

“Bilaam, and what a talking ass was doing in the Torah”

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Our sidrah (Nu. chs 22-24) chronicles the efforts of the Moabite king, Balak, to enlist the aid of Bilaam to defeat the Israelite army. Bilaam was the premier soothsayer, or fortune teller, of the age, renowned for invoking blessings or curses on people. In Balak’s words, כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר תְּבָרֵךְ מְבֹרָךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תָּאָר יִאָּר “For I know that those whom you bless is blessed and those whom you curse is cursed” (Nu. 22:6). Interestingly, the power of the curse to affect all aspects of life and commerce was universally accepted in the ancient Near East; and many formulae of curses – written on pottery (referred to by archaeologists as ‘execration texts’), and directed at the rulers of the various Canaanite cities, were unearthed in Egypt, dating back to the early 2nd millennium BCE., the period of the Exodus. So the plausibility of a king of that period resorting to the employment of a soothsayer’s curse to frustrate any further Israelite advance has been well corroborated.

We also have the enigmatic episode of Bilaam’s ass which God endows with the power of speech. It is the ass that brings home to Bilaam the fact that he would not succeed in his purpose, and that his journey would prove fruitless (see Nu. 22:32-34). God’s message to Bilaam is that, for all his professed magical powers, even his ass is superior to him when it comes to perceiving the reality of a situation, and that his occult powers have been seriously compromised.

The obvious question raised by several commentators¹ is why God generally permits such wicked leaders to defy His will at all, and why He didn’t simply root Bilaam to the spot like Lot’s wife, or bury him in the earth like Korach and his cohorts, thereby avoiding the whole bizarre episode, especially that of the talking ass!

God's curious concession – a repeat of His similarly indulgent response to the clamour of the people to send spies into Canaan² – is explained by the Talmud with reference to the maxim, *b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilech bah, molichin oto* – 'In the direction a person determines to go, heaven leads him.'³ The heavenly Father - much like most human parents - allows His children room to make their own mistakes – leaving it only to the wise ones to learn therefrom, to gain experience of life's hazards and boundaries, and to develop a more positive relationship with Him. In the words of R. Akivah: 'God foresees everything, but permission to act is granted by Him.'⁴

A further difficulty is why God allowed that heathen “prophet” – as he is popularly referred to, and the validity of which term we shall presently examine – to become an instrument of Israel's praise. After all, given that we know that Bilaam was more than content to be the agent of Israel's destruction, from his repeated indications to God of his wish to accede to Balak's pleas, and his various suggestions to Balak as to what sacrificial rituals he should perform,⁵ it is mystifying that God should have allowed him to be the mouthpiece of those four lyrical tributes. After all, in Bilaam's mouth, they were patently insincere and also superfluous given that God had made it perfectly clear to him that Israel was already in a permanently blessed state – 'Do not curse the people, for it is blessed.'⁶ **לֹא תָאָרֹר אֶת הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא.**

The answer may be inferred from the fact that Bilaam was never instructed by God either to bless or to praise Israel, albeit that both the king and Bilaam would so construe the words he would utter.⁷ He was merely told to refrain from cursing Israel and to speak only the words that God would put in his mouth. This is underlined by the phrase, *Va-yasem Hashem **davar*** - 'God *placed an utterance* in Bilaam's mouth'⁸ – not, 'And God placed *a blessing* in his mouth.' There was also Bilaam's own acknowledgment of his restricted function as no more

than God's mouthpiece⁹ - את אשר ישים ה' בפי אותו אשמור לדבר . Indeed, the consistent description of Bilaam's utterances as *mashal*, 'a parable,' rather than *b'rachah*, is also indicative of their limited scope and power.¹⁰ The nearest Bilaam gets toward referencing a blessing were his affirmations, הנה ברך לקחתי, וברך ולא אשיבנו "Behold, to bless I was summoned. He blessed, and I could not counter it" (23:20); and, מברכך ברוך ומקללך "Those who bless you are blessed and those who curse you are accursed" (24:9).

So, given Bilaam's powerlessness, it is perplexing that some Talmudic sages credit him with having been far more than a mere magician or sorcerer, but rather *the* most distinguished prophet to arise among the world's nations. It is even more perplexing that they went overboard with their assessment of his status and powers, via a rather loose inference derived from one of the last verses in the Torah: ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה - 'Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses' (Deut. 34:10), to which the Midrash observes, בישראל לא קם אבל באומות העולם קם. ומנהו? בלעם. - 'In Israel there arose no prophet like Moses, but among the nations, his like did arise. And who was that? Bilaam.'¹¹

At first glance, the claim that there might be a modicum of parity between their respective prophetic roles and capabilities appears preposterous, so how could they possibly have come to attribute *nevu'ah* (prophecy) to Bilaam, especially given that nowhere in the entire episode is he referred to by the term *navi*!

The justification offered by the Talmud is that the term was referring to just one prophetic ability that Bilaam possessed, namely that of discerning the exact time when God's anger was at its fiercest against Israel, to the extent that, should her enemies have employed their curses at that most vulnerable moment, they might well have been effective.¹² Hence, given that Moses, as a true prophet, would assuredly have shared that ability – though he would

never have used it without God's instruction – *in that respect alone*, it could be said that 'Bilaam was a *navi like Moses*.'

Maimonides, basing himself on the Talmud, suggests that hearing God's voice had the dramatic effect of turning Bilaam not only into a believer but also into one with the perception of a *navi*. However, having fulfilled his God-given mission, he immediately slipped back into his former evil and destructive mind set:

(יהושע יג, כב) 'ואת בלעם בן בעור הקוסם' קוסם? נביא הוא! א"ר יוחנן בתחלה נביא ולבסוף קוסם .
אמר רב פפא היינו דאמרי אינשי מסגני ושילטי הוא, אייזן לגברי נגרי.
As for the sorcerer, Bilaam son of Beor, Israel had put him to the sword along with the rest of the slain [in the war against the Canaanites] (Josh. 13:22). The sorcerer? Surely he was a prophet! R. Yochanan answered, 'At the outset, he was a prophet, but subsequently he was a mere sorcerer?' R. Papa observed: Hence the saying, 'A woman who is descended from princes and rulers may nevertheless end up fornicating with carpenters.'¹³

Bilaam's volte face accords with the Torah's statement that it was he who eventually advised Israel's enemies how to penetrate her moral defences by using the Pe'or prostitutes of Moab and Midian to entice them, as described in the ensuing section: הן היו לבני ישראל בדבר בלעם למסור מעל בה' על דבר פעור, ותהי המגפה בעדת ה'.
- 'It was they who caused the Children of Israel, on the instructions of Bilaam, to betray the Lord in the matter of Peor [idolatry and immorality]': (31:16).

It could not be clearer, then, that Bilaam justified the derogatory title *ha-rasha* that the sages append to his name. So, how then may this be equated with the Talmudic view that he began his mission as a *navi* – however restricted in his prophetic capabilities – given that such a title is never applied to him by the Torah?

The answer may be found nestling within four remarkable statements that Bilaam makes when, under pressure from God, he spells out to King Balak why he cannot accept the task of cursing Israel:

- אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבור את פי ה' אלקי
“If King Balak were to give me his palace full of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of the Lord, my God” (Nu. 22:18).

אשר ישים אלקים בפי אותו אדבר
“Whatsoever word God puts into my mouth, that I shall speak” (22:38).

כל אשר ידבר ה' אותו אעשה
“Whatever the Lord speaks, that I shall do” (23:26)

אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבור את פי ה'...
אשר ידבר ה' אותו אדבר...
“If Balak were to give me...”(24:13)

It is not only astonishing that that idolator is so vehement in his assertions that he simply cannot defy God in any way, but that, on each occasion, he refers to Israel's God as either *Hashem* or *Elokim*, or, in the first instance, *Hashem Elohai*, ‘The Lord my God.’ In other words, he fully accepts upon himself the sovereignty of Israel's God, to the extent that he feels totally bound by whatever God desires of him. That seems to have been the only justification for the Talmudic sages' elevation of Bilaam to the status of a prophet, albeit exclusively one to the other nations.

But, if we turn to the Talmudic statement regarding the authorship of the Bilaam section, it is not only enigmatic but also begs the same question of how he came to be perceived as a *navi*. It states: מֹשֶׁה כָּתַב סֵפֶרוֹ וּפְרָשֶׁת בִּלְעָם - ‘Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Bilaam’.¹⁴

Now, considering that Mosheh wasn't even present for any of the events of Parashat Bilaam, all of which took place in the latter's country, ‘by the [Euphrates]River’ (Nu. 22:5),

we may wonder how he came to write the verbatim account of that episode with all its elevated poetic and prophetic outpouring? Especially, given that Bilaam ended up reverting to his former wickedness, all his praise of Israel was clearly shown to have been a hollow sham, rendering him a mere puppet on God's string. It follows, then, that his employment of all those divine names, like his protestations, was in no way a reflection of an authentic prophetic voice. So, once again we are confronted with that question, why the sages credited him with having been, even temporarily, a prophet? So this entire portion has all the Hallmark of a riddle wrapped up in an enigma, which is hardly the style of Mosheh Rabeinu!

We may suggest that it was precisely because of the fact that Israel had no knowledge of the threat to its very existence that had been hatched in that far-off country, that God considered it necessary to request Moses to reveal the details of that episode in full to the nation. God's objective was that, through His glowing and lyrical tribute to His people, mediated through the mouth of Bilaam, Israel would become convinced of the *ahavah rabbah*, 'God's unbounded love' for them, and His commitment to abide by the covenanted relationship He had sealed with their forefathers, notwithstanding their present and future sins.

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THE TALKING ASS

Granted, then, the necessity for the Bilaam episode to have been included in the Torah, but one may wonder at the purpose of including the whimsical story of the talking ass which has all the hallmarks of folklore rather than fact, and which has mystified commentators down the ages.

We suggest that modern psychology, with its condition known as Psychosis - offers a pertinent insight into its inclusion.

Psychosis refers to a collection of symptoms that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. During an episode of psychosis, a person's thoughts and perceptions are disrupted and they may have difficulty recognizing what is real and what is not.¹⁵

Our link is the view of Maimonides that the talking ass subplot was not a reality, but merely ‘a vision of Bilaam’s mind.’¹⁶ This would categorise its authenticity as no greater than a fable or flight of imagination,¹⁷ and would underscore the problem of why Moses should have included it in his historical account of such a serious threat to the nation’s existence.

By referring to this episode as a vision of Bilaam’s mind, Maimonides alerts us to the state of mental confusion from which Bilaam may well have suffered at that time as he grappled with fear of God’s retribution on the one hand – and possibly of the king’s on the other – with the incessant importuning of Balak’s delegations, and the prospect of losing the vast wealth that he coveted more than anything, and that was tantalizingly within his grasp.

So, Bilaam’s vision of his speaking ass is suggestive of a psychotic symptom, such as that which accompanies the hallucinations of schizophrenia and which psychologists refer to as ‘voice-hearing.’ Patients with such a mental state hear voices talking to or about them, and either criticising, threatening, or demeaning them. At times the sufferers recognise the voices as people they know, and often have the feeling that the speaker or speakers are following them around or giving a commentary on everything they are doing. Frequently they are giving them commands, such as telling them to hurt people, which they do not necessarily wish to do.

The literature lists the following five main symptoms of this condition which we may recognise as having close points of contact with the talking ass episode, and which may offer a rationale for why the Torah should have included it:

1. *Things around them seem changed in some way* – For Bilaam that was certainly the case as his confidence ebbed and confusion set in. No longer did he bask in his glory as the famous prophet, with clarity of thought and decisiveness.
2. *Rapid speech that is difficult to interrupt.* – His flow of two- or three-word, parallel couplets, with their strong, cathartic outpouring of emotional release, would have been more than difficult to interrupt.
3. *Irrational statements.* – Our episode of a talking ass is indubitably irrational.
4. *Extreme preoccupation with religion or with the occult* – Bilaam's worship of Baal Peor, on the one hand, coupled with his inability to resist the God of Israel's demand, on the other, clearly imposed such a preoccupation.
5. *Peculiar use of words or odd language structures* - the high-blown phraseology and archaisms of Bilaam's four oracles are clear examples of such structures. And, as a Mesopotamian, unfamiliar with Hebrew, all the words that poured forth from his mouth would have been 'peculiar and odd.'

So, viewed from the perspective of this 'voice-hearing' condition, the talking ass episode may no longer be interpreted as a piece of whimsical folklore, totally uncharacteristic of the Torah. To the contrary: we would suggest that its justifiable purpose is to add an illuminating psychological insight into Bilaam's hallucinatory frame of mind. The description is of a man struggling mentally from a disconnect with reality as he warily negotiates the minefield of competing demands for his allegiance. In his vivid imagination, everyone around him is shouting: The king and his delegations that he must utter his curses, voices from above that he must return home immediately and abandon his mission, with the *hee-haw* disgruntled noise of his braying ass alerting him to the fact that the journey he is embarking upon is doomed to failure.

NOTES

1. See, for example, *ibn Ezra* on v.19.
2. See our Torah thought on *Shelach lecha* 2022.
3. Tal. *Makk.*10b.
4. Avot 3:15.
5. Nu. 22:8, 19, 35; 23:3, 15, 29

6. 22:13.
7. 23:11,20; 24:1, 10.
8. 23:5, 12, 13, 16.
9. 22:6, 8, 13, 18, 35, 38; 23:7, 12; 24:1, 13.
10. 23:7; 24:3, 16, 20, 21, 23. This is supported by *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, pp.330-333), which renders his four speeches as 'oracles,' rather than 'blessings,' and by the JPS translation of the phrase *Va-yisa m'shalo* as 'he took up his theme' (23:7, 18; 24:3, 15).
11. *Sifre* on Deut. 34:10.
12. Tal. *Ber.* 7a.
13. Tal. *B.B.* 15b.
14. Tal. *B.B.* 14b.
15. See www.UnderstandingPsychosis.org The National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed 14.07.2024.
16. See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II, 42.
17. For a critique of Maimonides' interpretation of the talking ass, see Nachmanides on Gen.18:1.

ADDENDUM

The similarity of vocabulary within the respective passages descriptive of the malevolence of both Pharaoh and Balak is interesting and meaningful. Pharaoh failed to frustrate Israel's exodus from exile by pursuing them with horsemen and chariots; Bilaam and Balak sought to accomplish that same goal using ; the employment of the execration formulae to which we referred at the outset

PHARAOH

ויקוצו מפני בני ישראל (Ex. 1:12) 1

ותמלא הארץ אתם (v.7) 2

ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים (v.8) 3

ויאמר אל עמו (v.9) 4

הנה עם בני ישראל 5

רב ועצום ממנו 6

הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה (v.10) 7

ועלה מן הארץ 8

ונלחם בנו 8a

BALAK

ויקץ מואב מפני בני ישראל (Nu. 22:3) 1

ויאמר מואב אל זקני מדין (v.4) 4

5 (v.5) הנה עם יצא ממצרים

3 ובלק בן צפור מלך למואב בעת ההיא...

2 (v.6) הנה כסה את עין הארץ

7 עתה ילחכו הקהל את כל סביבתינו...

6 כי עצום הוא ממני

8 אולי אוכל נכה בו ואגרשנו מן הארץ

8a אולי אוכל להלחם בו