Balaam from “Divinerville”

In a satirical account, Numbers describes how a local, non-Israelite Transjordanian prophet and diviner is forced by YHWH to bless Israel instead of curse them. Deuteronomy recasts Balaam as a stereotypical Mesopotamian diviner from faraway Aram-Naharaim, making the point that YHWH’s power extends even into the heartland of Assyria.

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123rf, adapted

Central to the narrative of Balaam son of Beor is the fact that his is not an Israelite. When Balak, king of Moab, needs someone to curse Israel and stop their encroachment on Moabite territory, he invites the non-Israelite prophet and diviner, Balaam to perform this task.[1]

Balaam’s Origins in the Prose Account

The specifics of Balaam’s national identity or geographic extraction are ostensibly clarified in the verse when Balaam is introduced:

במדבר כב:ה וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכִים אֶל בִּלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל הַנָּהָר אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹ לִקְרֹא לוֹ...

Num 22:5 So [Balak] dispatched emissaries to Balaam son of Beor, to Pethor, which was on the river, [in] the land of his people, to summon him...[2]

The verse has three geographical markers, but all of them are unclear:

1. The city of Pethor—It is mentioned only in references to Balaam and is unknown elsewhere in the Bible;
2. The unspecified river;
3. “The land of his people”—The phrase is tautological, since we aren’t told who his people are. Where else would Balaam be other than the land of his people?

Ammonite

The tautological phrase, “the land of his people,” is found in the Masoretic Text and the LXX. The Samaritan Pentateuch, Peshitta, and Vulgate preserve a different, more correct reading, with the final word in the phrase reading not *ʿammo*, but *ʿammon*: “the land of the *Ammonites*” (ארץ בני עמון).[3]

This situates Balaam in a specific, well-known geographic location: in the Transjordan, close to the land of Israel and adjacent to Moab, which is where we would expect him to be. Pethor would be an unknown city in Ammon, and the unnamed river would be the Jordan.

Balaam the Aramean: His Origins in the Poetic Texts

In Balaam’s oracles,[4] however, he describes himself as coming from Aram:

‏במדבר כג:ז ...מִן אֲרָם יַנְחֵנִי בָלָק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב מֵהַרְרֵי קֶדֶם לְכָה אָרָה לִּי יַעֲקֹב וּלְכָה זֹעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Num 23:7b From Aram has Balak brought me, Moab’s king from the hills of the East: “Come, curse me, Jacob; come, tell Israel’s doom!”

The verse has two geographical markers in parallel with each other:

1. Aram is a term that covers a wide area: in the biblical period, Aramean kingdoms were found throughout modern Syrian, as well as near the Sea of Galilee and in the Transjordan, depending on the specific period.
2. “From the hills of the East” would most likely be a reference to the Transjordanian region, east of Israel, and is a reasonable description of the hilly topography of that region.[5]

Part of the Transjordan was ruled by the Arameans in the late 9th century, following the conquest of much of Israel in that period by King Hazael of Damascus.[6] In that period, then, “East” and “Aram” could refer to the same area. If, as many scholars think, the poetic oracles are older than the surrounding prose narrative, this poetic verse would reflect the more ancient tradition of an Aramean Balaam. The description of Balaam as Ammonite in the prose would reflect a later update, from when Ammon ruled the same region in the 8th century.[7]

Deir ʿAlla

A Transjordanian Balaam fits with an important archaeological find: the plaster inscriptions from Deir ʿAlla, in modern-day Jordan—written in a West Semitic language (either Aramaic or Canaanite with Aramaic influence) and usually dated to the ninth or eighth centuries B.C.E. These preserve an extra-biblical tradition about Balaam.[8]

The first of these inscriptions depicts a Balaam son of Beor (בלעם בר בער) engaging in mantic activity that is strikingly reminiscent of the story in Numbers in both content and form. No mention is made regarding Balaam’s origins in the inscription, but the site of the inscriptions is in Transjordan.

The evidence thus suggests a tradition, shared by the Bible and the Deir ʿAlla plasters, of Balaam as a renowned diviner from a West Semitic people in Transjordan.[9] This location, close to Moab, makes good sense within the story-world of Numbers 22–24, in which Balak the king of Moab hires Balaam. It is almost certainly what the early texts that make up the Balaam story envision.

Aram-Naharaim across the Euphrates: Balaam’s Origins in Deuteronomy

In its reference to the Balaam story, the book of Deuteronomy mentions another, quite different, geographical location for Balaam:

דברים כג:ה ...וַאֲשֶׁר שָׂכַר עָלֶיךָ אֶת בִּלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר מִפְּתוֹר אֲרַם נַהֲרַיִם לְקַלְלֶךָּ.

Deut 23:5b …and because [Moab] hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.

Aram-naharaim refers not to a Transjordanian Aram or even to an Aramean state in the south of Syria but instead to a region far to the north of Israel, beyond the Euphrates River, near Abraham’s ancestral hometown of Haran, in the heartland of Assyria. The story of Isaac’s and Rebecca’s courtship makes this clear when Abraham dispatches his servant to “the land of [his] birth” (Gen 24:4) to find a wife for his son:

בראשׁית כד:י וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד עֲשָׂרָה גְמַלִּים מִגְּמַלֵּי אֲדֹנָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ וְכָל טוּב אֲדֹנָיו בְּיָדוֹ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל **אֲרַם נַהֲרַיִם** אֶל עִיר נָחוֹר.

Gen 24:10 Then the servant took ten of his master’s camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to **Aram-naharaim**, to the city of Nahor.

Thus, according to Deuteronomy, the river mentioned earlier in Numbers 22:5 would be not the Jordan but the Euphrates. This is how Targum Onkelos (2nd c. C.E.) understood the verse; he translates פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל הַנָּהָר “Pethor that is on the river” as לִפְתוֹר אֲרָם דְּעַל פְּרָת “Pethor of Aram which is on the Euphrates,” as does the NJPS (“that is by the Euphrates).

Indeed, the Bible often uses the non-specific term “the river” as a reference to the Euphrates. For instance, Joshua’s historical résumé at the conclusion of his career opens with:

‏יהושׁע כד:ב ...**בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר** יָשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם תֶּרַח אֲבִי אַבְרָהָם וַאֲבִי נָחוֹר וַיַּעַבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים. כד:ג וָאֶקַּח אֶת אֲבִיכֶם אֶת אַבְרָהָם **מֵעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר** וָאוֹלֵךְ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן...

Josh 24:2 …Since time immemorial, your ancestors dwelt **beyond the river**—Terah, ancestor of Abraham and Nahor—and worshiped other gods. 24:3 But I took your ancestor, Abraham, **from beyond the river** and led him throughout the land of Canaan…”[10]

Moreover, the Bible elsewhere refers to the Euphrates as הַנָּהָר הַגָּדֹל “the great river” (Gen 15:18, Deut 1:7, Josh 1:4).[11]

Support for this reading comes from the modern identification of a city named Pitrû in Akkadian sources, a connection that may be found as early as the 1903 commentary on Numbers by George Buchanan Gray (1865–1922) of Mansfield College.[12] Pitrû was near Haran, in the heartland of Assyria.

A Mesopotamian Balaam?

A Pethor in the Assyrian region would work well with Balaam’s role as a diviner. Balak hires Balaam because the latter has a reputation for great skill in communicating with the supernatural realm and harnessing its power.[13] While divination was a respected institution across the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, it was especially robust in Mesopotamia.[14] The Akkadian sources reflect numerous kinds of divinatory professionals, often directly paralleling biblical prophets and priests.[15]

Samuel Daiches (1878–1949), a rabbi and Judaica scholar at London’s Jews College, argued that Balaam fits the profile of the type of Mesopotamian diviner known as a *bārû*, who discerned the divine will by reading omens (especially the entrails of sacrifices).[16] If Balaam was a *bārû*, that would indeed bolster the case for his Mesopotamian origins.

However, some have objected that Daiches’ invocation of the *bārû* unjustifiably conflates two aspects of Mesopotamian religious functionaries: (a) divination, the effort to *understand* the divine realm, and (b) magic, the effort to *manipulate* it. Whereas the *bārû* was an expert in the former, Balak hires Balaam to do the latter.[17]

Is Pethor Really Pitrû?

Moreover, the identification of Pethor with Pitrû is problematic. First, Pitrû is not on the Euphrates River itself, but on one of its tributaries, the Sājūr. Second, by the time of Shalmeneser III (mid-9th century B.C.E.), Pitrû had been renamed to Ana-aššur-utter-asbat, and thus would not be the name familiar to the biblical authors.[18] Third, the biblical vocalization, “Pethor,” does not align with what would be expected for a rendering of “Pitrû.”[19] None of these problems is insurmountable,[20] but they should give us pause.

More importantly, a location north of the Euphrates, hundreds of miles north of the Moabite plains, defies narrative logic. Balak’s emissaries have to make the journey to Balaam twice before he agrees to go with them. If Balak is concerned about Israel’s imminent advance, would he send for assistance from someone so far away?

To the Diviner

Balaam’s status as a diviner suggests the possibility that פתורה “to Pethor” in Numbers may not be a place name at all. The consonants of “Pethor” are the same as the verbal root פ.ת.ר ( = פ.שׁ.ר), which can mean “interpret”—including in a divinatory context. Consider Joseph’s discussion of dream interpretation with his cellmates:

‏‏בראשׁית מ:ח וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו חֲלוֹם חָלַמְנוּ **וּפֹתֵר** אֵין אֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא לֵאלֹהִים **פִּתְרֹנִים** סַפְּרוּ נָא לִי.

Gen 40:8 They said to him, “We each had a dream, but there is no **interpreter (*poter*)** for it.” He answered them, “All **interpretations (*pitronim*)** belong to God. Go ahead and tell me.”[21]

Thus, the conventional reading of פְּתוֹרָה as “to Pethor” might in fact mean “to the diviner” (Num 22:5). This is how the text was understood by certain classical commentators. Thus, the early 1st millennium C.E. Targum Neofiti translates פתורה as פתורה חלמייה “the interpreter of dreams.” Similarly, the medieval commentator R. Bahya ben Asher (ca. 1255–ca. 1340) writes:

וע"ד המדרש פתורה, נקרא פתורה מלשון פתרון, לפי שמתחלה היה פותר חלומות ואח"כ חזר קוסם ואח"כ עלה לרוה"ק.

By way of midrash, Pethora from the word *pitaron* (solution), since at first he would interpret dreams, then he started on sorcery, and finally he received the holy spirit.

Even if it is a place name, which in its original context would have referred to some unknown town in the Transjordan, it is difficult to ignore the linguistic connection to the word “diviner.” Indeed, this was likely one of the inspirations for Deuteronomy’s reimagination of the Balaam story.

Deuteronomy—A Late Harmonization

Rather than preserving an independent tradition, Deuteronomy’s placement of Balaam’s place of origin as Aram-Naharaim represents a harmonistic effort to solve the ambiguity present in Numbers.[22] Deuteronomy’s phrase מִפְּתוֹר אֲרַם נַהֲרַיִם “Pethor of Aram-naharaim” combines elements that all appear in the Balaam narrative in Numbers—but never together: “Pethor” and “river” (i.e., *nahar*) come from the prose frame (22:5), while “Aram” comes from a poetic oracle (23:7).

The older layers of the Balaam story in Numbers envision a Transjordanian prophet. In the final form of the text, however, when we read the poetic reference to Aram through a Deuteronomic lens, we see it as a reference to Aram-Naharaim, and we understand Pethor as a city in that region.[23] By casting him from a faraway land, famous for its divination, Balaam becomes the quintessential diviner as well as the quintessential outsider.[24]

Numbers as Satire

Of course, a Balaam from far away Assyria does not make narrative sense. Nevertheless, the final version of the Balaam story, with its episode of the talking donkey, is not meant to be understood as a historical annal with verisimilitude. Rather, it is a satire, where realism is not a controlling factor.[25]

The story is an intentionally crafted, agenda-driven story with a theological claim: YHWH’s power means that he has sole prerogative over authentic prophecy; he cannot be manipulated through the mantic arts. The fact that this great foreign diviner must obey YHWH’s commands and is powerless to curse YHWH’s people testifies to YHWH’s divine superiority:

במדבר כב:ח וַיַּעַן בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַבְדֵי בָלָק אִם יִתֶּן לִי בָלָק מְלֹא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲבֹר אֶת פִּי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהָי לַעֲשׂוֹת קְטַנָּה אוֹ גְדוֹלָה.

Num 22:18 Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of YHWH my God.

The story advances this claim in large part by mocking the institution of divination as reflected in both its practitioner (Balaam) and its patron (Balak), each of whom appears (at various points) powerless and obtuse.

Using a Stereotype: Deuteronomy’s Recasting of Balaam’s Origins

Understanding this message, Deuteronomy recasts Balaam’s origins to make him hail from Mesopotamia because of its close association with divination. Through the use of a literary device well-attested in satire throughout history, he thus becomes a regional stereotype.[26]

The term “Pethor” is explicable in light of the literary function of Balaam’s Mesopotamian origins. Whatever Pethor may once have referred to, now it is a fictional place whose name recalls divination. It is as if Balaam comes from a city literally called “Divinerville,” in the far away land of Aram Naharaim.

1. The text reads:

במדבר כב:ו וְעַתָּה לְכָה נָּא אָרָה לִּי אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי עָצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל נַכֶּה בּוֹ וַאֲגָרְשֶׁנּוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר תְּבָרֵךְ מְבֹרָךְ וַאֲשֶׁר תָּאֹר יוּאָר.

Num 22:6 Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.

Translations of full biblical passages follow NJPS unless otherwise noted. For ease of analysis, translations of individual phrases (e.g., the names of places) in the text of the article are my own.

1. My translation.
2. In the Vulgate, *terrae filiorum Ammon*, in the Peshitta, (ܠܐܪܥܐ ܕܒ̈ܢܝ ܥܡܘܢ) לארעא דבני עמון. Instead of chalking up MT and LXX’s עמו to a scribal error (or intentional emendation) in MT, Scott Layton argues that the loss of the final *nun* may be explained linguistically; see Scott C. Layton, “Whence Comes Balaam? Num 22,5 Revisited,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 32–61 [50–59].
3. On the relationship between the prose and the poetry in the Balak narrative, see Jacqueline Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on Its Own Terms*, The Ancient Word (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 103–144.
4. Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 168.
5. Editor’s note: See Assaf Kleiman (forthcoming).
6. Editor’s note: For some discussion of the history of the political this region in this period, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, [“When Did ‘Fire Go Forth from Heshbon’?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/when-did-fire-go-forth-from-heshbon) *TheTorah* (2017); David BenGad HaCohen, [“Jephthah’s Wandering Biblical Message to the King of Ammon,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/jephthahs-wandering-biblical-message-to-the-king-of-ammon) *TheTorah* (2017).
7. For an overview of Deir ʿAlla, see Carl S. Ehrlich, [“Balaam the Seer: From the Bible to the Deir ʿAlla Inscription,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/balaam-the-seer-from-the-bible-to-the-deir-alla-inscription) *The Torah* (2018).
8. Layton, “Whence Comes Balaam?” Note that this does *not* entail positing that Balaam was a historical figure who really existed.
9. My translation.
10. An outlier is in the book of Daniel (10:4), in which Daniel refers to the Tigris as the Great River. However, that story is set in Babylon, not Israel.
11. George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, ICC 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903), 325–326.
12. The story indicates that Balaam’s initial attempts to discern YHWH’s will rely on reading omens:

‏במדבר כד:א וַיַּרְא בִּלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי יְ־הוָה לְבָרֵךְ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא הָלַךְ כְּפַעַם בְּפַעַם לִקְרַאת **נְחָשִׁים** וַיָּשֶׁת אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו. כד:ב וַיִּשָּׂא בִלְעָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לִשְׁבָטָיו וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים.

Num 24:1 Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased YHWH to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of **omens**, but turned his face toward the wilderness. 24:2 As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him.

1. Some biblical authors seem to have been aware of this association, as we see in Ezekiel:

יחזקאל כא:כו כִּי עָמַד מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל אֶל אֵם הַדֶּרֶךְ בְּרֹאשׁ שְׁנֵי הַדְּרָכִים לִקְסָם קָסֶם קִלְקַל בַּחִצִּים שָׁאַל בַּתְּרָפִים רָאָה בַּכָּבֵד.

Ezek 21:26 For the king of Babylon has stood at the fork of the road, where two roads branch off, to perform divination: He has shaken arrows, consulted teraphim, and inspected the liver.

1. For an overview, see Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 57–115; Uri Gabbay, [“The Practice of Divination in the Ancient Near East,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-practice-of-divination-in-the-ancient-near-east) *TheTorah* (2015).
2. Samuel Daiches, “Balaam—a Babylonian *bārū*,” in *Hilprecht Anniversary Volume: Studies in Assyriology and Archaeology Dedicated to Hermann V. Hilprecht upon the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of His Doctorate and His Fiftieth Birthday (July 28)*, ed. Richard Y. Cook (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909), 60–70.
3. Michael S. Moore, “Another Look at Balaam,” *RB* 97 (1990): 359–378. Moore provides a longer treatment of Balaam in idem, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, SBLDS 113 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).
4. Jonathan Miles Robker, *Balaam in Text and Tradition*, FAT 131 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 309.
5. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (2000; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 147.
6. The difference in Pitrû’s location may simply reflect an Israelite writer’s preference to situate Balaam’s hometown with respect to a more iconic river, even if it was less precise. As for Pitrû’s new name, the Balaam tradition or narrative might pre-date this change, or the author might have preserved the older name of his birthplace to convey authenticity. Finally, biblical transliterations of foreign place names are not always accurate or in keeping with linguistic rules. Even so, the problems militate against the identification of Pethor with Pitrû.
7. My translation.
8. Robker, *Balaam*, 317.
9. This understanding of Balaam’s origins is also built into the MT of Numbers 22:5a, which hides the older connection to Ammon with the tautological “from the land of his people.” To be clear, I am not proposing that Numbers 22:5a was authored with these Mesopotamian valences in mind. Rather, the Mesopotamian interpretations of the verse reflect a later biblical understanding of it in light of the emergent tradition reflected in Deuteronomy. The traditions that lie behind a text do not automatically determine what that text means forever. Literary meaning changes—especially in texts like those in the Bible, which were transmitted and adapted by scribes over the course of many centuries. For discussion, see D. Andrew Teeter, “The Hebrew Bible and/as Second Temple Literature: Methodological Reflections,” *DSD* 20 (2013): 349–77.
10. Cf. Robker, *Balaam*, 311. In fact, these two identities become linked, presenting divination as an antisocial, mercenary activity unbeholden to the ideals or interests of any particular community. Much later, the rabbis would claim that Balaam’s name means “without a people” (בלא עם; b. Sanh. 105a). While this etymology is obviously fanciful, it intuits a real dynamic in the story—one that might already be implied in the phrase “the land of his people.”
11. See, e.g., David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, BJS 301 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 29–41. Alexander Rofé has long argued that the episode with the donkey (Num 22:22–35) is a “burlesque” that was added to the story later; for an overview, see idem, [“The Account of Balaam’s Donkey: A Late Polemical Burlesque,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-account-of-balaams-donkey-a-late-polemical-burlesque) *TheTorah.com* (2019). While I agree with Rofé’s characterization and composition-historical reconstruction, I would add that the humorous, critical elements are present elsewhere in the story as well.
12. This also speaks to Moore’s objection to Daiches that Balaam does not match any single Mesopotamian divinatory role (e.g., *bārû*). In a tendentious satire, accuracy would hardly be expected.

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