


Short Comments on the First Part of Parashat Balak
Rabbi Eliot Malomet July 16, 2022 17 Tammuz 5782

<p>במדבר כב:ב וַיֵּרָא בָּלָק בְּרִי־צֹפּוֹר</p>	<p>Numbers 22:2 Balak son of Tzippor saw. The Torah introduces us to a new character. Who is he? By some accounts he was actually a Midianite, and the Midianites were allied with the Moabites and rotated their kingships. In the midrash he has a taste for magic and sorcery. What did he see? He saw <i>all that Israel had done to the Amorites</i> that they were victorious.</p>
<p>כב:ג,ד וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב... וַיִּקְרַן מוֹאָב... וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב...</p>	<p>22:3, 4 and Moav was in exceeding fear... they felt dread... Moav said. In the Torah, a string of verbs in rapid succession always conveys urgency. This is loaded with irony. The Israelites do not want to engage in war. All they want is safe passage through the territory. The fear of Moav is an outsized projection of their internal insecurity. As a desperate measure, Balak will turn to the deployment of an unconventional force: sorcery.</p>
<p>כב:ה וַיִּשְׁלַח מִלְאָכָיו אֶל־בִּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר</p>	<p>22:5 He sent messengers to Bil'am son of Be'or. Torah trivia: which other character sends messengers? Under what circumstances?¹</p>
<p>כב:ו וַעֲתָה לְקַהֲלָנָא אָרְה־לִּי אֶת־הַעֵם הַזֶּה</p>	<p>22:6 So-now, pray go, curse this people for me. We can't help but think that this is personal for Balak. This little phrase אָרְה־לִּי - <i>curse for me</i>, (and later קִבְּה־לִּי - <i>revile them for me</i>) tells the whole story. <i>It is for me. It is for my reputation. This is my idea. And I'm putting everything on the line for this.</i></p>
<p>כב:ז וַלְלוּ זִקְנֵי מוֹאָב וְזִקְנֵי מִדְיָן וְקָסְמִים בִּידָבָר וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בִּלְעָם וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו דְּבָרֵי בָּלָק:</p>	<p>22:7 The elders of Moav and the elders of Midyan went, tokens-of-augury in their hand, they came to Bil'am and spoke Balak's words to him. This is a mighty delegation of notables. And what are tokens of augury? This builds the impression that Balak likes magic and sees in Bil'am a world class talent who he is trying to impress with his own stuff. This is a way of telegraphing to Bil'am respect and admiration for his craft.²</p>
<p>כב:ח וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיהֶם לֵינוּ פֹה הַלַּיְלָה</p>	<p>22:8 He said to them: Spend the night here tonight. But what does he not do? He doesn't make a big feast for them. Unlike Lot (the Moabite ancestor) or even Abraham, the Torah doesn't emphasize Bil'am's hospitality. Point noted.</p>
<p>כב:ט וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ:</p>	<p>22:9 Now God came to Bil'am and said: Who are these men with you? As if God didn't know who they were. Why not come right out and say, "Don't bother with these men." Because God is also a character in this story. And we readers are trying to figure out what all this means. God's first word to Adam is a challenge to his consciousness: <i>Where are you</i>. To Abraham, a command from nowhere: <i>Lekh lekha, go for yourself</i>. To Moses, God says his name twice when first speaking to him: <i>Moses, Moses</i>. Evidently, God has spoken to Bil'am before this episode, but this question to him, in contrast with the way God talks to other characters, is instructive. The question sets up a comic tension. <i>Everyone knows who these people are. But do you, Bil'am, know who you are? Are you a prophet, or a carpetbagger?</i></p>
<p>כב:יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת־ הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:</p>	<p>22:12 God said to Bil'am: You are not to go with them, you are not to curse the people, for it is blessed! What is fascinating about this is that it was not too long ago in the Torah (Num. 14:11-12ff), that God was ready to destroy them, and here, God says that they are blessed! Despite the people's obstinacy, their faithlessness,</p>

¹ See Gen. 32:4. Jacob sends messengers to Esau his brother, to placate him. Num. 20:14, Moses sends messengers to the King of Edom to petition him for passage through his territory. Num. 21:21, Israel sends messengers to the Sihon for the same reason. In each case, there is diplomacy, petition, and just a hint of pandering. Here too.

² The National Archives has many saddles given to President Reagan from foreign leaders. They knew of his love of horseback riding and gave him extravagant saddles as Gifts of State not only as a courtesy, but also to establish a tone for negotiations. Balak's presentation to Bil'am is in the same vein.

	<p>penchant for idolatry, incessant complaints and a little lust to boot, God seems to like, or even love them! How is it that <i>they are blessed</i>? Because God has blessed their ancestors and they have inherited that blessing.</p>
<p>כב:יג וַיִּקָּם בַּלְעָם בִּבְקָרָה.</p>	<p>22:12 Bil'am got up in the morning. This by itself should not be remarkable. Except, whenever anybody else who is important gets up to do something in the morning the Torah always says, וישכם בבקר - <i>they arose early in the morning</i> which usually telegraphs to the reader that they are energetic, dedicated, and see the fulfilment of their task with a great degree of urgency. Not Bil'am. <i>He got up in the morning</i>, probably well after the crack of dawn.</p>
<p>כב:יז וּלְכֹהֵנָא קְבָהּ לִי אֵת הַעָם הַזֶּה:</p>	<p>22:17 Only: pray go, revile this people for me! The word קְבָהּ is a synonym for the word אָרָה above. Some lexicographers connect this to נִקְבַּהּ-to pierce or קָבַהּ-to hollow which is an interesting way to understand the intent of <i>cursing</i>. To curse is to <i>pierce</i> an enemy or <i>to hollow out</i> their essence. In Ethiopic <i>qaba</i> is to despise.</p>
<p>כב:כא וַיִּקָּם בַּלְעָם בִּבְקָרָה וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת־אֲתָנֹוֹ...</p>	<p>22:21 Bil'am arose in the morning, he saddled his she-ass. Attentive readers will note the contrast with Abraham, Gen. 22:3 וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ בִּבְקָרָה וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ - <i>Avraham arose-early in the morning; he saddled his donkey</i>. To paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen in his memorable debate with Dan Quayle: <i>I served with Abraham, I knew Abraham, Abraham was a friend of mine, Bil'am you're no Abraham.</i></p>
<p>כב:כב וַיִּחַר־אַף אֱלֹהִים בְּיִהוָה לֵאמֹר:</p>	<p>22:22 But God's anger flared up because he was going. This is not fair of God. God had just told him that he could go, but now God is angry at him for going! But here again, this shows that Bil'am is no Abraham. Abraham, faced with the same dilemma would have argued with God instead of making the morally problematic decision of accepting Balak's proposal, and expecting compensation for it. True, Bil'am is an extraordinary personality, but he lacks that extra quality which would have made him a truly exceptional personality, like...Abraham!</p>
<p>כב:כג וַיִּנְדֹּף בַּלְעָם אֶת־הָאֲתָנֹוֹן לְהִטָּהֵר הַדָּרֶדֶר:</p>	<p>22:23 ...And Bil'am struck the she-ass to turn her back onto the way. God blocks Bil'am's path. The she-ass sees the obstruction but Bil'am doesn't which is, of course, the parody moment in the story: the she-ass is able to see what the "prophet" cannot! But Bil'am hits the animal. While we can understand his frustration, this hitting and the subsequent two hittings seems unusually cruel. Which only serves to underscore the peculiarity of the situation. The bearer of God's message, does not comport himself with godliness.</p>
	
<p>כב:כח וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת־פִּי הָאֲתָנֹוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבַלְעָם מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתַנִּי זֶה שָׁלַשׁ רָגְלִים:</p>	<p>22:28 Then God opened the mouth of the she-ass and she said to Bil'am: What have I done to you that you have struck me [on] these three occasions? The animal is kinder than the prophet. She doesn't say, <i>what are you doing to me!</i> She says, <i>what did I do to you?!</i> She assumes she is the guilty one, out of unjustified deference to him, but we all know that he is guilty of wanton cruelty towards her.</p>
<p>כב:כט וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם לְאֲתָנֹוֹן כִּי הִתְעַלְלִית בִּי לִי וְשִׁחַרְרַב בְּיָדִי כִּי עָתָה תִּרְגַּמְתִּיךְ:</p>	<p>22:29 Bil'am said: Because you have been capricious with been capricious with me, If a sword had been in my hand, by now I would have killed you! Good thing he didn't have a sword in his hand. And how does Bil'am meet his end? Later on we read (31:8) וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ בִּבְקָרָה וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ - <i>they (the Israelites) killed Bil'am by the sword.</i> How about that? He was going to slay his animal with a sword, and instead, he was slain by the sword. Go figure!</p>
<p>כב:ל וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֲתָנֹוֹן אֵלֶי בַלְעָם הֲלוֹא אֲנֹכִי אֲתָנֹוֹת אֲשֶׁר־רָכַבְתָּ עָלַי מִעוֹדֶךָ עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲהִסְכַּן הִסְכַּמְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא:</p>	<p>22:30 The she-ass said to Bil'am: Am I not your she-ass upon whom you have ridden from your past until this day? Have I ever been accustomed, accustomed to do thus to you? He said: No. It's one thing to be upbraided by God, another by a fellow human. But by your animal? She puts him in his place. The faithful animal is not an uncommon folk-motif. Think Tevye and his horse. The Lone Ranger and Silver. Naftali the Storyteller and his horse Sus (IB Singer). Robert E. Lee and his horse "Traveller." And more. SHABBAT SHALOM!</p>

