

Was the prophet Balaam good or bad?

Summary of biblical text

Balak, king of Moab, is afraid of Israel, who are numerous and close. He sends emissaries 3 times to enlist Balaam, a non-Jewish prophet, to curse Israel. Balaam refuses, saying God already blessed Israel. The 3rd time he accepts to follow them, and Balak shows him Israel from 3 different "angles". Each time Balaam blesses Israel (against his will) and predicts victory for them:

[Balaam said: Even] if [King] Balak gave me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of the Lord, to do either good or evil on my own. Only what the Lord speaks can I speak. [Num. 24:13]

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! They extend like streams, like gardens by the river, like aloes which the Lord planted, like cedars by the water. Water will flow from his wells, and his seed shall have abundant water. His king shall be raised over Agag, and his kingship exalted. God, Who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness, He shall consume the nations which are his adversaries... Those who bless you shall be blessed, and those who curse you shall be cursed. [Num. 24: 5-9]

Talmudic interpretation of "How goodly are your tents!": He saw that the entrances were not facing each other [for privacy]. [B.B. 60a]

How can I curse whom God has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the Lord has not been angered?.. [Israel] is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations. Who [can count] the dust of Jacob or the number of the seed of Israel?.. [Num. 23:8-10]

Midrashic interpretation: When Israel rejoices, no other nation rejoices with them... And when the [other] nations prosper, Israel will prosper with them, but it will not be deducted from their account. [Tanchuma Balak 12, Num. Rabbah 20:19]

A star has gone forth from Jacob, and a staff will arise from Israel, which will crush the princes of Moab and uproot all the sons of Seth. Edom shall be possessed, and Seir shall become the possession of his enemies, and Israel shall triumph. [Num. 24:17-18]

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

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, 17th cent. rabbi of Prague)]

God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" [Num. 22:9]

That villain thought: He does not know them! There are times, then, when He does not know what is going on, and so I shall do with His children all that I please. [Sometimes, not everything is revealed before Him, for He is not always omniscient. I will find a time when I am able to curse, and He will not realize it.] [Mid. Tanchuma Balak 5, Num. Rabbah 20:9]

Who was Balaam?

-Balaam was one of "the seven prophets who prophesied to the peoples of the world". [The other 6 were: Beor (Balaam's father), Job, and Job's four friends] [B.B. 15b]

God raised up Moses for Israel and Balaam for the peoples of the world. [Num. R. 20:1; Tanhuma Balak 1]

-Balaam was greater than Moses in many respects:

It was taught: And there has not arisen a prophet [like Moses] since in Israel [Deut. 34:10]. In Israel there had not arisen one like him, but there had arisen one like him among the nations of the world. This was in order that the nations of the world might have no excuse for saying: If we had possessed a prophet like Moses, we would have worshipped the Holy One, blessed be He. What prophet did they have that was like Moses? Balaam the son of Beor. There was a difference, however, between the prophecy of Moses and that of Balaam...

-Moses did not know who was speaking with him, while Balaam knew...

-Moses did not know when the Holy One, blessed be He, would speak with him, while Balaam knew...

-Moses did not know what the Holy One, blessed be He, would speak to him about, while Balaam knew...

-Moses could not speak with [God] whenever he pleased, but Balaam could...

[Numbers Rabbah 14:20]

Also:

-Balaam knew the exact time of God's anger. [Av. Zar. 4a-b; Sanh. 105b][Berachot 7a]

This is what allowed his curses to be effective.

-Talmud makes clear Balaam's prophecies are included in the Torah:

Moses wrote his own book [Deuteronomy], and the parts dealing with Balaam [Num. 23-24] and the Book of Job... [B.B. 14b]

-Extra-biblical reference to Balaam: 1967 discovery of plaster in Tell Deir 'Alla, Jordan, in language similar to biblical Hebrew, dated ~8th-century BCE, with inscription bearing the name of *bl'm brb'r* – "Balaam, son of Beor", referred to as "a divine seer" (*'zh < lhn*), who dreamt that the gods told him of an impending disaster that would devastate the land. He then tells the people about it, and is viewed as an heroic figure, who tried to save his people and the land.

Was Balaam good?

-Balaam obeyed God and would not depart from what God told him to say. In Tanach, Balaam's role is interpreted as a sign of God's providence over his people. [Micah 6:5]

-Balaam may have had bad thoughts, but one is judged by actions, not thoughts.

-Balaam's is the only prayer by a non-Jew in the siddur:

Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! [Num. 24: 5]

Was Balaam bad?

-Talmud says so:

Balaam was a *rasha*, a wicked one [Berachot 7a; Taanit 20a; Numbers Rabbah 20:14].

An evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a proud soul, are the marks of the disciples of "Balaam the Wicked". [Avot, 5:19]

-God protected Israel by not allowing Balaam to curse them, and implies that Balaam intended to do just that:

Balak... sent Balaam to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam. Therefore, he blessed you. So I saved you from his hand. [Joshua 24:9-10]

-[Balaam] wished "to uproot an entire people for naught and for no reason" [Num. R. 20:1; Tanhuma Balak 1] and advised Balak on how to destroy them. This caused the Holy Spirit to depart from the Gentiles, and since then prophecy existed only in Israel. [B. B. 15b]

-Balaam was one of Pharaoh's counselors, along with Jethro and Job. His advice was that the male Israelite children should be cast into the Nile. [Sanh. 106a]. [Eventually Balaam was killed; Jethro argued against harming Israel and was rewarded; Job was silent and was punished.]

-Balaam led Israel to worship Baal Peor. That episode follows the account of Balaam's blessing in Torah [Numbers 31:8,16]:

Balaam arose, went, and returned home, and Balak went on his way. Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the Lord flared against Israel. [Num. 24:25, 25:1-3]

Behold, [the women] caused the people of Israel, *through the counsel of Balaam*, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor... [Num. 31:16, emphasis mine]

-Torah implies that because Balaam had been retained by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, God prohibited the conversion to Judaism of Ammonite and Moabite men:

An Ammonite or Moabite [masculine] shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord...forever; because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when you came out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Nevertheless the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing to you, because the Lord your God loved you. [Deuteronomy 23:4-6. See also Neh. 13:2]

-Balaam was killed in battle by the Israelites, together with the kings of Midian, during the war against the Midianites:

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

-Balaam was demoted. He is referred to as *ha-qôsem* ("the diviner") in the Book of Joshua. [Joshua 13:22] The Talmud comments:

[The children of Israel also slew with the sword] Balaam ben Beor, the soothsayer. A soothsayer? But he was a prophet! Rabbi Yochanan said: At first he was a prophet, but later he [was demoted to] soothsayer [as punishment for wishing to curse Israel]. [Sanh. 106a]

-God made Balaam speak the opposite of what he wanted to say:

Rabbi Yochanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man [Balaam] you may learn his intentions. [Every blessing is the opposite of the curse he wanted to utter.] Thus he wished to curse them

-That they [the Israelites] should not possess any synagogues or school-houses: [this is deduced from] "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob." [Num. 24:5];

-That the Shechinah should not rest upon them: [From] "And your dwelling places [*mishkenotecha*, or tabernacles], O Israel" [Num. 24:5];

-That their kingdom should not endure: "They extend like streams." [Num. 24:6];

-That they might have no olive trees and vineyards: "As gardens by the river's side." [Num. 24:6];

-That their odor might not be fragrant: "As the trees of aloes which the Lord has planted." [Num. 24:6];

-That their kings might not be tall: "And as cedar trees beside the waters." [Num. 24:6];

-That they might not have a king the son of a king: "He shall pour the water out of his buckets." [Num. 24:7];

-That their kingdom might not rule over other nations: "And his seed shall be in many waters." [Num. 24:7];

-That their kingdom might not be strong: "And his king shall be higher than Agag." [Num. 24:7];

-That their kingdom might not be awe-inspiring: "And his kingdom shall be exalted." [Num. 24:7]

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: All [these blessings eventually] reverted to a curse, [Balaam's intention was fulfilled with the fall of the house of David, the destruction of the Temple, and the Exile] except the synagogues and schoolhouses, for it is written,

But the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. [Deut. 23:6.]

The curse, but not the curses. [Only one curse was permanently turned into a blessing: that concerning synagogues and schoolhouses, as these never disappeared from Israel.] [Sanhedrin 105b]

Implication that the “feelings” of a prophet matter, even if his words belie them?

-Ultimately, Balaam had the free will to do as he pleased, except in cursing whom God had blessed, because the words of a prophet are fulfilled. So, to the question “Why did God first tell Balaam that He disapproved of his trip, then let him go and try to curse Israel, yet eventually prevented him from doing so? Why not just stop Balaam right away?”, the Talmud answers: Free will:

One is allowed to follow the road he wishes to follow. [For example], it is written, “God said to Balaam, ‘You shall not go with them,’” [Num. 22:12] and then it is written, “If the men came to call you, rise up and go with them.” [Num. 22:20]
[Makkot 10b]