions concerning Balaam.