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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 אֲחֵרִים is taken to mean בַּלְעָמִי בַּאֲשֵׁרֵי אֲחֵרִים, 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?

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 r 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 אֶתְנֵיךָ). '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 r 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 popyrus* (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?

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.

²³ 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 *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, Jethro, 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', פְּעוּר); 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 לבריה: ככוליה לא חפיש דרבינא לבריה דרבינא, דכמו דכמו לבר מבריה דרבינא, לבר מבריה דרבינא, דכמו דכמו לבר דרבינא - דרבינא ברך.

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

In section 20 we learn that one may have a 'free hand' to interpret (make a midrash about) the figure of Balaam. We should consider the very last section along with the previous one, and conclude that it is possible to see Balaam as a 'mock-Jesus' figure, or as conveying an anti-Christian message to the Jewish people (as stated by Urbach and Baskin), but the figure of Balaam should not be understood as a hard symbol, but a flexible one, allowing different interpretation according to need. Therefore, an interpretation of him as Jesus, while possible, is not exclusive. Balaam could be any 'Other' of the rabbinic culture.³¹

*The BR Point of View As It Appears in the Representation of the
Biblical Balaam Story*

The pericope is a mosaic of small textual units combined together by the editor to create a full picture. Some of the smaller units are copying, reworking or retelling narratives and ideas, which are known from earlier rabbinic writings of Palestinian or Babylonian origin. Some of the statements are unknown from other sources and could have been composed for this particular pericope.

There is an overall message which results from the sequential reading of the pericope and deciphering the various hints planted in it. This message is what the originator(s) of the Talmud wanted to present to the reader(s).

The BR is presenting Balaam in an unquestionably negative tone. He is ugly, impertinent, and he is choosing to be evil, even when he can avoid it. His prophetic abilities were originally quite high: he comes from a line of prophets. But he 'plays a losing game' when trying to come between God and his people. His prophetic abilities vanish, and he is reduced to being an advice-giver. It is this advice which in the end costs him his life.

Some points of this pericope present a particular Babylonian interest or world-view. We can point to the following as the typical Babylonian representation of Balaam:

- (1) Balaam is the only and absolutely negative protagonist in the story. This should be seen against the background of Tannaitic statements

³¹ This agrees with the way Heinemann presented the image of Balaam. Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development*, Jerusalem 1971, 119-21.

about Balaam, which presented him as a powerful receptor of the words of God, and which have a much less negative overtone in the narratives about him.³² This should also be seen in comparison with the later Palestinian midrashic corpus of Tanchuma, where Balak is emphatically described as being just as much a villain as Balaam was. These two corpora, the Babylonian Talmud and Tanchuma, seem to be representing two major cultural worlds of late rabbinic Judaism; in some cases the two corpora deliberately put themselves in opposition to each other. Our pericope could be one such case.

- (2) There is merit in ritualistic acts where the intention of the doer plays only a small part if any. An approach which seems to consider a relatively rigid Halakhic focus of Jewish life, as opposed to a system which promotes and develops narratives as a cultural identifier such as elaborated narratives (such as midrash) or liturgical poetry.
- (3) Balaam's advice has severe Halakhic implication regarding impurity. This is an attitude similar to what we have seen in the previous point.
- (4) Being in the Land of Israel does not necessarily entail a happy state of affairs. A point of view which seems natural to a diaspora culture such as the Babylonian.
- (5) Houses of learning are the only blessing of the Israelites. Again a typical Babylonian point of view, as already described by Rubenstein and others.

2. *Old Wine in New Jars: Narrative Continuum*

In the BR pericope there are more than a dozen cases of reworking earlier known material from other rabbinic writings. Parallels are found in the Mishna, the Tosefta, Tannaitic midrashim (*Sifre Bamidbar* and *Mekhilta*), Palestinian amoraic material (Palestinian Talmud and *Genesis Rabbah*) and other parts of the BR.

In all cases the earlier material is not quoted verbatim. Changes may vary from minute lexical alterations, through omission, additions and changes made in the order of the narrative, all the way to presenting a complete opposite meaning than the text known to us from writings of the earlier rabbinic strata. The question of which texts existed before

³² *Sifre Bamidbar*, paragraph 156; *Mekhilta deRashi* 18:1, 19:16; *Sifre Zuta*, paragraph 7; *Sifre Devarim*, paragraphs 243, 256.

the author(s) of BR, is complicated and not fully answered in the world of scholarly studies of midrash tends to relate to the various products of rabbinic culture as drawing on a mutual cultural repertoire, both oral and written, in order to express a particular relevant narrative message. Each narrative product that we possess, such as the midrashim or Talmudim uses this cultural repertoire for its own purpose/message. By this 'double action'—on the one hand using known material, and on the other hand producing a new narrative of it—the culture can both keep the continuity of its identity and update itself according to the needs of the reality. I term this phenomenon *narrative continuum*.

Since it is too much for the scope of the present article to cover all the early narratives which are reworked into the BR pericope, I will analyze here two such examples: the parable of the two dogs who were enemies of each other, and the Tosefta discussion of the question whether all gentiles go to hell, or only the wicked among them.

The dogs who were enemies of each other: retelling a midrashic story, and a 'memra'
A Tannaïc parable, also found in *Syfe Bamidbar*, is reworked in section 3. It is related to the verse Num 31:2: 'Avenge the avengers of the Israelites from the Midianites and then die'. Thus says God to Moses before the latter's death. Here is the text from *Syfe Bamidbar*, and the parallel in our Talmudic pericope:

<i>Syfe Bamidbar 157</i>	BR <i>Sanhedrin 105:1</i>
But the Moabites originated [the idea of attacking the Israelites] as it is written: <i>and the elders of Moab went and the elders of Midian</i> (Num 22:7).	<i>and the elders of Moab went and the elders of Midian</i> (Num 22:7).
They never had peace with each other, and they still fought against Israel [together]! ¹	There is a Tannaïc tradition that Midian and Moab never had peace.
It is similar to two dogs who were in a herd, and they were enemies of each other. A wolf came to take a lamb from the herd, and one of them was barking at him.	It is similar to two dogs who [were in a herd, and were enemies of each other. A wolf came on one of them.

Table (cont.)

<i>Syfe Bamidbar 157</i>	BR <i>Sanhedrin 105:1</i>
The other one said: if I don't go and help him now, [the wolf] will kill him and will pass to me and will kill me.	The other said: if I don't help him today, he will kill him, and tomorrow he comes for me.
[So] they made peace with each other and fought the wolf.	Both went and killed the wolf.
Thus [it was] with Moab and Midian. They never made peace with each other, as it is written (Genesis 36:35) <i>who defeated Midian in the country of Moab</i> , and when they prepared to fight the Israelites they made peace with each other and fought against Israel.	Both went and killed the wolf.

Rav Papa said: as people are saying, the weasel and a cat celebrated on the flesh of the unfortunate.

The exegetical question put forward in the midrash is: since it is the Moabites who caused the Israelites to sin, not the Midianites, why does Moses seek vengeance upon the Midianites? The answer comes in the form of a parable about the two dogs that made a pact in order to fight the wolf. The Israelites are the wolf, a strong and vicious animal, while the Moabites and Midianites are two dogs, essentially much weaker than the wolf. The parable in *Syfe* never says whether the nations/dogs overcame the wolf/Israel or not. The intended audience knows how the biblical story ends: the Israelites crossed the desert successfully. In fact the culture which produced the *Syfe* text is still living in this country. The 'wolf' survived the combined forces of the 'dogs'. The meta-message of the *Syfe* parable is that the Israelites are (always?) saved.

The BR incorporates this parable in order to convey a message different from the one found in the Tannaïc text. The end of the story is different: the dogs kill the wolf. A new gap is now created in the story: if the wolf is Israel, are the rabbis pronouncing Israel dead? The solution to this gap comes in an editorial addition to the parable, in the form

of a *memra*, a saying: 'the weasel and the cat celebrated on the flesh of the unfortunate'.³³ Is the wolf the unfortunate, or is it the cattle which was devoured by the wolf in the end? This is not made clear to us by the authors. In any case the unfortunate character is the 'us' group of the Talmudic voice, who are at the same time the Israelites in the desert from the biblical story and the Jews of Babylonian of the time of the text. The parable and the *memra* are alluding to the poor state of the Jews as a minority in Babylonia, when the 'nations' (Romans and Arameans?) are 'celebrating' [that is, being in power].³⁴

Do the Wicked among the Gentiles Go to Hell?

In section 2 we learn that Balaam is the only one of the four people mentioned in the Mishnah who will in fact not enter the world to come, whereas the other three will enter it. This idea contradicts the clear statement of the Mishnah. It is hinted at, however, in the Palestinian Talmud,³⁵ where we find excuses for allowing all the other persons mentioned in the Mishnah to enter the world to come, but there is no such excuse for Balaam. The BR makes this idea explicit in a simple indicative sentence.

By way of a support for this opinion, the BR then quotes a discussion, which is found also in the Tosefta.³⁶ The biblical context of the discussion is the verse Ps 9:18 ('The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God'). The question which is raised is whether gentiles go to heaven after their death or not. The answer is that the wicked among the gentiles do not go to heaven. Here is the Tosefta's version and the BR:

Tosefta

Rabbi Eliezer says:

All nations have no portion in the world to come, as it is written:

The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God (Ps 9:18).

Babylonian Talmud

Rabbi Eliezer says:

The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God (Ps 9:18)

³³ כַּרְטוּמָא וְחִתְיָא וְעִבְרֵי הַלְוִיָּא תְּדַרְבֵּי רַבִּי נָדָב

³⁴ R. Papa, in whose name this *memra* is quoted, died in 375.

³⁵ Palestinian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 10:2; 29b.

³⁶ Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 13:2.

Table (cont.)

Tosefta

The wicked will depart to Sheol—these are the wicked ones of Israel.

Babylonian Talmud

The wicked will depart to Sheol—these are the wicked ones of Israel. *All the nations that forget God*—these are the nations of the world. Words of R. Eliezer.

Rabbi Joshua said to him: If it was written *the wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations* and no more, I would have agreed with you, but since it is written *that forget God*

Rabbi Joshua said to him: Is it written *all the nations*? No, it is written *all the nations that forget God*.

The meaning is that there are pious ones among the nations who have a portion in the world to come.

So [the meaning is] *the wicked shall depart to Sheol*, and who they? *All the nations that forget God*.

And that evil-doer [Balaam] made it apparent about himself saying: (Num 23:10) 'My soul shall die a righteous death'. If my soul end will be like his' [I will be like the Israelites, i.e. going to heaven] and if not—I go to my people [i.e.—to hell].

The discussion in the compilation which we call nowadays Tosefta is found almost verbatim in the BR. The conclusion of the discussion is assigned in the BR particularly to Balaam. The anonymous and impersonal voice of the implied author of the BR pericope invokes for this purpose Balaam's own words and then interprets them.

We find in the BR a latent idea from the PR being made explicit; the argument is supported by a *baraita* (a non-Mishnaic Tannaitic statement), which however does not mention Balaam directly; the Baraita is then assigning it to Balaam using an interpretation of Balaam's own words from the biblical text.

The final view which is expressed here is contrary to what is clearly pronounced in the Mishnah, namely that four people do not enter the world to come. The Talmud concludes that three do enter, only Balaam does not. This new conclusion is presented as based on all the Tannaitic legal sources, namely both the Mishna and the Tosefta. The

new view is conveyed, as well as the accountability to the old culture, and by this the continuity of the cultural identity.

We see the multi-functionality of the 'narrative continuum'. While advancing the unique BR narrative about Balaam, it is also conserving the cultural repertoire (and by this keeping the continuity of the cultural identity) and making the repertoire relevant for audience, by relating to current events.

Concluding Summary

In this article, I hope to have demonstrated two points. One is the unique view about Balaam present in the Babylonian Talmud, the other is a process which I termed 'narrative continuum', as a process enabling a culture both to introduce new points of view as well as to keep its integrity.

The uniqueness of the Babylonian view about Balaam unfolds through analyzing the particular sequence of narratives which are present in the pericope about this biblical figure. This unique view may be made more apparent if seen in light of other rabbinic views about him, particularly Tannaitic views and later saboraic views expressed, among others, in *Tanchuma*. There is no room to do this within the framework of this article.

Both Urbach³⁷ and Baskin,³⁸ who studied the figure of Balaam in rabbinic literature, concluded that there was a generally anti-Christian attitude expressed by the rabbis in connection with the figure of Balaam. Neither of these scholars, as well as Heinemann (see note 31 above), made a sharp distinction between the various cultures within rabbinic literature, therefore their conclusion is more general and does not point to the uniqueness of the BR view.

As far as the 'narrative continuum' is concerned, I have discussed two examples of reworking older material into the BR pericope. The changes made in them, as well as the immediate context in the BR, serve the multi-function of presenting an up-to-date message to the audience, as well as keeping cultural integrity intact.

PART THREE

BALAM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

³⁷ Urbach, 'Rabbinic Sermons', 13-15.

³⁸ Baskin, *Pharao's Counselors*, 92-3.