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A God of Mockery? Revisiting the “Omnipotence Effect” in Numbers 22:21–35

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Article abstract

The characterization of YHWH, Israel's only God, is unique in the Hebrew Bible. The deity, while a character in the narrative, transcends the narrative on the level of discourse, rising above other characters, the narrator, and even the reader. This exceptional dynamic of characterization is exemplarily illustrated in the episode of Balaam and the talking jenny (Num 22:21–35), a text loaded with irony and ambiguity that recounts the deliverance of a foreign seer from YHWH's hands by his jenny. The characterization of YHWH in this text shows a God who manipulates both the narrated world and the formal structure of the text, exemplifying what Sternberg termed the “omnipotence effect.”

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A GOD OF MOCKERY? REVISITING THE “OMNIPOTENCE EFFECT” IN NUMBERS 22:21–35*

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On the rise of the field currently known in biblical scholarship as “narrative criticism,”¹ authors such as Sternberg and Savran introduced a concept of crucial importance for literary analyses of the biblical text. They argued that one of the main literary conventions in the Hebrew Bible narrative was YHWH’s ambiguous nature as a character:

On a purely literary level, the narrator treats God like any other figure, describing his comings and goings, his perspective ..., even God’s private musings But from an ideological, or theological standpoint, God’s status as a character is untenable. If the narrator posits an authoritative, omniscient, and exclusive deity, then he cannot presume to stand outside that creation. The narrator exists not because his advice is sought by God, but by reason of literary necessity.²

This dynamic gives YHWH a remarkable nature in biblical narrative. At the same time he is a character, he is more than that; while present in the narrated world, he is not restricted to it, joining the narrator in a higher perspective than even the reader. In the Hebrew Bible’s laconic narratives, the audience is often left

* This article is based on a chapter of the author’s MA thesis, written under the supervision of Prof. Suzana Chwartz from the University of São Paulo.

¹ According to Stephen D. Moore, “Biblical Narrative Analysis from the New Criticism to the New Narratology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Dana N. Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 95–108.

² George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 88.

groping for knowledge like the story's characters, being induced by the discourse of biblical narrative to acknowledge their inferiority in comparison to God.

Such a convention is often employed to express the height of divine powers: YHWH is dramatized as being able to create and shape the narrated world, including its characters, together with the narrator. Sternberg named this mix between divine and narratorial roles the "omnipotence effect"³: YHWH dramatizes his omnipotence by manipulating the very sequence of events in the narrative, imposing knowledge of his power upon the characters who inhabit the narrated world and advertising it to the readers through the narrator. The narrator "constructs a twofold rhetoric, extending to the implied reader the signs and message that God directs at his own refractory clients."⁴ But at the same time,

[t]he symmetry of the two communicative acts—the narrator's frame and God's inset—must not therefore obscure their interpenetration. For one thing, ... the narrator performs in the service of God; but to do so he must invert their ultimate hierarchical status by incorporating God's performance into his own discourse. For still another, God's operation as a self-propagandist affords a number of clues to the narrator's underground maneuvers.⁵

Over thirty years after Sternberg and Savran's seminal works, many authors have taken upon themselves to analyze the characterization of YHWH in biblical narrative, with astounding, troublingly fascinating results.⁶ Few, however, have tackled the literary nature of Israel's God, as well as the consequences of his literary construction to both his characterization and the ideological discourses of biblical narrative. Thus this work aims at analyzing the episode of Balaam and the talking donkey (Num 22:21–35) with the tools provided by narrative criticism, to assess whether the so called "omnipotence effect" can still be observed in different biblical texts—and how that affects the characterization of YHWH in such a narrative.

The episode of Balaam and the talking donkey takes place in the middle of Israel's journey through the wilderness. After witnessing Israel encamped around the borders of Moab, Balak,

³ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 99–128.

⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf. Stuart Lasine, "Characterizing God in His/Our Own Image," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Dana N. Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 465–78, and the references cited therein. Also cf. Lee W. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980).

the Moabite king, sends messengers to hire Balaam, an apparently powerful foreign seer, to curse Israel. The seer claims to be YHWH's servant and can only do as his master says, but is allowed by God to meet Balak after some insistence (Num 22:1–20).

The journey begins with rapid action by Balaam, who soon in the morning saddles his mount and departs with the Moabites, accompanied by two lads (v. 21). God's wrath flares against his servant's journey, and he sends a messenger as an adversary into his path (v. 22). Balaam will be saved only by his donkey, who, seeing the messenger that is invisible to Balaam, strays from the path three times, being struck with increasing violence by her owner, until the animal has its mouth opened by YHWH and engages in a debate with the blind seer. Only after another divine intervention will Balaam be able to see the messenger, who allows Balaam to proceed on the condition that he will only say what God tells him to.

The following narrative is the most famous among Balaam narratives, due to its heavy use of dramatic irony and comicity.⁷ It is considered a satire against Balaam and presents singular variations as a theophany type-scene.⁸ In the interests of this work, emphasis will be put on (1) the change of mind by God (v. 22), (2) the direct and indirect descriptions of YHWH's messenger and (3) Balaam's donkey.

“GOD’S ANGER WAS KINDLED BECAUSE HE WAS GOING”: THE FICKLE YHWH

Few divine aspects in the Balaam narrative were as discussed as YHWH's sudden change of mind in verse 22, when God, after authorizing Balaam to go with the Moabites (v. 20), became angry at his departure. In studies of the Balaam texts in its final form, many explanations were proposed for the sudden change in God's stance regarding his servant's trip. Mary Douglas, in her literary analysis of the episode, argues that there is no legitimacy in any attempts by Balaam after YHWH's statement in v. 12, since the permanence of the blessing over Israel makes any attempt to curse them inefficient and offensive to God.⁹ Such explanation does not make clear, however, the reason for YHWH to allow Balaam's trip in their following dialogue. Moberly proposes that the very permission conceded to Balaam arises as a

⁷ Despite its strong connections with irony and satire, humor and the comic defy definitions, being “a most subjective, and therefore intrinsically undefinable manifestation of a certain temperamental and highly personal *Weltanschauung*” (Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* [Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990], 24). Nevertheless, all scholars cited in this work see satirical humor in the donkey episode.

⁸ According to the theophany type-scene as proposed by George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative*, JSOTSup 420 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 5–30.

⁹ Mary Douglas, “Balaam's Place in the Book of Numbers,” *Man* 28/3 (1993): 411–30.

test, and as such should not be interpreted literally; the donkey episode would be a test for the correction and edification of Balaam as God's spokesman.¹⁰

A more comprehensive explanation is proposed by Moyer, in his analysis of the verb קרא as a *Leitwort* in Numbers 22–24.¹¹ The verb, which means “to call, summon, proclaim, read,”¹² is first used to describe the summon made by Balak: “He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him, saying, ‘A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed’ ” (Num 22:5–6).¹³

Such a summon, however, is based on Balak's false premise, *i.e.*, that Balaam alone possesses the power to bless or to curse the people of Israel.¹⁴ By using the same verb in his conditional sentence on verse 20, God aims at the very mistaken premise that Balaam did not bother to correct:

since God's response begins with the conditional “אם—if,” it falls to Balaam to decide which of the two contradictory perspectives upon which to act, whether it be the

¹⁰ Walter L. Moberly, “On Learning to Be a True Prophet: the Story of Balaam and his Ass,” in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium. Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston*, ed. Peter J. Harland and Robert Hayward, VTSup 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1–17, here 9–10.

¹¹ Clinton J. Moyer, “Literary and Linguistic Studies on Sefer Bil'am (Numbers 22–24)” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2009), 314–19.

¹² “קרא,” in BDB, Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7121.htm> (accessed 03.06.2024).

¹³ All scriptural quotations are from the NRSV.

¹⁴ It is outside the scope of this article to discuss the nature of blessings and curses in the Balaam story or in the Hebrew Bible more generally. However, it is worth noting that Balak's description of Balaam's skills mirrors YHWH's promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3; Num 22:6). If biblical blessings and curses were usually “ritual acts of speech that mediated or anticipated God's favor or disfavor and were performed by a person endowed with authority, even when that authority was merely situational” (Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012], 410), one could say that Balaam, according to Balak's flattering message, was infallible in his anticipation of the divine will, or had quasi-divine authority himself. In fact, “Balak's unmindful challenge of the divine promise in Gen. 12.2–3 is a statement of trust in the *extraordinary*—that flesh and blood, Balaam, shall utter irrevocable imprecations.” Oren Gelblum, “Transitive Analogies and the Meaning of Balaam's Origin: A Literary Analysis,” *JSOT* 47.3 (2023): 322–42, here 332.

one that attributes the power of blessing and cursing to Balaam, or the one that expresses Balaam's powerlessness to achieve such effects outside of God's direct instruction.¹⁵

It is up to Balaam to decide if he will act according to the perspective—and the call—of Balak or of YHWH. If he chooses to obey the divine will, his request was already denied in v. 12: "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." Balaam's choice of following the Moabites is a result of his own interpretation of God's ambiguous consent, and his departure ends up contradicting his early pious statements (v. 13, 18). Only by the end of the episode does Balaam understand what is at stake, as demonstrated by his response to YHWH's messenger: "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose [קרא] me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home" (Num 22:34).

By acknowledging his mistake, Balaam seems to finally understand part of the word's subtlety, seeing that the call is not just literal, but also involves a deeper meaning regarding the relationship between the caller and the one called:

Balaam understands that although the messenger interacted directly only with his jenny, the call (קרא) was directed at him; and, indeed, the call does not originate with the messenger himself, but with God, and only passes through the messenger on its way to Balaam. This cluster of relationships is analogous to that involving himself, God, and Balak's messengers: although they interact directly with him, their summons (קרא) seeks a response that only God can provide.¹⁶

There is still, however, a different matter to be discussed about the perceived contradiction in God's wrath. The previous episode (verses 1–20) presents repeating interactions between Balak, Balaam and YHWH; Balak will not accept a negative answer from Balaam (v. 13), and will "yet again" (יסף) send messengers to fetch the seer (v. 15). Balaam, while claiming to be obedient to YHWH's will, tries "yet again" (יסף) to ascertain God's response (v. 19), until he finally seems to allow Balaam's trip with the Moabite messengers (v. 20); despite being limited to do what YHWH allows him to, the foreign seer is always willing to enlarge the boundaries of what is allowed to him. The relevance of such insistence by the characters was perceived by Rosenzweig during his discussion of the *יסף* *Leitwort*,¹⁷ translated by him as "commencing anew," and its role in the Balaam narrative:

¹⁵ Moyer, "Studies," 316.

¹⁶ Ibid., 487.

¹⁷ The verb *יסף* occurs in Num 22:15, 19, 25–26. It is used to describe actions by Balak, Balaam and the messenger of YHWH, building up a thematic trend. For a discussion of *Leitwörter* presenting key themes in biblical narrative, cf. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114–28.

The story of Balaam's expedition revolves, then, around the problem of "commencing anew," of doing something twice. Ordinarily the proverb is right: once is not enough. ... In God's sight, once is once and for all; and the man who, like Balaam, after hearing God's first word makes a further attempt to see whether in the end the proverb is valid for him as well is punished precisely by its becoming the case that now, for him, once is not enough in earnest—and now, in fact, "once" for the second time. If we are not to be satisfied with God's first clear word, but must try what God, commencing anew, will say to us a second time, then God will this time unerringly speak the words of our own heart's demon.¹⁸

To be fair, this repetition was a regular procedure in Ancient Near Eastern forms of divination. In fact, if one accepts Koch's argument that three was the ideal number of inquiries for a diviner to surely ascertain the divine will,¹⁹ it would seem Balaam falls short of inquiries; after asking for YHWH's permission twice and receiving contradictory responses, the seer chose the option that pleased him the most instead of asking the deity a third time. As such, the episode with the talking donkey would represent a third, unsolicited inquiry, initiated by YHWH, clarifying that Balaam misinterpreted the divine will and thus incurred in his anger.²⁰

But whether one thinks Balaam asked YHWH too few or too many times, the seer's strategies and motivations remain the same: he bets on what he perceives as God's fickleness in order to exploit the divine will as it better suits his plans to harm Israel. It is thus no wonder that Milgrom, while discussing Balaam's stance, describes him as some sort of anti-prophet:

Perhaps the Lord will change His mind. Such indeed is the unspoken premise behind all forms of divination. The same ritual procedures are repeated until a favorable omen is received. ... Thus Balaam can sincerely hope that in his second dream he will learn that the Lord has changed His mind. This basically pagan view is reflected in the midrash that Balaam was privy to the split second when God waxes angry against Israel each day. The difference between Balaam and Israel's prophets contrasts sharply on this matter.

¹⁸ Ibid., 138–9.

¹⁹ Ulla S. Koch, "Three Strikes and You're Out! A View on Cognitive Theory and the First-Millennium Extispicy Ritual," in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 43–59, here 45, 48.

²⁰ Cf. Benjamin Wiggershaus, "The Man of Opened Eye: Ancient Near Eastern Revelatory Convention and the Balaam Cycle (Numbers 22–24)" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021), 207–8, 211–13. On the importance of the "3+1" pattern in the Balaam story, cf. Amos Frisch, "The Story of Balaam's She-Ass (Numbers 22:21–35): A New Literary Insight," *Hebrew Studies* 56 (2015): 103–13, here 104, 106.

Both hope that God will change His mind. But the prophets assume His constancy even while attempting to change His mind, whereas Balaam assumes that God is fickle, and he attempts to exploit that by divination.²¹

The incongruence conveyed by God's wrath thus portrays a divine will that could become even more fickle than Balaam had anticipated; the seer, who sought to manipulate YHWH's will by assuming his fickleness, has God's supposed instability turning against himself. The God that seems to change his mind and allows Balaam's journey becomes angry when the journey begins, and the seer, acknowledged as bearing unrivaled power and vision, becomes a pawn in the hands of the deity he thought to be manipulating.

The sudden divine wrath dramatizes YHWH's unpredictability against whoever thinks him predictable, and his power of manipulation against whoever tries to manipulate him; the additional use of the verb *סָחַף* to describe the action of YHWH's messenger (v. 26) shows his intention of repeating and prolonging his interactions with Balaam, making them a game which reflects Balaam's behavior towards the deity. Finally, the wrath of YHWH demonstrates that the domain of language, a major tool for the enactment of blessings and curses, could mean next to nothing against the deity, and as such it is not inherently trustworthy as a mediation tool between humans and God:

Balaam can speak with God; but, much like Wittgenstein's visitors to "a strange country," neither Balaam nor the reader of Numbers can "find their feet" with this particular God. God remains, to borrow Wittgenstein's word, an "enigma." And, more worrisome, that Balaam can talk to God does not prevent God from nearly killing him (22:33).²²

YHWH AND HIS MESSENGER

In Num 22:21–35, the narrator dramatizes YHWH as much more active in his relationship to Balaam; the tetragrammaton, previously uttered only by Balaam,²³ now appears in the narration, pointing to a more direct involvement of the deity with the

²¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990), 189.

²² Ken Stone, "Wittgenstein's Lion and Balaam's Ass: Talking with Others in Numbers 22–25," in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer L. Koosed, SemeiaST 74 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 75–102, here 90.

²³ In Numbers 22:1–20, God is consistently called "YHWH" by Balaam and "ʾēlōhīm" by the omniscient narrator. According to Carolyn J. Sharp, it "may represent the flagging of a discrepancy, in the perspective of the narrator, between what Balaam knows about God and what the narrator knows about God" (*Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009], 136–7).

characters in the story.²⁴ He is mostly present through his messenger, the מלאך יהוה,²⁵ who appears for the first time in v. 22: “God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him” (Num 22:22).

The term מלאך יהוה usually describes an anthropomorphic manifestation of the deity that can come instead of YHWH.²⁶ According to Martin Noth, this manifestation is interchangeable with the deity and is useful to avoid the direct, prolonged manifestation of the ineffable:

The messenger of Yahweh (‘angel of Yahweh’), here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, not a particular individual figure but a being of unknown origin sent by Yahweh from time to time, represents Yahweh himself and is introduced particularly at those points where too extended a speech by Yahweh was to be avoided; the messenger of Yahweh, then, acts and speaks in place of Yahweh, but always in such manner as if it were an action or speech of Yahweh himself.²⁷

As a direct representative of YHWH, his messenger thus characterizes him directly, while also hinting at a further separation between Balaam and his God. According to Robker,²⁸ the presence of the messenger signals a “division of labor” and a departure from the previous (Num 22:1–20) and following (Num 23–24) episodes, where Balaam talked directly to YHWH,²⁹ since the deity in Numbers 22:21–35 only addresses Balaam through the angel and the donkey as intermediaries.

The messenger of YHWH also stands in Balaam’s way as an adversary (v. 22). The root יצב,³⁰ which describes the positioning of the messenger in Balaam’s path, portrays him as a stationary object; the messenger does not pursue Balaam, but stands in his way and waits for him, enabling Balaam to avoid

²⁴ Herbert C. Brichto argues that textual variation in divine names often serves as “a graphic or semi-graphic outline of a sequence of thought(s) enlisted to clarify an argument” (*The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* [Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 1998], 21). Additionally, the names YHWH and ’ēlōhîm have markedly different roles in Num 22–24: while ’ēlōhîm is mostly associated with intransitive verbs related to emotion and speech, YHWH is associated with transitive verbs related to direct, concrete action (Moyer, “Studies,” 335–6).

²⁵ “מלאך,” in BDB, Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4397.htm> (accessed 03.06.2024).

²⁶ Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 65.

²⁷ Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1968), 179.

²⁸ Jonathan M. Robker, *Balaam in Text and Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 348.

²⁹ In Numbers 22:1–20, however, their relationship may not have been that straightforward. See above, n. 23.

³⁰ “יצב,” in BDB, Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3320.htm> (accessed 03.06.2024).

him or go around him.³¹ This is indeed what happens as the donkey, the only character who is aware of the messenger's presence, goes around him twice in order to protect her owner. Only after these two times does the encounter become unavoidable: "Then the angel of the Lord went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left" (Num 22:26).

Once directly involved with Balaam's journey, YHWH shows himself to be an unavoidable force which, although not pursuing his servant, stays in front of him until he is cornered. For Balaam, moving forward without facing his god is not an option. Moyer, when discussing the use of **יצב** in the Balaam narratives,³² compares the messenger of YHWH to Balak based on the occurrence of the verb in both cases:

The drawing together of the Moabite king and the messenger of God is striking, and suggests that both figures represent obstacles that Balaam must overcome. Yahweh's messenger impedes his physical journey, while Balaq disrupts his progress toward the realization of his full prophetic potential by urging him repeatedly to act counter to God's will for Israel.³³

Both arise as obstacles to Balaam, and seek to stop him from fulfilling the will of his other master; just like the messenger of YHWH blocks Balaam's path and stops him from fulfilling Balak's will, so is the Moabite king an obstacle against the fulfillment of YHWH's will, since he wishes that Balaam will curse a blessed people.

The characterization of YHWH's messenger as an adversary to Balaam also stands out, being the only description of YHWH as **יטש** in the Hebrew Bible. According to Peggy L. Day,³⁴ the term describes the messenger of YHWH as a legal adversary (or accuser) of Balaam, who would have incurred divine wrath and would be in judgment for his forbidden journey. Moberly, tracing a parallel to the political-military adversaries of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:9, 14, 23), comments:

In significant respects, as Hadad and Rezon are to Solomon, so is the angel with the sword to Balaam: a figure who opposes, dangerous yet without instant or overwhelming implementation of that danger, a figure whose opposing presence symbolises divine disfavour with the failure in faithfulness of someone who once did, and still should, know better.³⁵

The presence of YHWH's messenger as an adversary is enough to signal divine wrath without any further action, being invisible

³¹ Cf. Moberly, "On Learning," 9.

³² The root occurs in Num 22:22, 23, 31, 34; 23:3, 6, 15, 17.

³³ Moyer, "Studies," 319.

³⁴ Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: šātān in the Hebrew Bible*, HSM 43 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 45–67.

³⁵ Moberly, "On Learning," 10.

to the servant who does not even conceive having displeased his God. The inability of Balaam to see the divine messenger not only satirizes his reputation as seer and prophet, but reflects his very worldview: Balaam cannot conceive that YHWH, whom he serves and supposedly manipulates, could turn against him. “By virtue of his obtuse and manipulative nature and his lack of gifts, Balaam is unable to obey the Lord.”³⁶ However, the description of the messenger hints that the deity can indeed act against Balaam: “The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road” (Num 22:23).

The description of the messenger bearing a drawn sword in his hand, used only to portray divine emissaries,³⁷ points not just to imminent violence, but also to the restriction of such violence,³⁸ as revealed by the messenger to Balaam:

The angel of the Lord said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. The 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” (Num 22:32–33).

This statement sounds ironic after the outburst of Balaam against his donkey, who was saving him from dying by YHWH’s hands: “I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!” (Num 22:29). Balaam’s wish for a weapon inadvertently pointed against himself summarizes the relationship between Balaam and YHWH in the narrative, especially poignant in light of the transitive analogy, detected by Gelblum, between Balaam, Edom and the sword motif:

The inability of both Edom and Balaam to use the sword, Esau’s promised source of life, against Israel, embodies the general message of the pericope that the source of all power, including that of an endowed person’s mantic uttering, is God alone; neither blessing nor curse has any effect against the divine will.³⁹

The sword motif invites additional reflection on retributive justice, also acknowledged by Gelblum as a key element in the story.⁴⁰ While Balaam always seems willing to wield his power against others, whether by cursing peoples or killing donkeys, the seer is powerless at decisive moments, since the power he desires in order to inflict violence is wholly in YHWH’s hands. God, on the other hand, is more cautious with violence, and abstains from

³⁶ Sharp, *Irony*, 140.

³⁷ The other occurrences of the expression *וחרבו שלופה בידו* are in Josh 5:13–15; 1 Chr 21:16.

³⁸ Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 165.

³⁹ Gelblum, “Analogies,” 339.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 337–338. Gelblum, however, only sees a hint of divine retribution against Balaam, Edom and “the nations” in Num 24:18–20.

killing his own rebel servant while stopping him from cursing Israel. However, refrained divine violence is always imminent; while the sword of YHWH is not used against Balaam, it is never sheathed back, ready to go down in retribution against those who would claim his power in order to harm others.

THE TALKING DONKEY

The donkey is possibly the most known element in the Balaam story, since it's the only animal besides the serpent of Eden (Gen 3) that is able to speak in biblical narratives. This intertextual connection, perceived and analyzed by George Savran,⁴¹ is one of the few aspects analyzed with depth regarding Balaam's donkey in the narrative; most analyses and commentaries of Numbers 22 treat it as a mere folktale component inserted so the plot advances. But the donkey is an important character for the story, being called a "round character" by Cameron Howard⁴² and positioned closer to the deity than the humans in the narrative. Her proximity to God can make the donkey's words prophetic in nature, acting as revelation to the humans in the scene, and as such it could characterize YHWH himself. Applying "animal hermeneutics," *i.e.*, an analysis of the text which takes into consideration the "the human tendency to conceptualize identity and otherness in relation to nonhuman animals,"⁴³ is especially needed in this episode.

In order to do that, one has to understand the role of the donkey as a "companion species" in the Ancient Near East. The concept of companion species, coined by Donna Haraway and brought to biblical studies by authors such as Ken Stone,⁴⁴ is used to analyze the "co-constitutive human relationships with other critters" and understand the role of these living beings in the conceptions of identity and otherness for local cultures. The term "donkey" (אֲתוֹן) describes, together with חמור and עֵיז, the same species of domestic donkey, *Equus asinus*.⁴⁵ The domestic donkey was the main beast of burden in the ANE, and pointed to a high socioeconomic status when used as mount, serving thus as wealth/capital to its owner.⁴⁶ Such an importance for the daily lives of the Israelites granted the donkey a symbiotic partnership with humans, since it composed the foundations of the social

⁴¹ George W. Savran, "Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden," *JSOT* 19.64 (1994): 33–55.

⁴² Cameron B. R. Howard, "Animal Speech as Revelation in Genesis 3 and Numbers 22," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, SBLSymS 46 (Leiden: SBL, 2008), 21–9.

⁴³ Cf. Ken Stone, "Animating the Bible's Animals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Dana N. Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 444–55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 447–9.

⁴⁵ Kenneth C. Way, *Donkeys in the Biblical World: Ceremony and Symbol*, HACL 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 162–8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170–2.

order at the time.⁴⁷ Finally, the donkey has a role that, although uncommon, is of vital relevance to the Balaam traditions, both in Numbers 22–24 and in the Deir ‘Alla texts: its behavior is a potential source of omens and divinations.⁴⁸

Understanding the roles of the donkey as a companion species to Balaam is especially revelatory, since the inversion of roles between Balaam and his donkey is one of the main themes in the episode. Moyer,⁴⁹ after comparing the episode with other examples of role inversions in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Gen 38 and 1 Sam 25), describes the relationship of Balaam and his donkey as a superimposition of the relationship between Balak and Balaam in the rest of the narrative. Robert Alter comments that

[i]t seems fairly clear that the ass in this episode plays the role of Balaam—beholding divine visions with eyes unveiled—to Balaam’s Balak. The parallel between the two halves of the story is emphasized by the fact that in Balaam’s prophecies there are again three symmetrically arranged occurrences of the same incident, each time with greater discomfit to Balak.⁵⁰

From this inversion, Moyer describes the episode “as a scenario that exposes his [Balaam’s] human frailty but ultimately ends with the protagonist’s realization of his own shortcomings.”⁵¹ The inversion of roles not only develops Balaam, but also destabilizes the line between the animal, the human and the divine;⁵² just as Balaam’s life is treated as inferior to the life of the donkey by the messenger of YHWH—“If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live,” says the messenger in v. 33—the donkey takes up the role of prophet, seeing her God naturally,⁵³ while Balaam, even though it is daytime,⁵⁴ only sees the messenger after having his eyes uncovered by YHWH (v. 31). According to Noth, an important part of the episode’s discourse is that

an unprejudiced animal can see things to which a man in his wilfulness is blind; there is certainly also in this respect the presupposition that Yahweh’s messenger was in himself ‘visible’ in the usual way, just as elsewhere in the Old Testament the messenger of Yahweh ... is thought of as visible and in human form...⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Ibid., 179, n. 59.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 60–67, 88–91.

⁴⁹ Moyer, “Studies,” 492–503.

⁵⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 133–4.

⁵¹ Moyer, “Studies,” 502.

⁵² For a discussion on the destabilization of the animal/human binary in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Stone 2016, 449–50.

⁵³ For a brief discussion on the apparently natural clairvoyance by the donkey, cf. Way, *Donkeys*, 185, n. 88.

⁵⁴ Cf. Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 86.

⁵⁵ Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

The donkey's prophetic role is also observed in the fact that she has her mouth opened by YHWH so she can speak; in the same way the donkey is only able to speak through YHWH's intervention, Balaam can only say what God puts in his mouth (Num 22:38). Her prophetic role extends as far as intercession, an important trait of the most celebrated prophets in the Hebrew Bible: Moses and Abraham. Both characters go as far as risking their own standing with YHWH in order to save other people from the divine wrath,⁵⁶ something mirrored by the donkey in her attempts to save Balaam from the sword of YHWH in front of them.⁵⁷

Such an important role of mediation between the human and the divine, along with multiple textual cues, led Frisch to argue convincingly that the donkey stands for Israel in the metaphorical inversion of roles⁵⁸: just like the donkey has only assisted Balaam and is being treated unfairly by him, so is Israel, unfairly targeted by Balak⁵⁹ and Balaam, a medium through which YHWH's blessings reach other nations (Gen 12:3; 22:18).

Regardless of the metaphor's tenor, the abundance of parallels between the donkey and the prophetic role suggests that her behavior is also a potential divine revelation, reflecting something from YHWH he wants conveyed to Balaam: while Balaam thinks himself able to control and conduct his God like his donkey, he is ultimately unable to control either of them. It is God who conducts the pretended conductor through a divine game, where the messenger stands still and the donkey avoids the obstacle.

The dialogue initiated by the donkey scales up the tension between Balaam, Balak and YHWH. The donkey speaks for the first time after being smitten by Balaam with a staff (v. 27), an ominous act in and of itself.⁶⁰ YHWH then opens the mouth of the donkey, who says to Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a

⁵⁶ For brief discussions on the prophetic role of intercession in the stories of Abraham and Moses, cf. Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture*, 143–50.

⁵⁷ This is but one of the multiple allusions to Genesis, especially the stories of Abraham, found in this episode. See above, n. 14; Frisch, "Story"; Gelblum, "Analogies"; Savran, "Beastly Speech"; Jonathan D. Safren, "Balaam and Abraham," *V/T* 38 (1988): 105–13.

⁵⁸ Frisch, "Story," 107–10.

⁵⁹ It is never clear if Balak sees Israel as a military threat or expects them to attack Moab. His earlier speeches compare Israel to oxen (Num 22:4) and locusts (Num 22:5), which suggest he sees them as a resource-consuming plague, not as conquerors. Additionally, Israel didn't undertake a campaign against Moab in the narrative prior to this point; in fact, if Deuteronomy's retelling of the wilderness journey is to be taken into account, Israel was forbidden from attacking Moab (Deut 2:9).

⁶⁰ For a possible omen involving donkeys and staffs in the Ancient Near East, cf. Way, *Donkeys*, 90, n. 321.

sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!” (Num 22:28b–29).

According to Kenneth Way, the donkey’s speech stands out because it does not simply advance the plot; the donkey does not use her newly acquired gift to warn Balaam about the threat ahead. On the contrary, the donkey assumes that Balaam obviously knows that, and manifests to her owner the introspective thoughts of someone who is about to die.⁶¹ It is also surprising how naturally Balaam accepts that the donkey now speaks. Way proposes that Balaam, being a seer, understands the donkey’s words as an omen, and as such naturally engages in its investigation. But Balaam, just as the donkey, does not try to justify his mount’s behavior—Balaam is not analyzing the donkey’s stubbornness, he is justifying his own violence. According to Jacob Milgrom, Balaam should have recognized his donkey’s erratic behavior as an omen from the beginning,⁶² which lowers Balaam’s status even more: the seer claiming to be a prophet can barely practice his actual profession correctly.

Whatever is the reason for which Balaam is not surprised by his talking donkey, he soon justifies his violence as being due to his donkey’s “mockery”; Balaam feels humiliated by the donkey, who is actually acting in response to divine action. The donkey replies: “‘Am I not your 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.’” (Num 22:30).

Balaam’s wrath is answered with another rhetorical question by the donkey, this time even more elaborate, to which Balaam replies, overwhelmed, with a monosyllabic “no.” The scene’s comicity was already noted by the midrash: “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” (Num Rab 20:14).

But the donkey’s question contrasts with Balaam not only in its rhetorical level. According to Cameron Howard, this question establishes the donkey’s importance as a character, because “the donkey appeals to the companionship—albeit a companionship forged through servitude—she and Balaam have shared. She puts her own subjectivity first, insisting that Balaam acknowledge the trust he owes her.”⁶³

The donkey uses her newly acquired gift not just to advance the plot, but to defend herself against abuse based on her own loyalty, further blurring the line between the animal, the human and the divine. It is the donkey’s loyalty to her master that compels her to get out of his control, but the ongoing inversion of roles invites new questions for the reader: Balaam claims loyalty to his God, while remaining over the thin line between full commitment to YHWH and to Balak. The donkey is Balaam’s loyal servant, but she has to challenge his authority in order to save

⁶¹ Way, *Donkeys*, 185–6.

⁶² Milgrom, *Numbers*, 190.

⁶³ Howard, “Animal Speech,” 27.

his life from his angry divine master. YHWH, on the other hand, has no master; where, then, does his loyalty lie?

CONCLUSION

Numbers 22 appears to be a clear example of the “omnipotence effect.” Balaam tries to bet on the fickleness of YHWH’s word, insisting until he obtains the desired answer; but the volatility attributed to God turns against himself, and the God who authorized the seer’s journey becomes his worst enemy. The satirical tone of the episode, already shown by different scholars to be part of the narrative’s discourse,⁶⁴ is felt inside the plot by Balaam himself, who feels mocked by his donkey. The donkey, on the other hand, is only acting in response to divine action, which manipulates the very repetitive structure of the episode: it is by initiative of YHWH’s messenger that the same scene repeats three times and Balaam is increasingly humiliated in each of them. It is also by YHWH’s initiative that the donkey’s mouth is opened earlier than Balaam’s eyes, giving one more opportunity for YHWH to mock Balaam—both before his trip companions and the readers of the story. God manipulates the shape of the episode together with the narrator, triggering similar effects and reactions both inside and outside the narrated world.

A similar usage of the “omnipotence effect” can be observed in the Exodus narrative (Exod 1–14). YHWH proclaims from the beginning that he will cast plagues against Egypt, and goes as far as manipulating Pharaoh’s heart in order to ensure he will not free Israel before seeing all of God’s signs.⁶⁵ By doing that, God manipulates the very structure of the narrative, generating the 3+3+3+1 pattern of plague episodes with the aim of dramatizing his omnipotence to his own people, to the enemy’s people and, indirectly, to the very readers of the text. It is telling that the term used by Balaam to complain about his humiliation is the same used by YHWH while referring to the mockery he will make of Egypt (Exod 10:2).⁶⁶

In the narrative of Num 22:21–35, YHWH manipulates the narrated events in order to stretch and escalate Balaam’s humiliation, forcing him into total submission. Balaam is not even compelled by God to return home (v. 35); stopping Balaam from reaching Balak did not seem to be God’s aim as much as mocking his servant. According to Moberly, this mockery is not an end in and of itself, but has a restoring purpose. YHWH strips Balaam of his pride and his pretended control of the situation in order to better enforce his will:

⁶⁴ Cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 468–9.

⁶⁵ This comparison closely follows the reading of the Exodus story by David M. Gunn, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart: Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1–14,” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. David J. A. Clines, David M. Gunn, Alan J. Hauser, JSOTSup 19 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 72–96.

⁶⁶ Cf. Moberly, “On Learning,” 11, n. 23.

there is the possibility of repentance and a transformation of Balaam's mission, a possibility initiated by actions of divine mercy (opening the ass's mouth, opening Balaam's eyes). This mercy humbles Balaam by confronting him with his utter incompetence and showing him how close to disaster his quest had brought him. But this mercy also teaches him the necessary lesson when he acknowledges his sin, and so enables him to go and speak as a prophet should speak.⁶⁷

The satire against Balaam highlights, both inside the narrated world and in the narrative's discourse, the weaknesses and shortcomings of the protagonist faced with divine omnipotence, taking him to a breaking point in order to make his transformation possible. Such as with Pharaoh in the Exodus, YHWH mercilessly destroys the very conception of reality held by his enemies: the king of an oppressive empire, who claims sovereignty over all and will not acknowledge the superiority of the God of Israel, has his political prestige (Exod 9:20; 10:7) and even his free will destroyed by YHWH. Balaam, a supposed ally who seeks to manipulate the divine will in order to attain his own ends, is manipulated by YHWH himself, becoming a pawn in the divine hands and unable to control even his donkey. Both the arrogant oppressor and the manipulative devout are mocked and reduced to nothing by the God they antagonized.

But it is doubtful whether God's so-called transformative purposes have been achieved in either story:

In this dire situation, Balaam's declaration, "I have sinned" (22:34), cannot be taken on its own as conclusive evidence of a genuine inner reformation without support from the plot. The Pharaoh likewise proclaims, "I have sinned" (Exod 9:27; 10:16–17)—and immediately reverts to his wicked ways. Only actions truly count, not words.⁶⁸

Thus Pharaoh, a full-blown enemy of YHWH and his people, has nothing in store for him except divine mockery and destruction. "Pharaoh is doomed; he is a puppet before God. The freedom of the master turns out to be no more than that of the slave."⁶⁹ Of course, such a lack of divine mercy is not only due to Pharaoh's stubbornness, itself a product of divine intervention, but because YHWH's tampering with Pharaoh's very sense of self works as war propaganda, promoting the Hebrew God as a more powerful king than Egypt's ruler inside and outside the narrated world.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 16–17.

⁶⁸ Frisch, "Story," 105.

⁶⁹ Gunn, "Hardening," 81.

⁷⁰ Cf. André Kanasiro, "'His Name throughout the Earth': YHWH's Political Strategies in Exodus 3–15," *Cadernos de Língua e Literatura Hebraica* 17 (2019), 53–63, doi:10.11606/issn.2317-8051.cllh.2019.178558 (accessed 03.06.2024).

Balaam's closure, on the other hand, is more nuanced. In the beginning of Numbers 22, the foreign seer could be favorably compared to Moses before the Exodus: Balaam already knew the name of the deity, as well as the time of his appearance, and was able to talk to YHWH according to his will, traits wholly absent in Moses by the time of the burning bush episode (Exod 3).⁷¹ By the end of the donkey episode, however,

[t]he reader has seen that Balaam manipulates others, in particular by withholding the whole truth and emphasizing only the part that serves his own interests. The reader also has been led to suspect that Balaam is motivated by a mercenary ethos. After the donkey story, the reader knows that Balaam could not see or obey the Lord if, as it were, the Lord were standing right in front of him and his life depended on it.⁷²

All this makes the reader skeptical towards Balaam's apparent obedience to YHWH, of course, but the reader has seen what God has shown him alongside the narrator, and was led to suspect Balaam by God alongside the narrator. The whole donkey episode was orchestrated by YHWH and the narrator in order to mock and humiliate Balaam. So what does this story say about God apart from dramatizing his immense power? Resuming a previously unanswered question: where lies the loyalty of YHWH? The donkey episode shows the reader where God's loyalty *does not* lie: he is not loyal to anyone who takes his loyalty for granted and tries to take advantage of it.

This divine trait further complicates the Balaam oracles in Numbers 23–24. For if Balaam's "mouth, like that of the she-ass, is merely a tool manipulated by the deity,"⁷³ then the oracles, convincingly shown by Sharp to be filled with ambiguity,⁷⁴ point towards

the unsettling possibility that since the Lord put these words into Balaam's mouth, it may be the Lord's perspective on the "blessing" of Israel that is ambiguous. Here is an unspoken irony lurking in the shadows of this oracle: if Israel does indeed turn out to be cursed rather than blessed, it would be God himself who performs it, just as we have seen in Exodus 32 in the matter of the Golden Calf and as we are about to see in Numbers 25. On both of those occasions, God wreaks deadly havoc upon the Israelites for their apostasy.⁷⁵

In Numbers 22–24, then, it would seem that YHWH is loyal to the underdogs in the story: Israel and their representative, the donkey. As such, the people initially compared to oxen and locusts (22:4–5) will be compared by YHWH to apex predators, lions, led by God as a mighty bull (23:22, 24; 24:8–9). But Israel

⁷¹ Sharp, *Irony*, 136.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷³ Frisch, "Story," 113.

⁷⁴ Sharp, *Irony*, 141–7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

should not take these for granted either, since YHWH could—and many times, he would—turn against them. Alternatively, in a more positive light, just as the donkey’s loyalty compelled her to go against the immediate interests of her master Balaam, so could YHWH’s loyalty to his people compel him to go against their interests in order to ultimately save their lives.

It is often said that the Balaam story has the indictment against divination as one of its major themes. The characterization of YHWH provided by the “omnipotence effect” and its results in the narrative and the oracles also show the story to work as a cautionary tale against one of the key underlying principles of divination: the “desire to control the divine by human means,”⁷⁶ as argued by Savran in his intertextual analysis of Numbers 22–24 and Genesis 3.

The role of Israel in the story invites a last, additional reflection. Moses, the leader of Israel in the exodus and the wilderness journey, begins his mission as YHWH’s servant in a puppet-like state, but by the time he crosses the Sea of Reeds he already shows freedom and autonomy as God’s representative for the people.⁷⁷ Balaam begins his journey with freedom and initiative, which he uses in order to try and manipulate his master’s will. Inversely to Moses, he will be reduced to a puppet-like state when he uses his proximity to YHWH in a way that displeases him: while Moses uses his proximity to YHWH to challenge him directly and save people from his master’s wrath (Exod 32–34), Balaam means to use it as a weapon against foreign peoples and oppresses those under him in order to achieve his aims. In the world of an omnipotent God, a servant can indeed “act in faith but also in freedom,”⁷⁸ but can never take his privileged position for granted and wield it against others, lest he has his freedom taken away and the very fabric of reality crumbles before him. The role of a servant of YHWH is not to be taken lightly.

⁷⁶ Savran, “Beastly Speech,” 51.

⁷⁷ Gunn, “Hardening,” 87.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*