"Bilaam's mission: Success or failure?"

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Our sidrah (Nu. chs 22-24) chronicles the efforts of the Moabite king, Balak, to enlist the aid of Bilaam, the premier soothsayer of the age – also renowned for his ability to effectuate curses – in order to defeat the numerically superior Israelite army. The power of the curse to affect all aspects of life and commerce was universally accepted in the ancient Near East; and many formulae of curses – written on pottery (referred to as 'execration texts') and directed at the rulers of Canaanite cities, were unearthed in Egypt, dating back to the early 2nd millennium BCE. The object of such oral curses in our sidrah would belong, therefore, to the similar genre, though this time to frustrate any further Israelite progress and advance into that same land!

We also have the enigmatic episode of Bilaam's ass which God endows with the power of speech. It is the ass – whose way is obstructed by the angel – that brings home to Bilaam the fact that he would not succeed in his purpose, and that his journey would prove fruitless (see Nu. 22:32). But Bilaam is determined to proceed, and he secures God's permission to continue with his mission.

The question raised by several commentators[1] is why God allowed him to proceed at all if it countermanded His will and incensed Him so much (see v. 22). God's answer should surely have been to root him to the spot, thereby avoiding the whole bizarre episode of the ass! His curious concession – a repeat of His similarly indulgent response to the clamour of the people to send spies into Canaan[2] as well as to Pharaoh's ten-fold obduracy in the face of the plagues – is explained by the Talmud with reference to the maxim, *b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilech bah, molichin oto* – 'In the direction a person determines to go, heaven leads him.'[3] The

heavenly Father - much like most human parents - allows His children room to make their own mistakes – leaving it only to the wise ones to learn from them!

A further difficulty is why God allowed that heathen 'prophet' – bent on Israel's destruction – to become an instrument of her praise, offering a lyrical tribute that, however majestic and adulatory, was not only disingenuous but also superfluous given that God had made it perfectly clear to him that Israel was already in a permanently blessed state.[4]

A straightforward answer to this is that Bilaam was never actually instructed by God either to bless or praise Israel, albeit that both the king and, ultimately, Bilaam so construed the words that emerged from his mouth.[5] He was merely told to refrain from cursing Israel,[6] and to be sure to speak only the words that God would put in his mouth.[7] This is underlined by the phrase, 'And God *placed* ***an utterance*** (*Va-yasem Hashem* ***davar)*** in Bilaam's mouth,'[8] as well as by Bilaam's own acknowledgment of his function as a mere mouthpiece.[9] Indeed, the consistent description of Bilaam's utterances as *mashal,* rather than *b'rachah,* is also indicative of their circumscribed scope and power.[10] The nearest Bilaam gets toward referencing a blessing was his affirmations, "When He blesses, I cannot reverse it" (23:20), and "Those who bless you are blessed and those who curse you are accursed" (24:9).

A reason for the inclusion of the bizarre episode of Bilaam might have been that, as Israel was about to complete its preparation to enter Canaan, God would have sought to up-date His Torah record of all that Israel had experienced during its more recent travels, and especially its account of those surrounding nations who had sought to attack her and frustrate her entry into Canaan, and who would continue to constitute a threat in the future. Hitherto, Israel had had to deal with the Amalekites,[11] Edomites,[12] Amorites,[13] and Og king of Bashan.[14] And immediately ahead of them loomed a military clash with the Midianites who had sought to drive a wedge between Israel and her God by weakening her moral resolve through gross acts

of indecency and seduction.[15] The Bilaam story would have provided the opportunity to complete the biblical record with an account of the machinations of the Moabites who teamed up with the Midianites to see if they might achieve where their neighbours had failed.

The Bilaam episode is unique, however, for being the only situation that takes place off-stage, as it were, in a neighbouring country, revealing a conspiracy of which Israel had no knowledge at the time. Only when Moses disclosed it to the nation later in the Torah would they have learnt of the danger that had been averted. Only then would they have become aware of Bilaam's glowing tribute to Israel and its covenanted relationship with God; of the depth of God's protective concern for His people's welfare and safety notwithstanding its rebelliousness; and of His assessment of Israel's moral excellence, family loyalty, and spiritual tenacity.

Significantly, it was only when Moses revealed the divine account of that episode to his people that they would have learnt inter alia that Bilaam was in fact describing, *word-for-word*, God's assessment of their attributes and unlimited potential.

But, before we assess the ramifications of that awareness, we need to invoke Talmudic tradition to determine the point at which Moses would have revealed the Bilaam episode to them.

We know how and where the Ten Commandments were given, but there is a difference of opinion as to how the rest of the Torah was revealed.[16] R. Yochanan took the view that, intermittently, throughout the 40 years, God dictated to Moses His authorised account of recent events, as well as supplementary laws. Each time, Moses committed the latter to writing on separate *megillah* rolls and then pieced them together into a single scroll just before his death, presenting one master copy to each tribe and a thirteenth which he deposited

in the Tent of Meeting. R. Shimon ben Lakish asserted, on the other hand, that Moses wrote and delivered the Torah to Israel as a completed work just before his death.

Support for the view of R. Yochanan may be forthcoming from the reference to Moses having 'recorded the starting points of their *various* marches as directed by the Lord' (Nu.33:2). This indicates that, prior to setting off after each of their 42 journeys through the desert,[17] Moses was instructed to update the Torah account to embody their recent experiences.

Significantly, when stating their views, both sages employ the term *nitnah*, 'it was *delivered*' at that point, not merely 'written'. Thus, Moses would have shared and expounded on each *megillah* immediately after having written it at God's dictation.

So, how is all this relevant? Well, both views shed some light on the Israelite state of mind. According to the view that it was not until the nation had reached the end of their 40-yr odyssey that they read Bilaam's account of God's unflagging pride in, and eternal covenant with, Israel – they must have found God's attitude toward them mystifying. Particularly that He should have been prepared to allow Bilaam to offer such superlative praise – and, more so, to incorporate it into His Torah – knowing the moral depravity to which the nation would sink in the immediate aftermath of those utterances.[18] Their reaction to reading it would have been one of shame and mortification at the extent to which they had let God down and broken His covenant.

According to the alternative view – that the people were privy to God's version of things just a short time after they had occurred – we may assume that that was the case with the *megillah* containing the Bilaam account and the description of the ensuing wholesale moral degeneracy with the Moabite women. We may assume, therefore, that the latter *megillah* concluded with the end of the book of Numbers.

As this was also the point at which Moses began his final, Deuteronomic, address to the nation, we may imagine the people's tortured state of mind as they listened to their leader chastising them not only for their recent contemptible behaviour but also for the lengthy catalogue of their sins and rebelliousness since they left Egypt.[19]

NOTES

1. See, for example, *ibn Ezra* on v.19.
2. See our Torah thought on *Shelach lecha* 2022.
3. Tal. *Makk.* 10b.
4. 22:12; 24:1.
5. 23:11, 20; 24:1, 10.
6. 22:12, 35, 38; 23:12; 24:13.
7. 22:7, 20, 35; 38; 23:5, 12, 16, 26; 24:13.
8. 23:5, 16.
9. 23:12.
10. This is supported by *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, pp.330-333), which renders his four speeches as 'oracles,' rather than 'blessings,' and by the JPS translation of the phrase *Va-yisa m'shalo* as 'he took up his *theme*' (23:7, 18; 24:3, 15).
11. Ex. 17:8-13.
12. Nu. 20:14-21.
13. Nu. 21:21-31.
14. Vv.33-35.
15. Nu. 25:14-18; 31:1-20.
16. Tal. *Gitt.* 60a.
17. See Rashi on Nu. 33:1.
18. See chap. 25.
19. see Rashi on Deut. 1:1.