

## Who Sees the Truth, and Who Speaks It?

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Long-time New York subway riders are familiar with the slogan, “See something, say something.” Balaam’s story in this week’s parashah is closer to: “Say something, because you didn’t see something.” After all, “See something, say something” assumes that the hard part is speaking up, but Parashat Balak suggests the hardest part may be noticing at all, especially when Balaam, the professional seer, can’t see the angel in the road that his donkey does. This reversal of who notices (and who misses what’s right in front of them) is what draws me into this passage. As a scholar working primarily on medieval Jewish and Christian biblical commentaries, I’m especially interested in noticing how texts travel, how communities guard them, and how outsiders can sometimes help shed light on a tradition. Biblical interpretation is itself, in a sense, the discipline of noticing ‘angels in the road,’ learning to see what is already present right in front of you in the text.

Balaam’s story is an unusually good place to watch that interpretive dynamic unfold, because his own character becomes a shared (and contested) reference point in both Jewish and Christian reading to think about dangerous speech and false prophecy. The New Testament already references Balaam as a polemical tool (Rev. 2:14, Jude 11, II Pet. 2:15), while rabbinic traditions often interpret him as a paradigmatic wicked gentile prophet. But despite these categories established early in both textual communities, Balaam resists easy binaries. He is neither an Israelite nor entirely outside God’s purposes; he is simultaneously an outsider, participant, critic, and unwilling witness. So perhaps the more interesting question to ask is not whether Balaam is good or evil, prophet or fraud, insider or outsider, but this: What does it take to see what has been there all along?

One small detail in the Torah’s description of Balaam at the beginning of his speech, a phrase about his eye, became a hinge for generations of interpreters thinking about what it means to ‘see’:

Num. 24:3

וישא משלו ויאמר נאם בלעם בנו בער ונאם הגבר  
שתם העין

*He took up his discourse and said: The declaration of Balaam son of Beor, and the declaration of the man shetum ha-ayin [meaning unclear].*

Explaining the unusual Hebrew phrase *shetum ha-ayin*, appearing only in this chapter, Rashi draws on BT Sanhedrin 105a’s aggadic interpretation that the Torah’s use of the singular “ayin” (eye) indicates that Balaam was blind in one eye. Whatever the philological merits, the exegetical point is vivid: the man who claims visionary authority is marked by partial sight. He sees, but only out of one eye; he knows, but not fully.

Balaam’s failure, therefore, might be interpreted as not merely wickedness, but self-certainty. He assumes that because he is a seer, he sees; however, it is the donkey’s attentiveness that actually perceives the angel in the road. The beauty of biblical commentary is that no one reader sees everything fully. Jewish readers, Christian readers, medieval readers, modern scholars — all are, in some sense, seeing some things clearly and missing others. In the study of texts, traditions, and their long histories of encounter, the donkey’s careful attentiveness is the rarer gift. But what makes sight possible at all?

Thinking beyond Balaam's physical condition and character, this narrative might be read about our human perception itself.

Num. 22:31

וַיִּגַל ה' אֶת־עֵינָיו בְּלֶעָם

*And the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes.*

Rabbi Tobiah ben Eliezer, an eleventh-century contemporary of Rashi's from the Byzantine Empire, writes in his *Lekah Tov*:

ויגל ה' את עיני בלעם – מלמד שכל העולם כולו  
בחזקת סומין עד שהקדוש ברוך הוא מגלה עיניהם  
כיוצא בו ויפקח אלהים את עיניה ותרא באר מים. יש  
הרבה דברים ואין כח בעיני האדם לראותם עד שיגזור  
הקב"ה

*And the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes – this teaches that the whole entire world is presumed blind until the Holy One, blessed be He, uncovers their eyes.*

*Similarly [of Hagar]: "And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water" [Gen. 21:19]. There are many things, and the human eye has no power to see them until the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees it.*

Ben Eliezer's movement from Balaam to Hagar is especially striking: in both cases, God opens non-Israelite eyes to something already there. The well and the angel may be miraculous, but the deeper wonder is that both were present before humans could see them. Moreover, *Lekah Tov* does not make this a story only about Balaam's flaws. The limit is simply human: "the whole entire world is presumed blind" until God uncovers our eyes. Read this way, the parsha is not mainly warning about wicked outsiders, but is asking insiders to admit how much of reality (textual, moral, spiritual) we regularly pass by without noticing.

There is something subversive, and I think genuinely hopeful, about a tradition that builds a central lesson about vision and divine wisdom around a non-Israelite prophet and a talking donkey. For an educated modern public living amid confident claims from every side, Parashat Balak offers a counter-discipline to our New Yorker "see something, say

something" instincts, encouraging us to move through the text with less certainty about what we already "see," and more willingness to have our eyes uncovered before we speak. For if even Balaam can be made to speak truth, and even a donkey can notice what the prophet misses, then our task together is to become the kind of readers - and neighbors - whose attention makes room for truths we did not expect to hear, maybe even occasionally from people we did not expect to trust.