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BRILL

INTERPRET HIM AS MUCH AS YOU WANT:
BALAAM IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Ronit Nikolsky

Introduction

In the past, some scholars devoted studies to rabbinic views about Balaam. To mention only the most recent: Ephraim Urbach devoted an article to Balaam and the question of gentile prophecy, concentrating also on the conjecture put forward already in the 19th century that Balaam in rabbinic thought is representing Jesus.¹ Geza Vermes was describing the continuity between biblical opinions about Balaam (pointing to the different view expressed in P as opposed to the other sources) and late antique statements about him.² Judith Baskin devoted her dissertation to 'the three counselors of Pharaoh', which later appeared as a book.³ Her focus is on rabbinic appreciation of gentiles as prophets. James Kugel studied opinions of late antique authors about Balaam, focusing on the messianic understanding of his oracle as well as other issues.⁴

Even though in some cases scholars point to the differences found in various rabbinic or late antique texts about Balaam,⁵ in most cases they are focusing on one or more themes regarding Balaam, and they look into opinions of various late antique writers about this biblical figure. The present article is different in its focus. In contrast to earlier works, it does not follow a particular theme which appears in rabbinic literature about Balaam, such as his prophetic abilities or rabbinic assessment of

¹ E.E. Urbach, 'The Rabbinic Sermons about the Gentle Prophets and the Story of Balaam', in: E.E. Urbach, *The World of the Sages*, Jerusalem 2002, 537–55.

² G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*, Leiden 1973, 127–77.

³ J.R. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counselors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Traditions*, Chico, California 1983, 75–113.

⁴ J.L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was on the Start of the Common Era*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1998, 799–810, 818–23.

⁵ For example Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counselors*, 81.

his moral conduct, but it focuses on one particular text about Balaam. I wish to analyze the representation of the person of Balaam in a pericope in the Babylonian Talmud (BT), i.e., *Sanhedrin* 90a–106b.

The Pericope about Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud
(*Sanhedrin* 90a–106b)

The pericope about Balaam in the BT is found in *Perak Helék*,⁶ literally meaning 'the chapter on "portion"'. The issue in the Mishnah,⁷ which is the basis for the Talmudic discussion,⁸ is the question of who deserves, and who does not deserve to have a 'portion' in the next world.⁹ Usually, a person gains a portion in the next world by accumulating good deeds in this world, and by repenting the sins committed, but in some cases some people have committed such evil deeds that they cannot in any way repair their fate and therefore cannot have a 'portion' in the next world. The rabbis enumerate these villains: those who hold wrong theological opinions (such as saying that the Torah has not been handed down from heaven), those who make use of medico-magical practices ('whispering over a blow') or those who pronounce God's hidden name. Seven people are mentioned by name, three kings (Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh) and four commoners (Balaam, Doeg, Ahiofel and Gehazi), as being such villains that they do not deserve a portion in the next world. The *Gemara* on this Mishnah discusses each of these people extensively. This discussion is where we find the pericope about Balaam.

This BT pericope is a midrash. It follows the plot of the biblical story of Balaam. We read about the summoning of Balaam by Balak, Balaam's consent to come and curse the Israelites, his adventure with his she-ass, his encounter with Balak and his cursing of the Israelites, which turns into blessings. The BT pericope also discusses two other biblical narratives: the first is the episode of the fornication of the Israelites with the daughters of the Moabites—a sin resulting from

⁶ Hebrew: פֶּרֶק הֶלֶק. All the themes which appear in the summary below appear in all major manuscripts and editions of the Talmud (Herzog, Muenchen, Firenze, Karlsruhe and the Barco edition), albeit not always verbatim.

⁷ Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10:1–2.

⁸ *Sanhedrin* 90a–106b.

⁹ The expression 'to have a portion in the next world' can mean either that the soul will dwell in a blissful place after death, or that the soul will be present in the future messianic world. The exact meaning of the expression is not important for this article, as long as the general meaning of being in a good world after death is accepted.

Balaam's advise to the Moabites; this episode is found in chapter 25 of the book of Numbers. The second narrative is the killing of Balaam by the Israelites, found in two places in the biblical text: Num 31:8 and Josh 13:22.

Many of the narratives and ideas which make up the pericope about Balaam in the BT are quotations, retold stories and ideas found in earlier rabbinic narratives. In what follows, I will first summarize the content of the BT pericope and analyze it (§1). Later, I will analyze the manner in which the BT is reworking earlier rabbinic sources into the pericope, and how the original source is changed in this process (§2). It is my opinion that the method of integrating older sources into a current cultural products, such as the Babylonian Talmud, is particularly important in retaining a feeling of cultural continuity and therefore a solid cultural identity, while at the same time this process is enabling the culture to adapt to present-day circumstances and to a modern—for its time—world-view.

The type of analysis of the Talmudic text that I will be presenting here is similar to the one followed by J.L. Rubenstein in both of his recent books.¹⁰ Rubenstein has reluctantly called the first stage of the analysis (which is here part of the summary of the pericope) 'literary analysis' and the second stage 'source criticism', while being aware that both these terms carry a (historical) meaning which does not allow them to convey that fresh outlook on Talmudic narrative which exists in Rubenstein's books. I follow (also reluctantly) this terminology.

In my research on rabbinic literature, I have accepted the assertion that the various periods, as well as the various loci (that is, Palestine and Babylonia), of rabbinic culture have produced bodies of writing which represent their respective world view. We can expect to find differences in emphasis in a story when told in various periods or when moved from Palestine to Babylonia or vice versa. Rabbinic writings should not, then, be treated *en bloc*; instead, it is the cultural diversity represented in the various rabbinic writings, which should be the focus of the scholarly work dealing with this literature.

¹⁰ J.L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*, Baltimore/London, 1999; J.L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Baltimore/London, 2003.

1. *Summary and Analysis of the BT Pericope (Sanhedrin 90a–106b)*

The narrative in the Balaam pericope revolves around two axes. One is the biblical story of Balaam; here the narrative follows the sequence of the biblical verses, comments on and expounds on the story and thus it follows the usual midrash method. The second axis is a systematic description and explanation of the figure of Balaam. Unfolding in the *br* pericope are various aspects of the person of Balaam, beginning with an etymology of his name, going on to identify the person, relate his moral choice and his psychological, physical and sexual characteristics, and ending up with his professional abilities. Some details of the biblical story at hand are discussed: his adventures with his she-ass, the Balak-Balaam meeting, the advice Balaam gives to the Moabites and the consequences of this, and lastly Balaam's death are expounded on, and the context and the meaning of the story are addressed.

Another key to the message of the text are statements about sexual behavior: There is nothing in the biblical story about Balaam that is directly concerned with sexuality. Yet the Babylonian text sets before the reader three models of sexual behavior. The first is Balaam's: he is engaged in sexual activity with his she-ass. The second is the manner in which the young Moabite women tempt the Israelite men. The third model represents the relationship between the Israelites and their God; this is described as the intimacy between a lion and a lioness, an intimacy into which no one may intrude.

The sexual models serve as a way for the rabbis to differentiate propriety from impropriety, the pious from the wicked, and thus to identify Balaam as a villain and an improper person.¹¹

In what follows, I will provide a summary of what is said in the *br*. I will be breaking the narrative up into numbered sections so that the compositional effort of the author/editor¹² will be apparent; this will also facilitate references to the various narratives in the discussion. Every so often the sequence of sections of the narrative will be

¹¹ See the discussion in Baskin, *Parashat's Counselors*, 89.

¹² In this article, I am not making any conjecture about authorship of the *br*. Various words, such as 'author', 'editor', 'compiler' in the singular or plural are used for the sake of convenience, without intending a precise definition and without assuming that the work was done by a single person. For the same sake of convenience I use metaphorical language when speaking of the text as a person, i.e. 'the text says', 'the pericope shows', etc. I intend to say that the people/person responsible for arranging, compiling or writing the texts intended to convey such a meaning.

stopped for an analysis of what was said; I am hoping in this way to avoid repeating a telling of the narrative, once when summarizing and once when analyzing.¹³

The references to the biblical verses, which are discussed in the pericope, are given in brackets. Reference to the Talmudic pages is given in the footnotes.

*Sections 1–7: Introducing Balaam*1. *Who is the person of Balaam?* (Num 22:5)¹⁴

The pericope in the *br* begins by discussing the meaning of Balaam's name and his identity. A few etymologies are suggested, including one distinguishing Balaam as having had sexual intercourse with a domestic animal (his title בַּלְעָמִי בַּאֲשֵׁרֵי אֲשֵׁרֵי אֲשֵׁרֵי is taken to mean בַּלְעָמִי בַּאֲשֵׁרֵי אֲשֵׁרֵי, engaging sexually with a domestic animal). As far as his identity is concerned, it is stated: 'He is a prophet, son of a prophet, who exceeded his father in prophecy'. He is one and the same person as Kushan Rishatayim,¹⁵ who is also Laban the Aramean, the father-in-law of Jacob.¹⁶

2. *Balaam is evil through his own free will*

The editor quotes a *baraita*, a Tosefta-like narrative, stating that 'only the wicked among the gentiles do not deserve to enter the next world', implying that pious gentiles do deserve it.¹⁷ Balaam's own words are then quoted: 'If I die a pious death, my end will be like his' (Num 23:10). This is taken to mean if I, Balaam, am pious at the time of my death, I will merit the same fate as a pious Israelite (that is, have a 'portion' in the next world). From all the villains mentioned in the Mishnah—states the *br*—it is only Balaam who will not have a 'portion' in the world to come. The others will.

3. *Why did the Medians go with the elders of the Moabites?* (Num 22:7)

Next, the *br* quotes a Tannaitic statement¹⁸ concerning a surprising biblical account. In the story of Balaam, although it is Balak, the

¹³ See Rubenstein, *Stories*, 24–28.

¹⁴ *Sanhedrin* 105:1, line 39; *Sanhedrin* 105:2, line 36.

¹⁵ *Judg* 3:8–10.

¹⁶ The Aramaic identification probably follows the biblical text in Num 23:7 ('From Aram Balak led me'). I thank Tal Ilan for this observation.

¹⁷ The summary is of the text as it appears in the Tosefta. Some of the *br*'s manuscripts—Herzog and Muenchen and the Barco edition—support this reading, while others corrupt or alter it. This section will be discussed later.

¹⁸ This statement is found in *Sifre Bamidbar* 157.

Moabite king, who worries about the Israelites who are surrounding his country, the elders of the Midianites are also participating in the delegation set out to summon Balaam. These two nations, explains the Tannaitic sage, were originally in a state of war but they united in order to fight the Israelites who were approaching Balak's land.

4. *Balaam's impertinence* (Num 22:8)

Going into detail about Balaam's character, the BR indicates his impertinence. This is evident from his waiting for God's answer concerning Balak's request. 'Who would dare to come between a father [God] and his son [Israel]?', asks the BR. 'Impertinence is a kingship without a crown,' continues the BR, and it is impertinence that has earned Balaam permission to go to Balak in order to curse the Israelites, which at this stage is a success on his part, but which will later prove futile.

5. *Physical characteristics of Balaam*

The BR indicates some of Balaam's less appealing physical features such as his being lame and blind in one eye.

6. *Sexual qualities of Balaam*

Balaam is characterized as being 'a sexual magician' (מַגִּיד מַעֲשֵׂי עוֹר) and some textual proofs are invoked to prove that he was sexually involved with his she-ass.

7. *The nature of Balaam's magic*

What was the nature of Balaam's powers? His great talent was in knowing the spit second in which God was angry at the Israelites; this spit second was the only moment when a curse cast upon Israel could have any effect. His sexuality comes up again in this section: in a long narrative (based on Num 24:16) we learn about the nature of Balaam's power, as well as his relationship with his she-ass.

Analysis

From the outset Balaam is presented in a negative manner. Despite his respected lineage (a prophet, son of a prophet), he is ugly, impertinent and is identified with other doers of evil to the Jews, all of whom were of Aramean descent. The term 'Aramean' in the rabbinic literature is a reference to most of the nations in the region of Palestine, Syria and Babylonia, other than the Jews themselves; it is a term that designates the 'Other'.

The description of Balaam's unusual sexuality seems surprising at this point, but it will make more sense later on, when other sexual models are presented.

The fact that Balaam chose to do evil reveals him as someone who is not inherently evil, but who made a mistake which proved fatal for him. That mistake was in crossing the border into a state of intimacy which was not his own: the one between God and His people.

Balaam's prophetic abilities are being played down: 'Knowing the moment in which God is angry' and being a 'sexual magician' can hardly be equated with real prophecy bestowed on a person by God.

*Sections 8–10: Balaam as the sole evildoer of the biblical story*¹⁹

8. *Balaam is compared with Abraham* (Num 22:21)

The BR utilizes a textual unit known from *Genesis Rabbah*, where Balaam is contrasted with Abraham.²⁰ The incentive for making this comparison lies in the identical words, which are used in the Bible to describe the actions of both these people: both woke up in the morning and saddled their donkey. In both cases, they are men of high rank who did something that was not befitting their rank.

9. *Balak's sacrifices* (Num 22:40)

The next paragraph discusses Balak. Here it is related that the forty-two sacrifices, which in accordance with Balaam's orders Balak offered to God, merited him the honor of having a daughter Ruth, who would be the foremother of King David.

10. *Is it customary to say it this way?*

Section 10 seems not to belong to the Balaam sequence. It is asking, 'Is it proper to say about Yael the Kenite that she is more blessed than the women in the tent [that is, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah]?'²¹ The answer is that the text is not really saying this; it is only pretending to do so.

Analysis

This block introduces Balak. He was forced by Balaam to build forty-two altars and make sacrifices to God (section 9). This unintentionally pious act is contrasted with another act, an intentional one (section 8): two people of high stature, Abraham and Balaam, are engaged in work which is below their status, namely saddling a donkey. In the case

¹⁹ *Sanhedrin* 105:2, lines 36–46.

²⁰ *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 55:3.

²¹ This is referring to Judge 5:24 'Yael shall be more blessed than the women, more blessed than the women of the tent'.

of Abraham this was a good act, showing his love of God; but in the case of Balaam there is no pioussness in the act, since it was driven by hatred toward Israel.

In contrast, the act of sacrificing to God, performed by Balak, is pious in its very essence, regardless of the intention involved. Therefore this act merited Balak the honor of being the forefather of King David.

As a result of this contrast Balaam comes out of this narrative as the sole evil protagonist of this biblical story.

The Talmud does have reservations about its own statement: it should not be taken completely seriously. My interpretation of section 10 is as saying: it is not proper to present Balak as completely non-evil. We only seem to be saying this.

*Sections 11–13: Balaam's conduct in this episode?*²²

11. *How did Balaam speak?* (Num 23:5)

How was Balaam forced to pronounce oracles, which meant the opposite of what he intended to say? Some say God gave an angel permission to change his speech; others say He guided him as an animal with a halter:

12. *Analysis of the third oracle* (Num 24:5)

Whatever the manner of his prophecy was, God turned around each sentence Balaam intended to utter so that it had exactly the opposite meaning. The *BR* lists Balaam's various prophecies and by turning the meaning of these around, Balaam's original intentions were exposed. For example: Balaam wanted to curse the Israelites so that they would have no synagogues or houses of learning (*batei midrash*), but he ended up saying: 'How good are thy tents, O Jacob' (בָּתֵּי יַעֲקֹב טוֹבוֹת אֶרְבָּי). 'Tents' is equated with Torah studying, since it invokes the rabbinic expression 'a tent of Torah', which means learning the Torah in the houses of learning. Balaam wanted to curse the Israelites so that they would have no Shekhinah (God's presence) among them, but he ended up saying: 'Thy dwellings Israel' (שְׁכִינָתְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל), and this connects the word 'presence' (*shekhinah*) and 'dwellings' (*nishkanot*). Balaam wanted to curse the Israelites so that their kingdom would not continue, but he ended up saying: 'like a river they shall continue.' The *BR* goes on to unearth all the original evil intentions of Balaam which by God's

will were turned into blessings. Alas, say the rabbis, in the end all of what Balaam originally intended as curses turned out to come true, except for the first one: The Jews *do* have synagogues and houses of learning!

13. *The cedar and the poppyrus* (Num 24:6)

In the next section we read that the curses of a friend are better than the blessings of an enemy, so although Balaam ended up giving blessings, it would have been better not to have had these blessings (since in the end they turned back into curses).

Analysis

The important message these sections convey has to do with Talmudic culture. The rabbis sadly note that of all the blessings bestowed (unintentionally) by Balaam, only one is left for the Israelites: they have Houses of Learning. The emphasis on the 'learning' in houses is typical of Talmudic culture.²³

Since Balaam did not succeed as a prophet of God, he resorted to being an advice-giver; this is the topic of the next block.

*Sections 14–17: Balaam's advice*²⁴

14. *The oracle about the Kenite* (Num 24:21)

Now the text introduces Balaam as a giver of advice. There were three gentle sages who were counsel givers to Pharaoh: Balaam, Jehro and Job.²⁵ Balaam chose to curse Israel and was in the end killed by the Israelites;²⁶ Job did not take part in the evil counsel and therefore only suffered torture during his lifetime; Jehro, who ran away from the place of evil counsel to join Moses, was rewarded by having his offspring sit in the 'chamber of Hew stone' in the Temple.²⁷

15. *The last prophecy of Balaam* (Num 24:23–24)

The next section is a commentary on the last prophecy of Balaam. We learn that it is not wise to come between God and His people while God is in the process of saving them; it is like throwing a cloak between a lion and lioness at the time of their mating.

²² About this see, for example, Rubenstein, *Culture*, 3–38.

²⁴ *Sanhedrin* 106:1, lines 12–43.

²⁵ The subject of Baskan's book.

²⁶ *Josh* 13:22.

²⁷ *Metsilla de Rabbi Ishmael*, Jehro, tractate Amalek, 2.

²² *Sanhedrin* 105:2, line 46; *Sanhedrin* 103:1, line 12.

16. *Balaam's advice* (Num 24:14)

At this point the biblical story of Balaam comes to an end. The next chapter (Numbers 25) is about the sin of the Israelites in Shittim. However, the BR pericope does include the story of Shittim as part of the narrative about Balaam. We learn that Balaam gave advice to the Moabite king to use the Moabites' young women to tempt the Israelites. The Israelites would be lured into buying goods from these Moabite women, encouraged to feel at home in their houses, and after drinking their wine would consent to worship the idol Peor in order to receive sexual services.

17. *The outcome of the advice: the sin in Shittim*

The BR discusses briefly the sin in Shittim. The place's name is explained ('a place of nonsense', פְּעוּרָה); and Balaam's advice is said to have cast an influence over all the Israelites, since the Moabite women were seducing them while naked and so caused sexual impurity in the Israelite men. A rabbi is quoted as saying that whenever the words 'and Israel sat...' are found in the biblical text, a disaster follows. Many examples of such a nexus are quoted from the biblical text.

Analysis

Balaam is ignorant regarding the futility of his trying to come between God and His people. Considering what we know about his sexuality, the lawlessness of his suggestion to Balak, and his inability to recognize a truly intimate relationship is hardly surprising. Balaam is characterized here as mistakenly thinking that he has a relationship with God.

In describing Balaam's advice the BR is loyal to its Halakhic nature. It asserts that the major problem of the sin is not the few Israelites who actually sinned with the daughters of Moab, but about the sexual impurity which infected all the Israelite men.

What seems to be an unrelated matter—the nexus of the biblical verses speaking about Israel as 'sitting' (Num 24:1a) and the disaster that follows (Num 25:1b-9)—is in fact a clear statement of a 'Babylonian' point of view. The verses quoted all show that the words 'Israel's sitting' always indicated a disaster to come. The verses are describing Israelite people as sitting Canaan, Egypt or in the land of Israel, under King Solomon's rule. In all these cases they sinned and a disaster followed. One realizes, then, that living in the promised land does not protect the Israelites against sinning and the disasters that follow. This is a typical 'diasporic' claim.

*Sections 18–20: Balaam's death and additional issues*²⁸18. *Balaam's death and his status*

Balaam was killed by the Israelites along with the kings of Midian. Balaam was present at that place because he had come to collect the fee for his advice. At this point he was no longer a prophet, but a magician.

19. *Balaam's age*

A gentle asked Rabbi Hanina whether he knew how old Balaam was at the time of his death. The Rabbi answered that according to the verse (Ps 55:24), 'People of blood and deceit will not have half of their days', Balaam must have been thirty-three or thirty-four when he died. 'This is right', said the gentle, 'I have a book where it says that he was thirty-three when the villain Pinchas killed him'.

20. *What should we do with this story?*

In the final section we find the following sentence: 'Mar, son of Rabina said to his son: Midrash does not apply to the other [persons mentioned in the Mishnah] except in the case of the wicked Balaam. In his case: make a Midrash about him as much as possible.'²⁹

Analysis

The last sections of the pericope coincide with the end of the biblical chapter and the end of Balaam's life. Balaam was killed by the Israelites because of the advice he gave to the Moabites. Such a severe punishment is appropriate when we remember the BR's view that this advice caused impurity to all Israelite men.

In this last two sections we find the wider context of the story according to rabbinic view. The issue of Balaam's age is the topic of section 19. A scholarly debate has focused on the question of whether Balaam is here equated with Jesus, who also died at thirty-three. There is no clear statement, nor any clear hint that this is so. Urbach and Baskin conclude that Balaam has general anti-Christian traits in his representation in rabbinic literature.³⁰ Before reaching a conclusion about this issue, let us look at the last section.

²⁸ *Sanhedin* 106:1, lines 43–106:2, 13.

²⁹ אבא ליה מר ברין דרבינא לכרייה: ככוליה לא חפיש דרבינא דרשע, דכמו רבא לכר מכלליה דרשע, לכר מכלליה דרשע, דכמו רבא.

³⁰ See Urbach, 'Rabbinic Sermons', 281–4 and the literature quoted there; Baskin, *Pharisee's Counselors*, 91–3.

