

A SECRET RELIGION REDISCOVERED: THE CULT OF BALAAM

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Introduction

Balaam appears in sources as various as the Hebrew Bible, archaeological excavations in Jordan, and Medieval Latin Anthologies. Balaam traditions apparently enjoyed a wide circulation in both time and distance. Michael S. Moore, in his book *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, compares the figure of Balaam in Numbers and Deir 'Alla, but concentrates on the social role he plays, whether as a Prophet or a Cult figure.¹ In this article we will concentrate on one aspect of the material associated with Balaam: the use of animal similes by Balaam in the accounts involving him. We will show that the inclusion of these similes in the traditions of Balaam represents a development in the figure which, when recognized, elucidates several Biblical texts touching on Balaam.

Balaam in the Hebrew Bible

Balaam first appears in the Hebrew Bible in Num 22-24 and 31. Numbers 22-24 in the familiar story of how Balaam is hired by Balak to curse the Israelites. This section includes the famous story of

¹ Michael S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, SBL Dissertation Series 113, 1990.

Balaam's talking donkey. Throughout these first chapters Balaam is portrayed positively. He insists that he can speak no curse that God does not allow. The image of Balaam as one who leads Israel astray comes from Num 31. Here the killing of Balaam is described and the apostasy which occurred at Peor (Num 25) is blamed on him.

Other references to Balaam in the Hebrew Bible recount the above stories with little elaboration.² In these texts, the stories occur as historical catalogue. In post-biblical Jewish literature Balaam becomes a type for those who lead others astray in matters of religion or morals. This is seen in the Pirke Avot, Mishnah 19, where Abraham is a type for Orthodoxy and Balaam a type for Heterodoxy.

Whoever has these three qualities is of the disciples of Abraham our father; but he in whom there are three other qualities is of the disciples of Balaam the wicked. A good eye, a lowly mind and a humble spirit are the traits of the disciples of Abraham our Father; an evil eye, a haughty mind and a proud spirit are the traits of the disciples of Balaam the wicked.

In Numbers itself, however, Balaam is a Prophet/Mantic who is hired to curse the Israelites. When Balaam begins his various "oracles" the Hebrew text reads *wayyisa' mšalo* "And he took up his simile..." The word mašal, usually translated 'proverb', originally implied a simile structure. Indeed, the word mašal in its root means 'to be like', (cf. Arabic mithl, 'similar to'). The passage implies that the use of mešalim was typical of

² Deut 23,4,5; Josh 13,22; 24,9,10; Neh 13,2; Mic 6,5.

Balaam's style. In the oracles he speaks on these occasions, he makes use of animal similes to convey his message:

God has brought him out of Egypt—a Wild Bull of great power.
(Num 23:22;24:8)

Behold a people which rises up like a lioness and which stalks like a lion, It will not rest until it eats the prey and drinks the blood of the slain. (Num 23:24)

He lies crouching like a lion, and like a lioness, who can arouse him? (Num 24:9)

The repetition of the two images of Israel as both a Bull and a Lion, together with the title of Balaam's oracles as mešalim, suggests that the ancient reader expected animal similes to be a part of what the figure Balaam would say. Though Balaam is primarily understood in the OT as a prophetic or magical figure, he also seems to include the characteristics of a sage. This side of Balaam we will see grow until, by the Medieval period, it becomes the chief role of the figure.

Balaam at Deir 'Allah

In 1967, at Tel Deir 'Alla in Jordan, archaeologists discovered in the ruins of a temple dating to the 7th century BC plaster fragments containing writing which mentions the figure of Balaam son of Beor. The texts are highly fragmentary and their precise translation is in

dispute. Nevertheless, they seem to recount how Balaam sees a vision of the gods and relates to the people the significance of his vision in a series of similes using animals. Attempting to convey the concept of the natural order being overturned, Balaam describes situations that do not occur in the animal kingdom. For example, "For the swift reproaches the griffin-vulture and the voice of vultures sings out"³ and "Hares eat a [wo]lf."⁴

The Deir 'Alla texts show that Balaam enjoyed a wider circulation than just the OT. The appearance of the animal similes in this material as well shows that there is some stability in the tradition. Readers over a span of time and area understood the figure of Balaam to be associated with wisdom involving the use of animal similes.

Animal Similes in Ahiqar

Animal similes were useful in ancient wisdom because the natural order could be seen as a type for ideal behavior. In the Aramaic Ahiqar tradition, these similes are very important. The Ahiqar text includes a great deal of didactic material which makes use of animal similes.

What is stronger (louder?) than a braying ass?...⁵

³ sus'agur ḥarrapat nišr wa-qal raḥamin yagvne(h) (Combination I,7-8). Reconstructions, vocalizations, and translations of Deir 'Alla texts come from J. Hackett, The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla (Chico, CA 1980) pp. 27, 29.

⁴ 'arnabin akalu [di]'b.(Combination I,9-10), *ibid.*

⁵ Saying 1, p. 43, James M. Lindenberger, The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar. Examples of other proverbs with animal imagery are ##7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 23, 28, 34, 35, 36, 106, lines 179-186 and 199b.

Ahiqar is another example of a wisdom figure whose influence and domain grows with time until he becomes a legendary figure. Ahiqar is mentioned in Tobit.⁶ He is understood as a character in that story but it is clear that a tradition of wisdom involving him informed the personality the ancient reader ascribed to him. The same then should be true of a mention of Balaam in the diverse bodies of literature. The writer may use the figure with a specific intention, even polemically as in Numbers 31, but neither the writer nor reader could divorce all collateral knowledge of the figure, such as association with animal based wisdom similes.

Balaam in the NT

When we understand that a development in the personality of the legendary figure of Balaam was underway, we see that the traditional interpretation of a NT text is wanting. In 2 Peter 2, the writer describes Christians who lead others astray. In verse 15, he describes them as having "left the straight way (hodos) and gone into error, following the way of Balaam son of Bosor." This has been understood in light of the Jewish typological appropriation of Balaam. While 2 Peter has many close affinities to Jude, 2 Peter's appropriation of the figure of Balaam is not as obviously typological. Further, a close examination of 2 Pet 2 presents several pieces of tantalizing evidence that the writer is actually referring to the Balaam wisdom tradition described above.

⁶ Tobit 1:22; 14:10.

Firstly, the use of *hodos*, 'way', suggests competing systems of thought. "Way," is an early name for the Christian Church.⁷ It occurs again in 2 Pet 2:21:

For it would have been better for them to have never known the way (hodos) of righteousness than, after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment handed on to them.

Most importantly, the author of 2 Peter finishes his discourse on this subject by describing them with animal similes, asserting that they will get their just reward according to the "true proverb," implying that a "false" proverb inspires their system of thought:

It has happened to them according to the true proverb,

"The dog returns to its own vomit"

and

"The sow is washed to wallow in the mud."

The use of animal similes to describe the ones who follow the "way" of Balaam could be a sarcastic effort by the writer of 2 Peter to poke fun at the wisdom sayings lying behind the Balaam tradition. At the very least, we can see that the writer of 2 Peter is being affected by the wider understanding of Balaam in his culture. The development of Balaam into a sage was well underway, possibly nearly complete, at the time of the writing of 2 Peter. Therefore it is more likely that the

⁷ Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22.

writer is attacking an extant body of legendary wisdom material than that he is simply using Balaam typologically.

Balaam in the Quran

Another attestation of a continuing Balaam tradition is found in the Quran, Surah 31. This Surah, entitled Luqman, describes how the wise man Luqman gives advice to his son. This advice includes typical Near-Eastern wisdom about the need for humility and a guarded tongue:

Do not turn your face away from people in contempt and do not walk in the land haughtily. Indeed Allah does not love any conceited boaster. Set your walk (correctly) and lower your voice. The most disgusting of voices is the voice of the ass [ʿankara lʿaswati laṣawtu lḥamiri]. (Quran 31:18-19)

The similarities between this material from the Quran and the Ahiqar text above are striking. The animal simile is used for much the same purpose. But the similarity is not to be understood as showing a connection with Ahiqar and Luqman. Animal based wisdom was widespread in the region. Rather the early Islamic traditions link Luqman with Balaam. Luqman is sometimes connected by Islamic tradition with the figure of Aesop, also known for animal based wisdom literature. To some commentators, Luqman was considered to have been an Ethiopian. The name "Aesop" may very well be a corruption of Aethiops, Greek for 'an Ethiopian'. Other early Islamic traditions, however, associate Luqman with the biblical Balaam by

describing him as the "son of Ba'ur." Further evidence for the identification of Luqman with Balaam is seen in the fact that the Arabic verbal root (lqm) means 'to swallow', which is exactly what the Hebrew root (bl'), the base of Balaam's name, means.

Balaam in the *Disciplina Clericalis*

The strongest identification of Luqman with Balaam is by Petrus Alfonsi, a Spanish Jew who converted to Christianity in the 12th century. In his *Disciplina Clericalis*, he equates Luqman with Balaam and continues with a sample of Luqman's wisdom which is not found in the Quran and which uses the same animal based similes.

Balaam, qui lingua Arabica vocatur Lucaman, dixit filio suo, ne sit formica sapientior te, quae congregat in aestate unde vivat in hieme. Fili, ne sit gallus vigilantior te, qui in matutinis vigilat, et tu dormis. Fili, ne sit gallus fortior te, qui iustificat decem uxores suas, tu solam castigare non potes. Fili, ne sit canis corde nobilior te, qui benefactorum suorum non obliviscitur, tu autem benefactorum tuorum oblivisceris. Fili, non videatur tibi parum unum habere inimicum vel nimium mille habere amicos.

Balaam, who in the Arabic language is called Luqman, said to his son, "Do not let an ant be wiser than you, who gathers in the summer so that he may live in winter. My son, do not let a rooster be more vigilant than you, who is watchful in the morning, but you sleep. My son, do not let a rooster be stronger than you, who can keep his ten wives in line, while you cannot keep track of one. My son, do not let a

dog be of nobler heart than you, who never forgets his benefactors, you however, forget your benefactors. My son, let it not seem to you a little thing to have one enemy or too much to have a thousand friends.
(Prologue)

This text shows Balaam giving advice to his son in the same way as Luqman does in the Quran. Here in this Medieval text we see that the figure of Balaam has developed into a full fledged sage. The imparting of wisdom by the use of animal similes is really the only constituent to his personality.

From the earliest mention of Balaam in the OT to this relatively late use in the Middle Ages we can see the Balaam changes in estimation from a prophet to a legendary sage. Still, even at the earliest mention, we can see hints that an element of his personality, the use of animal based wisdom similes, is becoming connected to his legend. This element won out to form the final definition of the figure.

Conclusion

We have suggested that a development in the figure of Balaam occurred over a long span of time and area. Balaam began as a prophetic magical figure and developed into a wise sage. The use of animal similes by the figure of Balaam shows the continuing process of this development into an Aesop-like figure in the Middle Ages. It is difficult to tell how extensive the traditions may have been. The temple at Deir 'Alla implies that Balaam was an important figure for some religious expressions. The 2 Peter reference could even point to a continued existence of this expression as late as the 1st century, but

it is more likely that the 2 Peter reference shows the development of Balaam into a legendary figure associated with the use of animal similes and part of a genre that included Aesop. Nevertheless, in understanding this development, we gain a sharper view of the use of Balaam in these diverse bodies of literature.