

Greater Than Moses?

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Although this week's Torah reading is named for the Moabite king Balak, who sought to curse the Israelites, the real star of the show is the gentile prophet Balaam ben Be`or—with a special comedy cameo by his talking ass. Three whole chapters of the Torah (Num. 22–24) are given over to the efforts of Balak and Balaam to curse the Jews. In the end, of course, God prevails, and on Friday nights in Schul we still sing Balaam's blessing, "*Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov*—How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel."

Half a century ago, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski summed up the situation in his small book, *The Key to Heaven* (Grove Press, 1972), when he imagined Balaam's perspicacious and faithful ass pronouncing, "In the final analysis, I'm the most injured party. My master suffered only a moral unpleasantness, but my rump still hurts" (p. 28).

This biblical farce, however enjoyable, pokes fun at the gentile prophet and in doing so reveals the Bible's anxiety about Israelite exceptionalism. If God speaks with the gentiles, we might ask, how are we Jews special? God spoke with Adam and Eve, to be sure. But they lived a long time before Abraham, father of our faith. God also spoke with Noah. Pirkei Avot (5) reports that Noah lived ten generations after Adam, right in the middle of pre-Abrahamic times. As Midrash Leviticus Rabbah (1:9) wryly comments about Adam and then Noah: "There is no shame when a King consults with his gardener . . . or his ship's captain."

It bears notice that in Islam, Noah (*Nuh* in Arabic) is counted as a prophet. In rabbinic Judaism, the medieval midrash Seder Eliahu (Rabbah 26 and Zuta 10) counts Noah's son

Shem as a prophet, too. The passage is worth quoting, as it leads us back to Balaam:

Shem prophesized for 400 years to all the peoples of the world, but they did not listen to him. From that point onward Eliphaz the Temanite, Zophar the Naamathite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Elihu son of Barakhel the Buzite, and [their long-suffering conversation partner] Job of the land of Uz [were prophets]. Balaam ben Be`or was the last of them all. There was no matter whatsoever that the Blessed Holy One did not reveal to Balaam . . . Balaam ben Be`or was even greater in wisdom than Moses. (Seder Elihu Rabbah 7)

Since that same midrash refers to Moses as "the father of wisdom" and "the father of prophets," this is an astonishing claim. Balaam was greater than Moses! As the rabbi of that midrash later explains it, the reason God sent these prophets to the gentiles is so they could not complain they were not also given the opportunity to accept the Torah.

Notwithstanding that dubious explanation, we must contemplate what it means that the Torah itself, as well as the rabbis interpreting it, acknowledge the fact that there are prophets who are not Jews. This challenges the persistent myth of Jewish exceptionalism, which conveniently ignores that this same Torah teaches us that the One and Only God of the universe created all of humanity and loves all of God's creatures equally.

Yes, we recite in Friday night kiddush (and on other occasions), "*asher bahar banu mikol ha'amim*—[We praise you God] Who chose us **from among** all the peoples." But given the monotheistic imperative that we all worship one and the

same God, I prefer to recite (as I learned at the Jerusalem Shabbat table of our late teacher Rabbi Jacob Milgram z”l): “*asher bahar banu im kol ha’amim*—Who chose us, **along with all the peoples.**”

Which brings me back to Balaam. Can one then not reasonably say: There is no God but God, and Balaam, too, is God’s prophet? I acknowledge that some of my scholarly colleagues have interpreted certain rabbinic midrashim about Balaam as referring to Jesus (e.g. Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton 2007). What’s confusing about this equation is that Jesus was Jewish, not a gentile like Balaam. But what if Midrash Seder Elihu, composed in its final form in the ninth/tenth century CE under Islamic rule, is thinking of the preeminent non-Jewish prophet of his time: Mohammed?

Could one then not reasonably say that there is no God but God, and Balaam/Mohammed is God’s prophet? Articulating such a statement does not make me a Muslim. But it does make me a monotheist who recognizes, as have the Bible and centuries of rabbis before me, that there are prophets among all nations. The One God speaks to all of God’s peoples, each in their own chosen status, be they Jews, Christians, Muslims, or for that matter, adherents of other, non-Abrahamic religions. Perhaps that is the lesson Balaam teaches us in our own strife-filled day, when he offered his aspirational prophecy millennia ago: “*Mah tov u ohalekhah Yaakov*—How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel.” Our dwellings are truly goodly when we live together with respect and blessings for our fellow human beings.

Character vs. Reputation and the Social Construction of Reality

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“Vrai ou faux, ce qu’on dit des hommes tient souvent autant de place dans leur vie et souvent dans leur destinée que qu’ils font.”

“Whether true or false, what is said about men often

has as much influence on their lives, and particularly on their destinies, as what they do.”

Victor Hugo, Les Misérables, 1862

“Many a man’s reputation would not know his character if they met on the street.”

Elbert Hubbard, A Thousand and One Epigrams, 1911

It is easy to pigeonhole people and to dichotomize the categories into which we place people, such as good vs. evil. Myths and legends tend to portray characters in this one-dimensional manner, and it is considered remarkable when a character is portrayed as complex. But all humans are complex. The human condition is a multivalent one, and people are almost never so easily categorized. Everyone’s character has the capacity for both good and bad, and in fact, everyone realizes elements of both within themselves.

Unfortunately, our reputation is never truly dependent solely on our actions. Reality is a social construction, and our reputations and legacies are always subject to the perceptions, interpretations, and agendas of others. And humans are flawed; we employ selective memory, we judge others based on external factors, and our inaccurate or incomplete portrayals of others are directly responsible for altering their images. This week’s parashah presents us with an illustration of this phenomenon. Balaam is portrayed in the narrative in a largely positive light, with the sole exception of the affair with his donkey. Yet Balaam’s legacy in the Jewish tradition survived as a negative one, primarily because it served a specific pedagogical purpose.

This power to shape a man’s remembrance lies in the hands of others. We all hold this power and should be mindful of it when reading the news or speaking about people. Let us not skew reality to fit our own desires at the expense of others.

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