

Modes of Divine Communication in the Balaam Narrative

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The Balaam narrative in Num 22-24 is a prime example of combining different modes of and techniques for coming into contact with the divine. Since this narrative is neither coherent nor independent,² but rather a complex entity of different sources and redactions,³ the different revelatory concepts could give glimpses into the literary history of this much disputed story. The subject of divine communication was clearly developed over a long time span, but it will be analysed on a synchronic level within this essay.

In its final form the Balaam narrative is constructed using threefold repetition, thereby giving the story a certain tension and dynamic:⁴ God encounters Balaam three times, the donkey tries to side step the Angel thrice and Balaam arranges three sets of sacrifices. This carefully arranged plot constitutes a unified and consistent narrative which betrays the distinguished skill of its redactors.

In this essay, the perplexing variety of divine designations shall be briefly examined in terms of form and content, as the divine partner in this communication is of prime importance. Five modes of divine communication will then

¹ Many thanks to Timothy B. Sailors, University of Tuebingen, for improving the English version of this article.

² But, for a synchronic reading, see Weise, Segen.

³ For this as a basic narrative with expansions see Gross, Bileam; Rouillard, Péricope; Levin, Jahwist; Witte, Segen; Achenbach, Vollendung. For it as two independent strands (J and E) that have been combined by a later redactor see Greene, Balaam; Graupner, Elohist; Schmidt, Bileam; Seebass, Numeri 1. All proposed solutions differ either slightly or significantly from each other. No consensus has yet been reached. However, the first option seems to lie closer to the literary history of the Balaam narrative, since the second proposed strand (the so-called Elohist) of the second option is a fragment at best in the Pentateuch, making it doubtful whether two independent and meaningful stories could be extracted.

⁴ Schmitt, Mantiker 240-241 detects a threefold structure in both parts of the Balaam narrative, underlying a careful structure and composition of the whole story: three divine answers during the hiring of Balaam and three oracles. Barré, Portrait 261 compares the threefold structure of Num 22:41-24:14 with Num 22:21-35: the donkey in relation to Balaam can be likened to Balaam in relation to Balak. For the structure see also Wenham, Numbers 165-166; Douglas, Wilderness 220.

be studied; these cannot be entirely separated, as they are all connected in some way to each other. These modes of divine communication are of two sorts: first, the demonstration of the prophet's inability as exemplified in the story of Balaam and the Angel; and secondly, through different degrees of involvement by God and the prophet in the process of revelation.

This essay cannot give a complete description of the problem of prophetic revelation in general, its major aim is rather to sketch the portrayal of divine communication within the limits of the Balaam narrative in Num 22-24. Plainly this narrative has to be seen in the wider context – both lexical and thematic – of prophetic stories,⁵ but this can only be mentioned in passing and not treated in due fashion here.

1. Different Designations for God and Heavenly Beings

In the Balaam narrative God is called either אֱלֹהִים⁶ or יְהוָה.⁷ The designation אֱלֹהִים is employed only within the first part of the Balaam narrative (till Num 24:2), whereas יְהוָה is used continually throughout the whole narrative.⁸ It is hardly possible to find a rule governing the usage of these different names, which often appear side by side.⁹ It seems that the storyteller uses אֱלֹהִים whereas Balaam prefers יְהוָה.¹⁰ Within the final form, יְהוָה is the personal God of

⁵ I.e. stories about true and false prophecy, about the function and ability of prophets, about receiving divine messages and about the relationship between the prophet and YHWH. For criteria of true or false prophecy see Jeremias, *Prophetic* 37-41; Epp-Tiessen, *Lord* 178-184; Schmid, *Propheten* 305-306.

⁶ Num 22:9,10,12,20,22,38; 23:4,27; 24:2.

⁷ Num 22:8,13,18,19,28,31; 23:3,5,8,12,16,17,21,26; 24:1,6,11,13(*bis*).

⁸ For a long time these different designations were interpreted as indications useful for literary criticism, see the different proposals in Gross, *Bileam* 69-80 who rightly rejects such attempts. Critical of similar source-critical approaches are Levine, *Numbers* 137-138 and Witte, *Segen* 191-197. The main problem with such source-critical attempts is the perplexing alternation of divine names even within the running story, making it nearly impossible to divide the text into different independent sources assigned to two authors who could be differentiated merely by the usage of the divine name.

⁹ The versions usually harmonize the divergent use of divine designations so that textual criticism by itself can contribute little to solve these problems. See Rösel, *Textüberlieferung* 214.221.224. The Septuagint deprives Balaam of his status as a worshipper of YHWH and portrays him negatively, see Rösel, *Jakob* 162-163.

¹⁰ See especially Rudolph, *Elohist* 103-105; Gross, *Bileam* 201; Seebass, *Numeri* 1 52. Klein, *Erwägungen* 24-25 also discusses various reasons for the variation in the divine name. Graupner, *Elohist* 164 n.39 takes this peculiarity of name-usage for redactional activity.

Balaam as stated in Num 22:18,¹¹ whereas אלהים is only a general designation which the storyteller can also use with a pagan seer who cannot really be a worshipper of יהוה. This rule also applies to Num 23:3,16 where Balaam hopes for a meeting with יהוה but runs contrary to Num 23:4 where the same idea in the narrative is expressed with אלהים.¹² It seems that יהוה is the God who governs all the events of the story. In contrast, אלהים could be used for an imprecise designation of a deity. That is why both Balaam and the narrator can use the name אלהים in Num 22:38; 23:4,27. The name אלהים could also be employed for different gods. Thus, in Num 23:27 Balak calls Balaam's god not by his actual name, יהוה, but by אלהים. Only in Num 24:11 has Balak learned that Balaam's god יהוה is responsible for the blessing of Israel.

Although it is a common idea that יהוה might in some instances become angry, the authors steer clear of attributing anger to יהוה in Num 22:22, perhaps because this attitude was considered to be too human for God. This is also the only use of אלהים in the episode with the Angel.¹³ Thus, the authors feel free to associate anthropomorphic attributes with אלהים, whereas a more spiritual picture of God is reserved for יהוה.

It is only at the end of the story with the donkey, where יהוה personally intervenes in the plot in Num 22:28,31, that יהוה takes part in the narrative. Thus, the whole composition is an attempt to gradually accredit all things to יהוה. Even Balak recognizes that יהוה has deprived Balaam of his reward. Thus, in the second part of the Balaam narrative in Num 23-24 the main focus is on יהוה, whereas the first part, namely Num 22, serves as a kind of prehistory, with a different cast of characters, in which both divine designations are possible.

Besides the different designations for God, a certain יהוה מלאך is mentioned only in the story about the Angel.¹⁴ The Angel and God must be differentiated in this account, with the Angel playing only the role of an instrument

¹¹ According to Barré, Portrait 262 the author portrays Balaam as a prophet of YHWH because of his confession in Num 22:18 ("יהוה" my god") and to solve the dilemma of the veracity of his uttered oracles. However, the Septuagint changed Balaam's confession significantly so that he is not portrayed as a true worshipper of YHWH, see Rösel, Jakob 163.

¹² The verb קרה-N is directly or implicitly connected to יהוה several times, see Exod 3:18; Num 23:3,4,15,16. The connection with אלהים is therefore noteworthy and cannot otherwise be explained. Moreover, as is shown by 2Sam 1:6, the verb seems to be related to a real and not a spiritual meeting.

¹³ Schmidt, Bileam 339 n.24 changes the MT to יהוה in accordance with Sam. Cole, Numbers 375 points out that in all other cases of this idiom the divine name יהוה is used.

¹⁴ Num 22:22,23,24,25,26,27,31,32,34,35. See especially Gass, Angel 98.

used by God to accomplish his aims. The Angel is clearly distinguished from יהוה, and cannot therefore be a temporary manifestation of God.¹⁵ The Angel, then, is a threat sent by its master to prevent Balaam from carrying out his intentions.¹⁶

2. Balaam and the Angel

The story of Balaam and the Angel in Num 22:22-35 is centered around the motif of the blindness of the seer Balaam. In addition to יהוה, who governs its unfolding, this narrative has three important characters (Balaam, Angel, donkey) standing for certain attributes (blindness, threat, clear-sightedness).¹⁷ The theme of sight or blindness is expressed by the verb ראה. It appears in the prose story and in the poetic sections and refers to the sight of Israel, the Angel, a revelation of God or further things to come. This verb is also used in revealing the special status of Israel which makes cursing it impossible.

Num 22:22-35 disrupts the coherence of the narrative. This tale is certainly a later addition, perhaps deriving from a separate source which tries to downplay Balaam's abilities.¹⁸ It is clearly a negative assessment of Balaam used to mock diviners like him, since elsewhere even ordinary mortals are able to see divine messengers. The anger of God over Balaam's following the Moabite men seems to contradict the divine order given in v.20, and divine permission for this action is reiterated in v.35. So the story of Balaam and the Angel is a later

¹⁵ Ashley, Book 455. Contra Davies, Numbers 250; Bellinger, Leviticus 267.

¹⁶ Perhaps the narrator introduced the designation רוח אלהים under the influence of Num 23:27, where Balak tries to acquire a favourable word from האלהים. See also Klein, Erwägungen 26.

¹⁷ The precise relationship between the figures and the attributes cannot be treated here in detail.

¹⁸ However, there are also good reasons for understanding it as a later correction to the Balaam narrative. Bartelmus, Eselinnen 35 opts for this alternative. He refers to redactional alterations detectable only in the surrounding narrative that suggest that there never was a separate source with Balaam and the Angel. Perhaps this story was compiled to establish Balaam as a true prophet, since the author used significant words and themes from the legitimizing formula in Num 24:3-4; 15-16. Moreover, only after the encounter with the Angel is he allowed to speak (דבר) and not merely to do (עשה) God's will, see Bartelmus, Eselinnen 41-42. However, though threatened with death by the Angel, Balaam does not refer in his apology of v.33-34 to being granted God's permission to travel with the Moabite messengers. Thus the story of Balaam and the Angel must have been a secondary addition deriving from a separate source.

interpolation by someone not paying due attention to the awkward logic resulting from this addition.¹⁹

The story of Balaam and the Angel will now be briefly described.²⁰ In v.22 the anger of God is kindled when Balaam goes to Balak. This is described by an anger formula which is used thrice in the Balaam narrative and works as a structuring device. The entourage is made up of Balaam riding on his donkey and his two servants, whereas the Moabite messengers are not mentioned.²¹ The Angel of יהוה appears ten times in the Balaam narrative.²² He takes his stand on the road to hamper the way of the travellers (יָצַב-tD),²³ and functions as an adversary of Balaam.²⁴

In v.23 the Angel is described as a great danger to the travellers. He is standing in the road with a sword drawn in his hand. In a synchronic perspective the Angel of the Lord could be interpreted here as a chieftain of the heavenly army, like in Josh 5:13-14, and thus as a high-ranking commander. This dreadful appearance forces the donkey to turn off the path and into the field, for which Balaam strikes the donkey, punishing her stubbornness. Thus, the professional diviner Balaam is unable to recognize, through the peculiar behaviour of his donkey, that the deity has a message for him.²⁵

¹⁹ Perhaps the redactor meant to add the topic of divine testing with this augmentation, see Staubli, Bücher 300-301; Klein, Erwägungen 28.

²⁰ For a fuller treatment, see Gass, Angel.

²¹ The mention of two servants is most probably a literary device designating Balaam as a person of eminence who has to be accompanied by two servants. Balaam's servants conspicuously quit the scene after their unexpected appearance.

²² See Num 22:22,23,24,25,26,27,31,32,34,35.

²³ יָצַב-tD + כּ is also used in Exod 1:17; Deut 31:14; 1Sam 10:23; 2Sam 21:5; 23:12; 1Chr 11:14. It most probably means "to stand ostensibly on sth.", if the tD-stem is interpreted as imitative ("to play the status of the verb's meaning"). For this function of the tD-stem see Irsigler, Einführung 93. According to Levine, Numbers 155 יָצַב-tD elsewhere describes "the posture of divine beings in theophany" or "attendance upon divine beings".

²⁴ See Sakenfeld, Numbers 127; Schmidt, Numeri 133. In this respect, Levine, Numbers 155 thinks that the noun שָׂטָן is typical of the diction in late preexilic historical books since it lacks the notion of the determined noun in Zech and Job or the proper name Satan. Moberly, Prophet 10 draws a parallel to 1Kgs 11 where Hadad and Razon are also called adversaries of Solomon. Similarly, the Angel is an opposing figure symbolizing divine disfavour. According to Day, Adversary 65, שָׂטָן means both "adversary" and "legal opponent". Rouillard, Péricope 120-121 regards the Angel as functioning as an obstacle, but not as the opponent in itself.

²⁵ Wenham, Numbers 170-171.

According to v.24-25, the Angel stands in the narrow path between the vineyards so that the entourage could hardly pass by. Just as the first time, the donkey sees the Angel and squeezes herself against the wall causing Balaam's foot to scrape it. Again Balaam strikes the donkey.

In v.26 the Angel moves and totally blocks the path, prompting the donkey (according to v.27) to lie down under Balaam. The obstinate behaviour of the donkey causes Balaam to strike her a third time. This is apparently an escalation of Balaam's earlier reactions. The intensification of events is also expressed by particular phraseology.²⁶

However, according to v.28, יהוה is in complete control of the situation and opens the mouth of the donkey, making this – apart from the account of the serpent in Gen 3 – the only biblical record of an animal speaking to human beings. In v.28-30 the donkey accuses Balaam of striking her three times without just cause and explains her overall loyalty to her master. Due to his blindness Balaam was in danger of losing his life. After the discussion with the donkey, Balaam admits that the behaviour of the donkey is quite unusual in that she has always been absolutely reliable before. It is remarkable that only the donkey informs Balaam about her lifelong loyal service to him, for it is up to יהוה to grant Balaam his sight.

In v.31 יהוה opens Balaam's eyes so that he can see the Angel with a drawn sword, just as described in v.23. Immediately he understands the situation, bows down and prostrates himself before the Angel. The Angel then explains everything to Balaam in v.32-33, maintaining that he would have killed Balaam but not the donkey if she had not turned aside. The accusation of the donkey is repeated, but also heightened since the Angel refers to the donkey's ability to see (which fortunately saved Balaam's life) in contrast to the blindness of Balaam.

The idioms used by the Angel are, for the most part, common in the story of Balaam and the Angel and show the literary skill of its author: נכה אחון שלש, נכה רגלים, שטן, דרך, הרג, נטה ל/מפני and הרג, דרך, שטן, רגלים. יהוה. The Angel also explains to Balaam that his journey was too hastily undertaken without first sincerely consulting יהוה.²⁸

²⁶ See Gass, Angel 101-102.

²⁷ נכה אחון in Num 22:23,25,27,28,32 (twice with ePP); שלש רגלים in Num 22:28,32,33; שטן in Num 22:22,32; דרך in Num 22:22,23 (*tris*), 26,31,32,34; הרג in Num 22:29,33; מפני ל / נטה in Num 22:23,33 (*bis*).

Only the verb ירט remains elusive, since this verb occurs only tentatively in Job 16:11-12, see Levine, Numbers 159. Based upon the versions, Lapsley, Am I Able 25 interprets this word as "perverse". Similarly Budd, Numbers 266. For Ashley, Book 453 n.9 the MT is textually corrupt.

²⁸ For problems with this interpretation see Gass, Angel 104.

In that respect, the Angel charges Balaam with undertaking his journey without divine consent.

Balaam admits in v.34 that he has sinned (חטא), but he excuses his sin as he did not know about the Angel standing in the road. Furthermore, Balaam will refrain from going to Balak if this displeases the Angel (רע בעיניך). The Angel does allow Balaam to go with the chieftains of Balak in v.35, but he is only to deliver the word given by the Angel. This last command differs from v.38 where God gives Balaam a prophecy in his mouth, with no mention of the Angel who disappears after Num 22:35 without further reference. Thus, the word given by the Angel could be an indication that the Angel is a manifestation of God. However, v.35 is a slightly altered repetition of v.20 so that its appearance in the mouth of the Angel is due to redactional work but not meant to identify God and the Angel. Thus, the Angel and God have to be differentiated, with the Angel being given only the role of an instrument used by God to accomplish his aims.

The narrative of Balaam and the Angel is clearly a prophetic story belonging to the genre of “divine testing of a prophet”. The angel – invisible to Balaam at first – and the talking donkey are devices used to illustrate the abilities and inabilities of a true prophet. Moreover, prophetic sightedness or blindness are subject to God alone and cannot be controlled by human beings. This episode also reveals a lesson for Balaam and for every real prophet; the tale of the donkey seems to relate a test of the prophet and is thus comparable to other prophetic accounts. After the encounter with the Angel he is allowed not only to do (עשה), but also to speak (דבר) God’s will,²⁹ enabling him to act as a true prophet of God.

3. Encounter with God

Among the modes of communication between God and the prophet Balaam the metaphor of a “coming” of God is certainly the most direct form of this contact. There are only five appearances of the wayyiqtol of בוא-G + אלהים / יהוה in the Hebrew Bible, two of which are in the Balaam narrative.³⁰ In all of these instances God (אלהים) comes to non-Israelite people, such as Abimelech, Laban or Balaam.³¹ Here, the divine name יהוה seems to be avoided since these people

²⁹ Bartelmus, Eselinnen 41-42.

³⁰ Gen 20:3; 31:24; Num 22:9,20 with אלהים. 1Sam 3:10 with יהוה.

Kaiser, Balaam 101 thinks that Balaam seeks God’s will in nocturnal dialogues. Seebass, Numeri 1 75 considers the coming of God as a “Topos divinatorischer Literatur”. However, what is meant by a coming of God is left open.

³¹ Milgrom, Numbers 189 regards this as an indication of an inferior theophany, since the coming of God is never used with Israel’s prophets. For the coming of God see

are non-Israelites. Only the Israelite Samuel is granted a night-time visit by יהוה. Furthermore, in Exod 19:9 and 20:24 God (יהוה or אלהים) announces his own coming to Moses.

The coming of God is always at night.³² It seems to refer only thrice to a direct encounter with God himself, since the coming of God in these instances is not related functionally to a dream (חלום).³³ Though it may well be that even in these three instances the encounter with God is also indirectly mediated through a dream. Nevertheless, it is striking that the authors make no mention in these cases of a dream. Balaam and Samuel are therefore exceptionally granted a personal communication with God at night. All the other divine visits occur in the context of dreams.³⁴ The encounter with God in these narratives is to be seen in the context of the call and guidance of individuals. The coming of God is described in an archaic and anthropomorphic way, yet without touching the sovereignty of God. However, the confusion of this direct diction was also alleviated by the introduction of a messenger.³⁵ All of these accounts of the coming of God share the same objective, namely, the desire of God to communicate something to individuals.³⁶

Apart from the above-mentioned archaic narratives that describe the coming of God, this topic also has a prominent place in the hymnic and prophetic accounts of divine theophany in the context of judgement and salvation and also at

also Achenbach, *Vollendung* 398. Moore, *Balaam* 99 considers the nocturnal dialogue with God an oneiromantic oracle.

³² Wagner, *Elemente* 89 thinks that this type of revelation is an auditory experience: either a dream or an incubation oracle.

³³ See Num 22:9,20; 1Sam 3:10. It is remarkable that the Septuagint has not altered the text by introducing a messenger instead of God. Since Balaam does not dream he could not be labelled an oneiromantic, see Kaiser, *Balaam* 101. Graupner, *Elohist* 163 thinks that the dream as a means of revelation is restricted to the time of the Patriarchs and thus the presumably Elohist author differentiates the time of Moses from former times. But one wonders why the author admits to a more direct form of communication with God in the time of Moses and especially to foreigners.

³⁴ Communication with God took place by means of a dream in those accounts. Schnutenhaus, *Kommen* 18 does not find the difference between a dream and a real encounter incongruous. The idea of a coming of God also corresponds to the Balaam Inscription of *Tell Dēr 'Allā* (2088.1782) which reports a coming of the gods to Balaam (KAI 312:1), but expressed with the verb אִזְחַק.

³⁵ See Jenni, *Kommen* 26-27. Contra Jenni, *Kommen* 27, in Num 22:9,20 there is no mention of a dream in which God appears to the individual. See the cautious remark of Preuss, *בוא* 562.

³⁶ Schnutenhaus, *Kommen* 18. Nevertheless, according to Preuss, *בוא* 563 the coming of God is “nie etwas Harmloses”.

the temple in cultic language.³⁷ However, the different phraseology employed there cannot be appropriately dealt with here.

4. Contact with God

In Num 23:4-5,16 Balaam meets God, who then gives him a prophecy in his mouth (שִׁים דִּבֵּר בְּפִה). The exact meaning of the verb קָרָה-N “to meet” is difficult to establish in this context. The question remains whether there is a direct encounter or perhaps an unscheduled communication with the divine.³⁸ In non-theological contexts קָרָה-N carries the notion of chance, whereas in theological parlance chance is combined with divine guidance.³⁹ This verb has also revelatory connotations.⁴⁰ However, how this revelation actually takes place is not specified. But in all cases, this unexpected revelation causes the human subject of the verb קָרָה-N to obey God.⁴¹

Although the effect of קָרָה-N is beyond doubt, the underlying experience can hardly be established. Num 24:1 seems to imply that Balaam used tools for divination (נְחָשׁ and כֶּסֶם). Therefore the verb קָרָה-N seems to denote not a real personal meeting with God but a message obtained by divinatory means. Thus קָרָה-N must be differentiated from בּוֹא to some extent. Unlike בּוֹא, where only one participant in the encounter is active – namely God himself –, the verb קָרָה-N stresses the reciprocity of the following events and thus underlines the involvement of both partners: Balaam performs his rituals and God might – in return – give him a revelation (although it is not made clear whether the ritual could actually effect an answer from God).

5. Balaam as God’s Mouthpiece

Balaam acts as God’s mouthpiece when he exactly repeats the word which was communicated to him. The subject of direct revelation in the Balaam narra-

³⁷ For the problem see Schnutenhaus, *Kommen* 15-18; Jenni, *בּוֹא* 267; Preuss, *בּוֹא* 563-568; Jenni, *Kommen* 28-35.

³⁸ Milgrom, *Numbers* 198 interprets קָרָה-N as reflexive. This form could equally well stress the element of chance. For the problem see also Cole, *Numbers* 401; Levine, *Numbers* 166. Ashley, *Book 466* assumes a “divine-human meeting”. Wagner, *Elemente* 103 interprets קָרָה-N as audition. But there is no indication that the semantic range of קָרָה-N is limited to the auditory sphere.

³⁹ See Ringgren, *קָרָה* 173-174.

⁴⁰ Ringgren, *קָרָה* 174.

⁴¹ Amsler, *קָרָה* 684: “In beiden Fällen läßt sich Jahwe unerwartet und persönlich jemandem begegnen und bringt diejenigen, denen er erscheint, zum Gehorsam ihm gegenüber”.

tive – be it a direct inspiration by God or a temporary spiritual turmoil – will now be addressed.

Already at the beginning, Balaam makes plain that he could only repeat what יהוה tells him.⁴² In that respect, he has no power to curse an object blessed by God. Balaam can only echo what was given to him. The allegedly powerful sorcerer is totally dependent on יהוה. Although Balak clearly saw that Balaam's curses and blessings were effective, he disregarded Balaam's subordination to יהוה. He failed to see that Balaam can only act as a mouthpiece of יהוה.

This way of divine communication can be expressed by the idiom “to put a word into someone's mouth” (שים דבר בפה).⁴³ God meets Balaam (קרה-N) two times and, after giving him the prophecy in his mouth, sends him back to Balak to report the word to him.⁴⁴ It seems that Balaam is not aware of the exact meaning of the prophecy because in these cases God is most probably not speaking directly with Balaam (דבר). Instead, the message is simply put in his mouth. Only the wording כה תדבר could indicate that Balaam had first received

⁴² אל דבר כאשר דבר יהוה אל in Num 22:8. Similarly in Num 22:20,35; 24:13 and other mixed expressions. Balaam is not an interpreter; it is more likely that פתורה in Num 22:5 should be rendered as a place name, see Kaiser, Balaam 103; Weise, Segnen 41-43. For the problem see Gross, Bileam 101-104; Milgrom, Numbers 186; Levine, Numbers 147-48; Gass, Stern 258 n.22; Seebass, Numeri-1 67-8. However, Schmidt, Buch 124-125 thinks that Petor is a later addition made to establish a connection between the home town of Balaam and his function as an interpreter. Apart from its interpretation as a place name see the following proposals: Schüle, Israels 144-145 interprets פתורה as “Land der Zeichendeuter”. Layton, Balaam 35-42 regards פתורה as the nomen agentis “diviner”. Similarly Barré, Portrait 256. But the interpretation of פתורה as “dream interpreter” fails to explain the directive suffix ה, see Day, Adversary 48 n.5, unless one regards the final ה as originally the Aramaic article א which was later changed to ה.

⁴³ Num 22:38 with אלהים. Num 23:5,16 with יהוה. Schüle, Israels 253 interprets this idiom in the following way: “Mit dem ‘Legen des Wortes in den Mund’ wird der Akt bezeichnet, mit dem Gott sein Wort dem, der es überbringen soll, *anvertraut*. Es geht um den vertrauenswürdigen Boten / die vertrauenswürdige Botin – gegenüber denjenigen, die sich das Sprechen im Namen Jahwes selbst anmaßen.” According to Wenham, Numbers 167 the phrase might be intended to “emphasize the inspiration of his oracles rather than the holiness of his character”.

⁴⁴ Num 23:5,16. The encounter between God and Balaam is described in two different ways. In v.4 God meets Balaam whereas in v.15 Balaam takes action, saying “I myself will encounter (him) there”. Thus the perspective changes. Graupner, Elohist 167 thinks that Balaam already knew the content of the revelation and simply let Balak do the work like before.

a message. But unlike a messenger formula, the oracle does not follow immediately but only after returning to Balak.

In the third instance the spirit of God (רוח אלהים) comes upon Balaam and he starts to prophesy.⁴⁵ Thus, the spirit of God initiates the third oracle. The coming of the spirit of God does not indicate a permanent presence, but only a temporary gift in order to perform prophecy.⁴⁶ Since he has no power to declare a message different from יהוה's, Balaam acts as a mouthpiece for God's will. The last poem is delivered automatically without external impetus. Also in this case Balaam could only proclaim God's blessing upon Israel, and this against the will of Balak who sends him back home without reward.

6. Balaam the Visionary

The verb ראה can, in the Balaam narrative, be related to seeing ordinary things, but it can also refer to visionary experiences. Used in this way, the verb can denote the vision itself.⁴⁷ Perhaps due to its importance in the Balaam narrative, it was used to structure not only the whole story but also the secondary tale of Balaam and the Angel. Although able to perform the role of a seer, Balaam could neither control nor demonstrate this ability on demand because it derives entirely from יהוה.⁴⁸

Moreover, even normal sight might reveal whether something is blessed or cursed. For this reason, Balaam first observes Israel from different perspectives, prepares for sacrifices and only then utters his prophecies. The choice of a special position from which to view Israel is crucial for the subsequent actions.⁴⁹ According to Num 23:27, the position must be ישר in the eyes of God. Thus, the ritual requires a view of the object to be cursed or blessed. In that respect the ritual performed is a visual one. The procedure for receiving an oracle follows a special plan.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ It is difficult to argue that רוח אלהים, although used in a Yahwistic context, is a "geprägte Wendung", see Schmidt, *Numeri* 126 n.25 since there are also many instances of the expression רוח יהוה. Moreover, Num 24 cannot be compared with 1Sam 11, as the governing verb is different in both accounts. On this problem see Gass, *Genus* 47-48.

⁴⁶ Davies, *Numbers* 266; Bellinger, *Leviticus* 270.

⁴⁷ See Num 23:3; 24:1,17,20,21.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Balaam* 102.

⁴⁹ Wagner, *Elemente* 103.

⁵⁰ Rösel, *Propheten* 511 considers Balaam a practitioner of inductive mantic since he attempts to acquire inspiration from God through oblations. Only later does Balaam see the future through intuitive mantic, with no need of further omens. On the preparations before the first oracle see also Rouillard, *Péripécopé* 158-209.

a) VIEWING POSITION

In Num 22:41; 23:13 and 24:2 Balaam and Balak take different positions in order to view Israel (Bamoth-Baal, Pisgah, Peor). Most probably, the ordinary sight of the object is a prerequisite for the following.

b) ALTARS BUILT

In Num 23:1,14,29 Balak must build seven altars and prepare seven bulls and rams, most probably for a sacrifice on each altar. In the present account, all altars are dedicated to יהוה which is rather exceptional.⁵¹ Perhaps the seven altars are to guarantee the completeness of the ritual.⁵² Only Ezek 45:23 describes daily burnt offerings of seven bulls and rams for the whole week. And the usage of numerous altars is unattested elsewhere in the Bible.⁵³

c) BURNT OFFERING

In Num 23:2,14,30 Balak offers the prescribed sacrifice as a burnt offering.⁵⁴ Only in the first of these does Balak act together with Balaam. Although it is not explicitly said whether they sacrifice all of the animals, one can assume that they do.⁵⁵ According to Num 23:4, it was Balaam himself who built the altars and offered the sacrifices, but this is not corroborated in the context.⁵⁶

⁵¹ See Seebass, Numeri 1 63-64. However, Moore, Balaam 105-106 interprets the sacrifice as an exorcistic ritual. The custom of arranging several altars might be due to the belief that each altar is dedicated to a different deity.

⁵² Cole, Numbers 399; Achenbach, Vollendung 408. Olson, Numbers 145 assumes that these sacrifices are supposed to bribe the deity in order to get the desired curse. Similarly Bellinger, Leviticus 268, who also thinks that the sacrifice could provide organs for divination. However, the context describes the sacrifices as burnt offerings, which would leave no organs to be inspected by Balaam.

⁵³ Milgrom, Numbers 194. According to Staubli, Bücher 294 the sevenfold sacrifice has the character of an invocation.

⁵⁴ In this respect, it is not Balaam who acts as a priest, see Kaiser, Balaam 104. Contra Greene, Balaam 59; Cole, Numbers 376. Levine, Numbers 166 thinks that it is logical that Balak offers the sacrifice – he, after all, is the person officially requesting a curse upon Israel, while Balaam is only working on behalf of Balak.

According to Levine, Numbers 162 the “magician had to attract the attention of the gods in order to present his petition”. A burnt offering was well suited to this objective because the deity could smell the aromatic smoke ascending heavenward.

⁵⁵ Milgrom, Numbers 194 considers the definite article before מִזְבְּחֵי as distributive “on each altar”. Similarly Seebass, Numeri 2 85-86.

⁵⁶ Due to this contradiction, Schmidt, Buch 135 regards Num 23:4b as a secondary gloss meant to prevent the pagan Balak from sacrificing to יהוה. However, the historical Balaam, as attested in the plaster texts of *Tell Dēr 'Allā*, was not a prophet of

d) RETREAT

In Num 23:3,15 Balaam is departing for a meeting with יהוה who will hopefully reveal (ח-ראיה) only in Num 23:3)⁵⁷ a message to Balaam, whereas Balak stays to watch the burnt offering.⁵⁸ For this meeting Balaam has to withdraw to an isolated location. He requires hilltops and solitude to read signs and omens (Num 23:3,14), and uses, in particular, נחש and קסם to interpret the divine will. Perhaps Balaam's perambulation was a means of searching for omens, a habit attributed to him in Num 24:1.⁵⁹ It is important to note that the ritual in itself does not automatically guarantee a curse or a blessing.

e) RECEIVING PROPHETIC MESSAGE

In Num 23:4-5,16 Balaam meets God who then gives him a prophecy in his mouth (שִׁים דְּבַר בְּפִי). Since Balaam seems to have used tools for divination (נחש and קסם), the verb קרה-N most probably denotes not a personal encounter with God but a message obtained by divinatory means.

f) RETURN

In Num 23:6,17 Balaam returns to Balak who is standing beside the burnt offering together with the chieftains of Moab who are mentioned without any clear-cut motivation.⁶⁰

g) DECLARATION OF ORACLE

In Num 23:7-10,18-24; 24:3-9 Balaam utters the oracle just as it was communicated to him by יהוה or by the spirit of God.⁶¹

The first two encounters include the full range of steps for receiving an oracle outlined above. However, in seeking the third oracle Balaam deviates from the usual routine, insofar as steps d-f are missing. Furthermore, Num 24:1 makes plain that the first two meetings with יהוה were the result of divination (נחשים).⁶² According to Num 22:7 the elders of Moab and Midian took קסמים

YHWH, since El is the chief god in these texts, see Dijkstra, Balaam 60-61. Thus, only the biblical picture transforms the pagan prophet to a Yahwistic one.

⁵⁷ According to Kaiser, Balaam 102 Balaam claims to function as a seer by promising to speak the word that God causes him to see. Levine, Numbers 162 thinks that Balaam perambulated until he "connected" to the deity. Staubli, Bücher 294 regards Balaam a medium, whereas Balak is responsible for the sacrifices.

⁵⁸ According to Wenham, Numbers 173 the verb יצב might indicate that it is "a patient waiting for God, possibly in prayer".

⁵⁹ See Levine, Numbers 190-191.

⁶⁰ Schmidt, Buch 137 thinks that the chieftains are a later gloss.

⁶¹ For a linguistic interpretation of the Balaam oracles see Gass, Stern.

⁶² Ashley, Book 486; Barré, Portrait 263; Bellingier, Leviticus 270; Sherwood, Leviticus 179. Contra Kaiser, Balaam 104-105 who thinks that divination was his usual way of

with them when going to Balaam. The plural noun קסמים denotes either “tools of divination”⁶³ or the “reward for divination”. However, the second oracle explicitly states in Num 23:23 that these means (קסם and נחש mentioned in the singular) do not work against Israel, requiring Balaam to change tactics. For the third oracle a retreat to ask for omens followed by a return is apparently no longer necessary. In that way the character of the third oracle is totally different from that of the first two.⁶⁴

For this oracle, the Spirit of God overwhelms Balaam causing him to prophesy (Num 24:2). In the Balaam narrative the Spirit of God seems to be the spirit of prophecy. Thus, Balaam no longer acts as pagan diviner, but as God’s prophet.⁶⁵ The reference to the Spirit of God shows that Balaam was explicitly chosen by God. Thus, Balaam’s oracle receives the ultimate authorization as a revelation by God. Unfortunately, the topic of the Spirit of God coming upon a prophet cannot be analysed here in detail, but there are many instances in which the idiom יהיה רווח על is connected to prophesying.⁶⁶

operating in the past before his current undertaking to curse Israel. Schmidt, Buch 140 regards this notice as a later gloss. Budd, Numbers 268 maintains that there is no hint in the original story that Balaam used divinatory techniques before. But in a synchronic reading, the references in Num 23:23 and 24:1 must be understood to mean that Balaam has used divinatory means before.

⁶³ Moberly, Learning 4. Contra Vuilleumier, Bileam 159 who interprets קסמים as “Wahrsagerlohn”. Similarly Budd, Numbers 265; Davies, Numbers 247. Cole, Numbers 382 points out that fees are usually called מנחה. However, Ashley, Book 447 considers both translations equally possible, just as in the case of בשרה.

Hurowitz, Balak’s 78-81, referring to parallels in the Mari texts, regards קסמים as models of omens which are sent to Balaam for his expertise and authoritative interpretation. Similarly Sherwood, Leviticus 174-175, who assumes that Balak was dissatisfied with the readings of his diviners and expected another assessment.

⁶⁴ Witte, Segen 203 points out that the introductory lines refer to Balaam as an ecstatic seer. For the interpretation of Balaam falling into an ecstatic state, see also Wenham, Numbers 176-177; Milgrom, Numbers 202. Seebass, Numeri 2 92 does not reckon the coming of the spirit of God as something exceptional. Balaam was most probably not in a trance. However, according to Gross, Bileam 137 the Spirit of God indicates “einen neuen Inspirationsmodus: YHWH legt nicht mehr Worte in den Mund Bileams, sondern Gottesgeist überkommt ihn”.

⁶⁵ Wagner, Elemente 93 thinks that, based on the syntax, Balaam’s inspiration by the Spirit of God happens either after he sees or while he is viewing Israel.

⁶⁶ See especially Num 24:2; 1Sam 19:20,23; 2Chr 15:1; 20:14.

According to Num 24:4,16, Balaam hears the words of God and sees the vision of Shaddai. Thus, Balaam probably receives an audition and a vision.⁶⁷ Balaam is then ready for a real vision, and not merely a visionary experience. This is expressed by the stem *חזה* in the introduction to the oracles. It follows from these introductory lines that Balaam is a legitimate prophet.⁶⁸ As a *חזה* he is also considered to be a clairvoyant and therefore specialized in divination.⁶⁹

The verb *חזה* is used several times for visionary experiences of God⁷⁰ or for visions in a broader sense⁷¹. The designation *חזה* is also found in the Balaam Inscription of *Tell Dēr 'Allā* (PG 2088.1782) which describes Balaam as an *אש חזה* (KAI 312:1).⁷² The verb *חזה* refers to a vision of God. This revelation precedes Balaam's oracle and is a *sui generis* experience which legitimates the claim to be a clairvoyant.⁷³ It is unclear whether this vision was accompanied by an audition, since the triad "see – hear – realize" of Num 24:3-4; 15-16 might reflect later reworking of the original tradition.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ However, it is not said that Balaam took part in the heavenly assembly. Contra Schüle, *Israels* 248.

⁶⁸ For the legitimizing impact of the introductory lines see Num 24:3-4,15-16. The interpretation of the idiom *העין שרתם* is far from sure. But it is most probable to relate the word *שרתם* to a cognate word in Middle Hebrew with the meaning "open", see Gass, *Stern* 18-20.154-155. Furthermore, Schmidt, *Buch* 141 argues for this denotation by way of the context. On this problem see also Fuhs, *Sehen* 112-113.116; Davies, *Numbers* 267.

⁶⁹ Milgrom, *Numbers* 472 thinks that Balaam interpreted a bird omen due to the list of birds mentioned in the plaster inscription of *Tell Dēr 'Allā* (KAI 312:7-9) and the account in Philo (1Mos 282.287).

⁷⁰ See Exod 24:11; Job 19:26,27; Ps 11:7; 17:15; 27:4; 63:3.

⁷¹ See Job 15:17; Isa 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; Lam 2:14; Ezek 12:27; 13:6,7,8,9,16,23; 21:34; 22:28; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 10:2.

⁷² On the Balaam inscription see, among many other discussions, Dijkstra, *Balaam* 47-60; Cole, *Numbers* 367-370; Levine, *Numbers* 241-254; Schüle, *Israels* 128-139.

⁷³ Fuhs, *Sehen* 219.

⁷⁴ Fuhs, *Sehen* 166-167. According to Num 24:4,16, Balaam is lying down while receiving the vision with open eyes. This mode of receiving revelation is expressed by a nominal clause. Schmidt, *Buch* 141 thinks that Balaam was given his revelation while in ecstasy. Unfortunately, 1Sam 19:24 is the only account which combines *נבא* and *נפל*, whereas *חזה* and *נפל* are connected only here. One can therefore only speculate about the mode of Balaam's revelation. Furthermore, real ecstatic prophecy is described in another way, see 1Sam 10. Wagner, *Elemente* 97 thinks that the verb *נפל* also describes honor and homage towards God. Seebass, *Numeri* 2 93 also discusses the problem of the correct interpretation of *נפל*.

The visionary language intensifies in the course of the Balaam narrative, moving from *ראה* to *חזה*. This, in turn, corresponds to Balaam's growing insight on the blessed state of Israel and the irreversibility of God's will. The "ordinary" sight of Israel's reality by Balaam culminates in a "real" vision.

7. Conclusion

In its final form, the Balaam narrative alludes to a number of different topics related to divine communication: Balaam comes into contact with the divine sphere through an encounter with God and God's messenger, by an audition, by consulting omens and finally by a "real" vision. Thus, there is a certain progression and dynamic in the way that Balaam receives the message of God.

Moreover, the characters play different roles and are set in remarkable contrast, like the blind seer and the seeing donkey or the obstinate Balak who tries to manipulate God and Balaam who is obedient to the will of God. All in all, Balaam is portrayed as a diviner able to predict the future, though ineffective as a sorcerer who could manipulate God's will.⁷⁵ This seems to be the disastrous misunderstanding of Balak who thinks that every god will react appropriately to the needs of his specific worshippers as long as the ritual is performed properly. Balak relied on this belief when assuming that a talented diviner like Balaam could obtain a favourable oracle at any time. Thus, the Balaam narrative is mainly interested in the proper concept of God; it is only secondarily concerned with a discussion of prophecy. All modes of divine communication in the Balaam narrative are subservient to the will of *יהוה* and can be given even to a non-Israelite diviner who is nevertheless described as a worshipper of *יהוה*.⁷⁶ Moreover, blessings and curses are not commodities which can be controlled by diviners.⁷⁷

One final objective of the Balaam narrative is to demonstrate that God's will is unchangeable and that a true prophet can only speak what is revealed to him by God. Bargaining with God, as initially attempted by Balaam, will not work. Even an acknowledged diviner like Balaam could not manipulate God. Thus, a synchronic reading of the Balaam narrative reveals a lesson for Balaam and for every other prophet. Similarly, the tale of the donkey also seems, in its context, to be a case of the testing of a prophet and thus comparable to other prophetic accounts.

⁷⁵ Cole, Numbers 366 maintains that according to the Old Testament some forms of divination were acceptable, whereas sorcery was not.

⁷⁶ This is apparently a later literary stage in the Balaam tradition, see the remarks in Gass, Stern 261-263.

⁷⁷ See especially Barré, Portrait 264.

Summary

In its final form, the Balaam narrative alludes to a number of different topics related to divine communication: Balaam comes into contact with the divine sphere through an encounter with God and God's messenger, by an audition, by consulting omens and finally by a "real" vision. Thus, there is a certain progression and dynamic in the way that Balaam receives the message of God. All in all, Balaam is portrayed as a diviner able to predict the future, though ineffective as a sorcerer who could manipulate God's will. This seems to be the disastrous misunderstanding of Balak. Thus, the Balaam narrative is mainly interested in the proper concept of God. One final objective is to demonstrate that God's will is unchangeable and that a true prophet can only speak what is revealed to him by God.

Zusammenfassung

Die Bileamerzählung stellt bei synchroner Lesung verschiedene Weisen einer Kommunikation mit Gott vor: Bileam erreicht den Kontakt zu Gott durch eine Begegnung mit Gott bzw. dem Boten Gottes, durch eine Audition, durch Omenschau sowie durch eine „reale“ Vision. Darüber hinaus lässt sich ein Fortschritt bzw. eine Dynamik in der Art und Weise feststellen, wie Bileam eine Botschaft Gottes erhält. Insgesamt wird Bileam als Wahrsager dargestellt, der die Zukunft vorhersagen kann. Er kann jedoch nicht den Willen Gottes als Zauberer effektiv beeinflussen, was Balak in verheerender Weise missversteht. Dementsprechend beschäftigt sich die Bileamerzählung in erster Linie mit einem angemessenen Gottesbild. Sie will zeigen, dass der Wille Gottes unveränderlich ist und folglich ein wahrer Prophet nur das wiedergeben kann, was ihm zuvor von Gott mitgeteilt worden ist.

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