

Balaam and Balak and the Midianites

The stories

There are two fairly separate accounts of Balaam in the Bible:

- Balaam and Balak, containing a brief aside concerning Balaam and the ass
- Balaam and the Midianites

Balaam and Balak

The main story of Balaam occurs during the sojourn of the Israelites in the plains of Moab, east of the [Jordan River](#), at the close of forty years of wandering, shortly before the death of Moses, and the crossing of the Jordan. The Israelites have already defeated two kings on this side of the Jordan: [Sihon](#), king of the [Amorites](#), and [Og](#), king of [Bashan](#). [Balak](#), king of Moab, consequently becomes alarmed, and sends elders of Moab, and of Midian, to Balaam, son of Beor, in order to induce him to come and curse Israel. Balaam's location is simply given as *his people* in the [masoretic text](#), though the [Samaritan Pentateuch](#), [Vulgate](#), and [Syriac Peshitta](#) all identify it as [Ammon](#), which is consequently supported by many modern scholars.

Balaam and the angel. [Nuremberg Chronicle](#) (1493).

Balaam sends back word that he can only do what God commands, and God has, via a nocturnal dream, told him not to go. Moab consequently sends higher ranking priests and offers Balaam honours, and so God tells Balaam to go with them. Balaam thus sets out with two servants to go to Balak, but an [Angel](#) tries to prevent him. At first the Angel is seen only by the [ass](#) Balaam is riding, which tries to avoid the otherwise invisible Angel. After Balaam starts punishing the ass for refusing to move, it is miraculously given the power to speak to Balaam, and it complains about Balaam's treatment. At this point, Balaam is allowed to see the angel, who informs him that the ass is the only reason the Angel did not kill Balaam. Balaam immediately repents, but is told to go on.

Balak meets with Balaam at [Kirjathhuzoth](#), and they go to the *high places of Baal*, and offer sacrifices on seven altars, leading to Balaam being given a prophecy by God, which he speaks to Balak. However, the prophecy blesses Israel; Balak remonstrates, but Balaam reminds him that he can only speak the words put in his mouth, so Balak takes him to another *high place* at [Pisgah](#), to try again. Building another seven altars here, and making sacrifices on each, Balaam provides another prophecy blessing Israel.

Balaam finally gets taken by a now very frustrated Balak to [Peor](#), and, after the seven sacrifices there, decides not to seek *enchantments* but instead looks upon the Israelites from the peak. The *spirit of God* comes upon Balaam and he delivers a third positive

prophecy concerning Israel. Balak's anger rises to the point where he threatens Balaam, but Balaam merely offers a prediction of fate. Balaam then looks upon the [Kenites](#), and [Amalekites](#) and offers two more predictions of fate. Balak and Balaam then simply go to their respective homes... for the moment. [Deuteronomy](#) 23:3-6 summarises these incidents, and further states that the Ammonites were associated with the Moabites. [Joshua](#), in his farewell speech, also makes reference to it.

Balaam and the Midianites

[Nehemiah](#), [Micah](#), and [Joshua](#), continue in the historical account of Balaam the cursing prophet, who advises the Midianites how to bring disaster upon the Israelites by seducing the people. This accords with the events of the [Heresy of Peor](#), recorded in Numbers after the account of Balaam and Balaak. Much later, during the [War against the Midianites](#), also recorded in Numbers, Balaam is listed amongst the Midianites who were killed in revenge for the matter of Peor.

According to Jewish legend, Egypt's Pharaoh had three advisors to help him prevent a potential Jewish revolt: Jethro, Job, and Balaam. Jethro advises conciliation, Job abstains, and Balaam advises enslaving the Jews.

Balaam and the ass

While [speaking animals](#) are a common feature of folklore, the only other case in the [Old Testament](#) is that of the serpent in [Eden](#). Classical Jewish commentators, such as [Saadia Gaon](#), and [Maimonides](#), taught that a reader should not take this part of the story literally. Rather, they explained, it should be read as an account of a prophetic experience, which are experienced as dreams, or as visions, and consequently, the ass did not actually speak. Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, one of the great Jewish biblical commentators of the 20th century, writes that these verses

depict the continuance on the subconscious plane of the mental and moral conflict in Balaam's soul; and the dream apparition and the speaking donkey is but a further warning to Balaam against being misled through avarice to violate God's command'.

Similar views have been held by E. W. Hengstenberg and other Christian scholars, though others, e.g. Voick, regard the statements about the ass speaking as figurative; the ass brayed, and Balaam translated the sound into words.

According to modern [textual critics](#), such as the of biblical scholars who support the [documentary hypothesis](#), this portion of the tale is unique to the [Jahwist](#) version of the tale. In this view, the Jahwist deliberately intended the ass to be considered to physically have spoken, and the whole episode is designed to mock Balaam. The Jahwist evidently disliked non-Jewish prophets, and is much harsher toward Balaam than the [Elohists](#). As the paragraphs immediately preceding this episode are usually assigned to the Elohist, this treatment explains why God, in a dream, tells Balaam to go with the princes to Balak,

only to immediately send an Angel to prevent Balaam from going with the princes to Balak.

According to Jewish legend, 10 things were created at the end of the Creation itself, just before the evening of the seventh day, on which God rested. One of these is said to be "the mouth of the ass" that would later speak to Balaam.

The poems

All the prophecies that Balaam makes take the form of (Hebrew) [poems](#):

- The first, Numbers 23:7-10, prophesies the unique exhaltation of the [Kingdom of Israel](#), and its countless numbers.
- The second, Numbers 23:18-24, celebrates the moral virtue of Israel, its [monarchy](#), and military conquests.
- The third, Numbers 24:3-9, celebrates the glory and conquests of Israel's monarchy.
- The fourth, Numbers 24:14-19, announces the coming of a king who will conquer [Edom](#) and Moab
- The fifth, Numbers 24:20, concerns the ruins of [Amalek](#)
- The sixth, Numbers 24:21-22, concerns the destruction of the Kenites by [Assyria](#)
- The seventh, Numbers 24:23-24, concerns ships approaching from the west, to attack Assyria and [Eber](#)

These fall into three groups. The first group consists of two poems characteristically start immediately. The third group of three poems also start immediately, but are much shorter. The second group, however, consists of two poems which both start

*Balaam the son of Beor hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said:
He hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the
Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open:*

Of these, the first and third groups are considered, in the documentary hypothesis, to originate within the Elohist text, whereas the second group is considered to belong to the Jahwist. Thus the Elohist describes Balaam constructing giving two blessings, making sacrifices on seven altars, at the high places of Baal, before each, then deciding not to *seek enchantments* after the third set of sacrifices, but to *set his face upon the wilderness*, which Balak views as a third blessing, and so Balaam then gives the three final predictions of fate. Conversely, in the Jahwist source, Balaam arrives, the spirit of God comes upon him, and he simply delivers a blessing and a prophecy, in succession.

Nethertheless, the poems themselves are considered to predate the Jahwist and Elohist, and simply to have been embedded by them in their works. While the Elohist took off whatever introduction was present in the poems they chose, the Jahwist left it on. An archaeological discovery in 1967 uncovered references to a *Book of Balaam*, from which these poems may have originally been taken. The first four poems are commonly

regarded as ancient lyrics of the early monarchy of Israel and Judah, although there is some suspicion amongst several critics that they have been edited from either less edifying oracles, or oracles which did not refer to Israel.

There are several odd features about the poems. *Agag*, mentioned in the third poem, is described as a great king, which does not correspond to the king of the Amalekites who was named [Agag](#), and described in [I Samuel 15](#), since that description considers Amalek to be small and obscure. While it is the [Masoretic text](#) of the poem which uses the word *Agag*, the [Septuagint](#), other Greek versions, and the Samaritan Pentateuch, all have [Gog](#), implying a very late date for the poem. These names are consequently thought to be textual corruptions, and [Og](#) has been suggested as the original, though it does not make much of an improvement.

The final three poems do not refer either to Israel or Moab, and are thus considered unusual, since they seem to have little relevance to the narrative. It is thought that they may have been added to bring the number of poems either up to five, if inserted into the Elohistic source, or up to seven, if only inserted once [JE](#) was constructed. While the sixth poem refers to Assyria, it is uncertain whether it is an historical reference to the ancient [Ninevah](#), or a prophecy, which religious commentators consider refers to the [Seleucid](#) kingdom of Syria, which also took the name Assyria. The seventh is also ambiguous, and may either be a reference to the [Sea Peoples](#), or, again in the view of religious commentators, to the conquest of Persia by [Alexander the Great](#).

In the view of textual criticism, the thin narrative, excepting the episode involving the ass, is simply a framework invented in order to be able to insert much older poems. Whether the poems themselves constitute prophecies, or simply poems created after the events they appear to prophecy, tends to depend on whether the commentator is religious or not.

Balaam in rabbinic literature

In [rabbinic literature](#) Balaam is represented as one of seven gentile [prophets](#); the other six being Beor (Balaam's father), [Job](#), and Balaam's four friends (Talmud, B. B. 15b). In this literature, Balaam gradually acquired a position among the non-Jews, which was exalted as much as that of Moses among the Jews (Midrash Numbers Rabbah 20); at first being a mere interpreter of dreams, but later becoming a magician, until finally the spirit of prophecy descended upon him (ib. 7).

According to the a negative view of Balaam in the [Talmud](#), Balaam possessed the gift of being able to ascertain the exact moment during which God is wroth — a gift bestowed upon no other creature. Balaam's intention was to curse the Israelites at this moment of wrath, and thus cause God himself to destroy them; but God purposely restrained His anger in order to baffle the wicked prophet and to save the nation from extermination (Talmud, Berachot 7a). The Talmud also recounts a more positive view of Balaam, stating that when the Law was given to Israel, a mighty voice shook the foundations of the earth, so much so that all kings trembled, and in their consternation turned to Balaam,

inquiring whether this upheaval of nature portended a second deluge; the prophet assured them that what they heard was the voice of God, giving the sacred law to the Israelites (Talmud, Zeb. 116a).

According to Jewish legend, Balaam was made this powerful in order to prevent the non-Jewish tribes from saying: "If we had only had our own Moses, we would be as pious as the Jews."

Nevertheless, it is significant that, despite the apparently positive description of a Prophet blessing the Israelites, given in Numbers 22-24, in rabbinical literature the epithet *rasha*, translating as *the wicked one*, is often attached to the name of Balaam (Talmud Berachot l.c.; Taanit 20a; Midrash Numbers Rabbah 20:14). Balaam is pictured as blind of one eye and lame in one foot (Talmud Sanhedrin 105a); and his disciples (followers) are distinguished by three morally corrupt qualities, supposedly the very opposite of those characterizing the disciples of Abraham (Ab. v. 19; compare Tan., Balak, 6):

- an evil eye
- a haughty bearing
- an avaricious spirit

Due to his behaviour with the Midianites, the Rabbis interpret Balaam as responsible for the behaviour during the heresy of Peor, which they consider to have been [unchastity](#), and consequently the death of 24,000 victims of the plague which God sent as punishment. When Balaam saw that he could not curse the children of Israel, the Rabbis assert that he advised Balak, as a last resort, to tempt the Hebrew nation to immoral acts and, through these, to the worship of Baal-peor. *The God of the Hebrews*, adds Balaam, according to the Rabbis, *hates lewdness; and severe chastisement must follow* (San. 106a; Yer. ib. x. 28d; Num. R. l.c.).

Balaam in the New Testament

An interesting, but doubtful, emendation makes this poem describe the nun of Shamal, a state in northwest Syria. In the [New Testament](#) Balaam is cited as a type of avarice ;6 in Rev. ii. 14 we read of false teachers at Pergamum who held the "teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication." Balaam has attracted much interest, alike from Jews, Christians and Muslims. [Josephus](#) paraphrases the story more so, and speaks of Balaam, as the best prophet of his time, but with a disposition ill adapted to resist temptation. [Philo](#) describes him in the Life of Moses as a great magician; elsewhere he speaks of "the sophist Balaam, being," i.e. symbolizing, "a vain crowd of contrary and warring opinions" and again as "a vain people" both phrases being based on a mistaken etymology of the name Balaam.

Balaam also figures as an example of a false teacher in both 2 Peter 2:15 and in Jude 1:11. In both of these verses, Balaam is cited as an example of a false prophet motivated by greed or avarice. These references harken to the Old Testament account of Balaam in

Numbers 22-24 in which King Balak hires the renowned Balaam to curse his enemies (Israel). Even though God intervenes and makes Balaam deliver blessings instead of curses, it's clear that Balaam was normally a prophet for hire. The verses in 2 Peter and Jude are then warnings to the early Christians to beware of religious leaders who are enjoying financial advantages.

Numbers 24:9~25:16...

NU 24:9 Like a lion they crouch and lie down,
like a lioness--who dares to rouse them?

"May those who bless you be blessed
and those who curse you be cursed!"

NU 24:10 Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam. He struck his hands together and said to him, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times. ¹¹ Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the LORD has kept you from being rewarded."

NU 24:12 Balaam answered Balak, "Did I not tell the messengers you sent me, ¹³ 'Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the LORD--and I must say only what the LORD says?' ¹⁴ Now I am going back to my people, but come, let me warn you of what this people will do to your people in days to come."

NU 24:15 Then he uttered his oracle:

"The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,
the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly,

NU 24:16 the oracle of one who hears the words of God,
who has knowledge from the Most High,
who sees a vision from the Almighty,
who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened:

NU 24:17 "I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,
the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.

NU 24:18 Edom will be conquered;
Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,
but Israel will grow strong.

NU 24:19 A ruler will come out of Jacob
and destroy the survivors of the city."

NU 24:20 Then Balaam saw Amalek and uttered his oracle:

"Amalek was first among the nations,
but he will come to ruin at last."

NU 24:21 Then he saw the Kenites and uttered his oracle:

"Your dwelling place is secure,
your nest is set in a rock;

NU 24:22 yet you Kenites will be destroyed
when Asshur takes you captive."

NU 24:23 Then he uttered his oracle:

"Ah, who can live when God does this?

NU 24:24 Ships will come from the shores of Kittim;
they will subdue Asshur and Eber,
but they too will come to ruin."

NU 24:25 Then Balaam got up and returned home and Balak went his own way.

NU 25:1 While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

NU 25:4 The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel."

NU 25:5 So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor."

NU 25:6 Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ⁷ When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand ⁸ and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them--through the Israelite and into the woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; ⁹ but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

NU 25:10 The LORD said to Moses, ¹¹ "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. ¹² Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. ¹³ He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites."

NU 25:14 The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. ¹⁵ And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Cozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family.

NU 25:16 The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁷ "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them, ¹⁸ because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor and their sister Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of Peor."