

Balaam's Ass: Why?

Introduction

Today's topic: A smart-ass. ☺

King Balak of Moab is afraid of the Israelites, who are numerous and physically close. So, three times he sends emissaries to enlist Balaam, a non-Jewish prophet, to curse Israel. Balaam refuses the first two times, saying that God has already blessed Israel. But the third time he accepts and follows them.

On his way to King Balak, Balaam's ass keeps seeing an angel with a sword blocking his way and gets off the road. Balaam never sees it, strikes the ass every time, and brings her back to the road. Finally the ass speaks and asks Balaam why he is hitting her:

22. And God's anger was kindled because [Balaam] went [to Balak]. And an angel of the Lord stood on the road [to stop him.] Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him.

23. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned away from the road, and went into the field. Then Balaam struck the ass, to turn back to the road.

24. But the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side, and a wall on that side.

25. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, it pushed itself against the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. And he struck her again.

26. And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn to the right or the left.

27. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, it crouched under Balaam. Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with a staff.

28. And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?

29. And Balaam said to the ass: Because you have mocked me; I wish there was a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you.

30. And the ass said to Balaam, Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life, until this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you? And he said: No.

31. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand. He bowed his head, and fell on his face.

32. And the angel of the Lord said to him: Why did you strike your ass these three times? Behold, I went out to stop you, because you hastened on a road to oppose me.

33. And the ass saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away from me, now I would also have killed you, and let her [the ass] live.

[Numbers 22:22-33]

Question

What is the meaning of this story? Why is it there? It must be important, because the Talmud says that that ass was created way back at the beginning of the world:

Ten things were created at twilight on Shabbat eve [right after the Creation of the world]:

-The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach] [Numbers 16:32]

-The mouth of [Miriam's] well [which accompanied and supplied the Israelites in the desert] [Numbers 21:16-18]

-The mouth of [Balaam's] ass [Numbers 22:28-30]

-The rainbow [Genesis 9:12-17]

-The manna [Exodus 16:15]

-The staff [of Moses] [Exodus 4:17]

-The shamir [worm] [Mishnah Sotah 9:12]

-The writing, the writing instrument and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments].

-Some say also the burial place of Moses [Deuteronomy 34:6] and the ram of our father Abraham [Genesis 22:13]. And some say also the spirits of destruction as well as the original tongs, for tongs are made with tongs.

[Pirkei Avot 5:6]

Rabbis: God foresaw needed exceptions to His natural laws, and created them for the proper time. So the talking ass was needed. Why?

Ten possible reasons

1-God wanted to impress upon Balaam that it's really the all-powerful God talking. (If he makes an ass talk, he must really be God.)

2-God wanted Balaam to know that God controls speech, even the speech of an ass. So, if Balaam tried to curse Israel as he planned, only words of blessing would come out. Midrash:

This was done in order to make known to [Balaam] that the mouth and the tongue are in [God's] power and that [even] if [Balaam] wished to curse, his mouth was in [God's] power. [Numbers R. 20:14]

3-God wanted Balaam to turn back, but of his own free will, so he sent hints. However, this interpretation presents problems because the Torah tells us that Balaam was willing to turn back:

And Balaam said to the angel of the Lord: "I have sinned; for I did not know that you stood in the way against me. Now, therefore, if it displeases you, I will go back again." But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam: "Go with the men, but you will say only what I tell you to say." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak. [Num. 22:34-35]

So apparently God decided He will not prevent Balaam from doing what Balaam wishes, just warn him that He is displeased. God tells Balaam: Go if you insist, but I am most powerful (I can make asses talk) and there will be consequences.

Indeed, Balaam was later killed fighting the Israelites during the war against the Midianites. The Torah says:

[The Israelites] also slew Balaam ben Beor with the sword. [Num. 31:8]

4-God wanted to deflate Balaam's ego. Keli Yakar, 17th-century commentator from Prague, writes:

This was to impress upon Balaam that he should not feel proud that he has been given the gift of prophecy. If it suits God's purposes, even an ass will see angels and make speeches. [Keli Yakar (Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz)]

In Torah, Balaam claims he "hears the words of God and sees the vision of the Almighty". [Numbers 24:4] God shows him that his own ass sees more than he does, as if to say: "Think you can outsmart me? You are not even as smart as your ass!"

-However, Balaam does not seem surprised to hear the ass talk. He just answers her.

5-God downgrades Balaam in the eyes of the Moabite dignitaries, to suggest he will not be able to complete his mission of cursing Israel. The Torah says:

And Balaam said to the ass... I wish there was a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you. [Num. 20:29]

The Midrash comments:

The ass [was implicitly telling] Balaam: You are unable to kill me unless you have a sword in your hand. How then do you intend to uproot an entire nation [with mere words]? [Balaam] kept quiet, not finding a reply. The princes of Moab began to express astonishment, for they had witnessed a miracle the like of which had never been seen... Some authorities say that [Balaam] told them: [The ass] is not mine [and I have no experience of how to control her.] [Tanchuma Balak 9, Num. R. 20:14]

6-God wanted to teach Balaam that a “righteous” ass is worth more than a crooked prophet. The angel tells Balaam:

If [the ass] had not turned away from me, surely now I would also have killed you, and let her [the ass] live. [Numbers 22:33]

However, as a counterpoint, the Midrash says that the word “also” implies that the angel killed the ass. The above phrase must be read as:

If [the ass] had not turned away, I would also have killed you, and let her [the ass] live. But now, since she spoke and rebuked you, and you could not withstand her rebuke, (as it is written, “He said, No,”) therefore, I have killed her, so that [people] should not say, “This is the one that silenced Balaam with her rebuke, and he could not respond.” This serves to inform you that the Holy One, blessed be He, has consideration for the dignity of mankind and, knowing their needs, He shut the mouth of beasts. Had they been able to speak, it would have been impossible to put them to the service of man or to stand one's ground against them. For here was this ass, the most stupid of all beasts, and there was the wisest of all wise men, yet as soon as she opened her mouth he could not stand his ground against her! [Tanhuma Balak 9, Num. R. 20:14]

The Midrash also offers another opinion:

[The angel killed the ass] so that people should not say: “This is the animal that spoke, so make her an object of reverence.” [Num. R. 20:14]

7-God uses this episode to tell Balaam how much He cares about Israel. The Midrash says:

[The Torah says:]

And the angel of the Lord said to [Balaam]: Why did you strike your ass these three times? [Num. 22:32]

Did the angel really come to seek satisfaction on behalf of the ass? [No.] In fact, he was telling [Balaam]: If, for this ass, which does not have either merit or a covenant with patriarchs, I have been commanded to demand satisfaction, how much more so in the case of the entire nation which you seek to uproot, and which possesses both merit and a covenant with patriarchs! [Num. R. 20:15]

8-God allows animals to see more than humans because humans have more understanding and would live in fear if they could see everything. Rashi says:

God allowed a beast to perceive more than a man, because a man possesses intelligence, and so he would become insane if he saw forces of destruction.

9-The ass was important because Balaam had a sexual relationship with her. The Torah says:

And the ass said to Balaam: Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life, until this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you? [Num. 22:30]

The Talmud interprets this verse as follows:

When [Balaam] was seen riding on his ass, [the Moabite dignitaries] said to him: "Why don't you ride on a horse [as a man of your rank should]?"

And he replied, "I sent [my horse] out to pasture."

Immediately the she-ass retorted: "Am I not your ass?"

"Just for carrying burdens," he interrupted.

"Upon which you have ridden," she continued.

"Only on occasion", he again interrupted.

"All your life", she continued.

[Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?]

[She added] "What is more, I have carried you during the day and I have been your companion at night",

for the word "I was in the habit" [*hiskanti*], used here, is analagous to the word "let her be his companion" [*sokeneth*] used elsewhere. [1Kings 1:2]

[Avodah Zarah 4b]

The Midrash tells us:

[The Torah says that Balaam had ridden this ass "all his life".] You may thus infer that [Balaam] was not an old man, since the ass was older than he [and asses do not live long]. [Numbers R. 20:14]

The Zohar adds:

-Rabbi Yitzhaq said: I marvel at the wicked Balaam, how all his actions proceeded from the side of impurity... [He] besmirched himself nightly by bestial intercourse with his ass, and he would then proceed to his divinations and sorceries. [Zohar, Bereshit 1:125b]

-Rabbi Yosei... asked him: ...Who did Balaam derive all his magical practices and knowledge from? Rabbi Yitzhaq replied: He learned it first from his father [who was also a prophet]. [Zohar, Bereshit 1:126a]

10-The ass was a symbol of royalty, and so was a fit instrument for God's message. Saul, David, Solomon and Avshalom rode asses.

The horse symbolized war and the ass peace. When kings rode asses, they came in peace, not as conquerors. Bible frequently mentions leaders riding asses [1 Kings 1:33, Judges 5:10; 10:4; 12:14; 2 Samuel 16:2]. Messiah will enter Jerusalem on an ass:

Behold, your king comes to you. He is triumphant and victorious, humble and riding upon an ass. [Zech. 9:9-10]

For that, the Talmud says:

If one sees an ass in a dream, he may hope for salvation. [Berakhot 56b]