Ricoeur and the World of the Text: Imagination, Time, and Hope in the Book of Balaam

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ABSTRACT

RICOEUR AND THE WORLD OF THE TEXT:
IMAGINATION, TIME, AND HOPE IN THE BOOK OF BALAAM

Gerald A. Lofquist III

Held in metaphorical tension with Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi,* the following

thesis compares two readings of Numbers 22-24, the book of Balaam: one historical-

critical (the *world behind the text*), and the other literary-imaginative (the *world of*

the text). This comparison seeks to address the (historical and existential) question:

which is *true*? Concerning methodology, the thesis employs Paul Ricoeur's

philosophical hermeneutics to help mitigate the ongoing tension between history and

theology, thus revealing the *world of the text* of Numbers 22-24. Concerning content,

from this *world of the text* reading of Numbers 22-24, the thesis seeks to uncover a

possible meaning for ancient Israel. This is an existential meaning, in which past

traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present—i.e., myth

shaping identity.

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RICOEUR AND THE WORLD OF THE TEXT:
IMAGINATION, TIME, AND HOPE IN THE BOOK OF BALAAM

A Project

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by

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For Ryan, Lora, and Caleb

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

At the end of Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* (along with its Ang Lee film

adaptation), after having narrated his incredible journey at sea, young Pi Patel

recovers in a Mexican infirmary. Approached by shipping officials needing to file

insurance claims, he is pressed to tell the *real* story of what happened during his

months-long ordeal at sea—the *truth*. So, Pi relays an alternative account of his

journey; absent the power of myth, he recasts his fantastical story in rational,

explainable terms. Thus, by the end of the novel/film, the reader/viewer is left with

at least three questions: Which of Pi's two stories is true? Which account does the

reader *want* to be true? And *why*?

  Life of Pi is a story about a story. It is a story about belief. It is a story about

God. *Life of Pi* is not a story about religion. Nevertheless, *Life of Pi* speaks to the

power of myth to shape one's understanding of God, which in turn shapes one's life

towards that God.[1] In other words, myth shapes identity. Initially, through societal

pressure, Pi had lost the enchantment of his faith. However, through his journey at

sea, it was regained—stronger than before. So, for Pi, which of his two stories is

true? Which has the power to shape and to inform his life—the story of empirical

rationalism or that of supernatural myth?

  This concept of myth shaping identity is at the heart of the present study.

However, instead of discussing a twenty-first century novel or film, the project

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[1] Note: unlike much contemporary usage, *myth* is a technical term meaning *symbolic story*, and does not imply its falsity. States Jon Levenson, "myth does not mean 'untruth' or 'falsehood,' in spite of such usage in ordinary discourse. One should not allow this pejorative use of the word to prejudice oneself against the Aristotelian position that poetry is truer than history." Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 104.

investigates a text from the ancient literary corpus of the Pentateuch. In broad strokes, the study compares two approaches or readings of Numbers 22-24: one historical-critical (the *world behind the text*), and the other literary-imaginative (the *world of the text*)—in this setting, roughly comparable to Pi's two stories—that raise similar issues concerning which is *true*? In terms of biblical studies, it will be helpful first to distinguish between these two kinds of readings. Sandra Schneiders offers a helpful and concise summary:

> The world behind the text includes everything that cooperates to produce the text, that is, the process of text production (the history of composition) and the subject matter of the text as it took place in the past.…The world of the text (is) a work, an artistic entity constructed according to a particular genre, for example, narrative, poetry, proclamation, or discourse.…(Such) a literary work clears a space, creates a world, into which the reader is invited.…The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative *reality*.[2]

Thus established, one rightly may ask the purpose or value in comparing two such readings.

In the postscript to his *Old Testament Theology*, Gerhard von Rad comments, "The historical interpretation of the Old Testament has reached a kind of crisis."[3] Written nearly sixty years ago, this crisis, in his view, is precipitated by the confrontation between ancient and modern notions of history. Since both eras judge historical data through different frames of reference, ancient Israel's conception of history is fundamentally at odds with that of the modern view.[4] Referring to the historical interpretation of the Old Testament, von Rad states:

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[2] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 167.

[3] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1965), 417.

[4] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:417.

It furnished us with an entirely new picture of Israel, her life, and her religious ideas: but the question then arose whether a consistently applied historico-critical method could really do justice to the Old Testament scriptures' claim to truth. Is not the great gain here at the same time counterbalanced by a great loss, namely that we tend to beg the questions of their claim to truth?[5]

To address this imbalance, von Rad proposes adopting Israel's own notion of history as offered through the traditions. As an example, he highlights the specific truth claims of the patriarchal narratives: "It is doubtful whether Israel, when she read or listened to these old traditions, was dominated, as we are, by the standpoint of authenticity. Or, to put it better, it is open to question whether she did not understand their authenticity in a different way from the way we do, for they were certainly authentic for her also."[6] This authenticity was expressed through Israel's adoption of these traditions as her own. States von Rad:

> One thing can be said with assurance—Israel was not interested in the subjects of these old traditions in the sense that they dealt with self-contained events which suddenly emerge from a very far-off past. Rather, while perfectly well aware of her historical remove from them, she saw them as her own, she found something of importance for herself expressed in them, and therefore they were at the same time contemporary for her.[7]

In this way, the stories of the traditions expand into something almost like parables, in which something that Israel experienced in the past is experienced in the present, "down to the narrator's own time."[8]

However, even beyond the everyday aspect of parables, Israel's adoption of these traditions points also to her future through the prophetic understanding of

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[5] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:417.

[6] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:424.

[7] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:424-25.

[8] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:425.

history. As von Rad comments, this is the "openness to the future" that is characteristic of biblical narration: "the conviction that there is an event still to come, from which, and from which alone, the event narrated is to receive its final illumination."[9] Beyond the prophets, this is true, he states, for all biblical narration, e.g., the patriarchal history, the wilderness wandering, and the rise of David.[10] Comments von Rad, "It has been said that all that the narrators described is determined by this end (i.e., a definite happening that will come from God) and is narrated with reference to the future."[11] This is expressed through the notion of *promise* and *fulfillment*; the promise inherent in past traditions will be fulfilled in the future. This is "a future known in the light of a clear promise which has been already made," states von Rad, "as, for example, the promise that Jahweh is to make the patriarchs become a great nation, or that the patriarchs' descendants are to take possession of the land of Canaan, or that David is to be exalted as *nagid* of Israel."[12] Thus, even within the literature of the Pentateuch, this "openness to the future" expressed through *promise* and *fulfillment* conveys an eschatological perspective. According to von Rad, this constitutes an understanding of Israel's history from Israel's own perspective, an authenticity by which past traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present.

This confrontation between ancient and modern notions of history is indicative of the tension between history and theology so characteristic of twentieth-

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[9] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:422.

[10] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:423.

[11] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:422-23.

[12] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:423.

century biblical studies.[13] The present project, in its own way, suggests one approach to help resolve this ongoing tension. In order to do so, and to probe further von Rad's concept of authenticity, the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics will be applied towards the biblical text. In this, the object of inquiry is not only the text, but also understanding itself. "Rather than reading texts and other objects as detached entities that are to yield their secrets through the application of scientific method, interpretation takes account of the relationship between text and interpreter," states Jens Zimmermann. "The object to be interpreted, whether it be a text, a work of art, or one's own self, is interpreted in light of its as well as the reader's own ontological embeddedness in history, tradition, and culture."[14]

As such, both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur value tradition's role in hermeneutics. "The fundamental prejudice (or pre-judgment) of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself," states Gadamer, "which denies tradition its power."[15] However, Gadamer argues, one's pre-judgments, informed by tradition, constitute one's being.[16] As for Ricoeur, concerning the role tradition plays in the transmission and the reception (as well as the interpretation) of received stories, he states, "Let us understand by this term (tradition) not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of

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[13] See Chapter 2, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur."

[14] Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 21.

[15] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2002), 270.

[16] Hans-George Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 9.

an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity."[17]

In this, Ricoeur makes the specific link between myth and identity. As Mark Wallace (Ricoeur's biographer) states, "Ricoeur argues for the premier value of mythopoetic forms of expression, rather than purely philosophical or theological modes of discourse, for understanding the meaning of human being in a world charged with the presence and absence of the sacred. The relative superiority of myth over philosophy—or 'fiction' over 'reason'—is manifest in the power of religious creation stories to uncover the structural disparity in human beings between their fractured nature and their destinies as integrated selves."[18] Thus, by employing Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics, it is hoped that an understanding of Israel's history from Israel's own perspective—its authenticity, in the words of von Rad— will be recovered.

"In short," states Schneiders, "mainstream biblical scholarship has been guided by its espousal of and fascination with a method, namely, historical criticism, rather than by a developed hermeneutical theory. It has not raised the ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions whose answers are integral to any such theory."[19] *As such, the present study is concerned more with hermeneutics than with biblical studies, strictly speaking.* Nevertheless, it is hoped the perspective offered here will contribute to ongoing synchronic studies of the Pentateuch.

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[17] Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), 1:68.

[18] Mark I. Wallace, introduction to *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, by Paul Ricoeur, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 4-5.

[19] Schneiders, 23.

In keeping with the tenets of philosophical hermeneutics, the reader of the present study should understand the background and outlook of its author. First, before pursuing theological education, his education and professional experience has been in the field of graphic design. Thus, he has sought to understand his burgeoning theological interests in light of his creative background. The present project is one such attempt at integrating these two life pursuits. In this, the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, whose work throughout his career has been preoccupied with creativity and imagination, is particularly well-suited.[20] Just as the phenomenon of creativity is integral to Ricoeur's hermeneutics, so too is the role of the productive imagination.[21] "Indeed," states James Fodor, "imagination constitutes a key feature of his hermeneutics, with profound consequences for his understanding of reference and, concomitantly, his notions of world and truth."[22]

Second, the author of the present study writes as a Christian of the Protestant tradition. His interest in hermeneutics is born of an observable disconnect between the content of biblical scholarship and the visible life of the church (i.e., the preaching of the clergy and the understanding of the laity). Therefore, through such a hermeneutical study, he hopes to model an approach that might help to bridge this discernable gap between the academy and the church.

In summary, the following thesis compares two readings of Numbers 22-24, the book of Balaam: one historical-critical (the *world behind the text*), and the other literary-imaginative (the *world of the text*). While a *world behind the text* reading

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[20] James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 123. Not to mention his work in metaphor and symbol, stock-in-trade for the graphic designer.

[21] Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 183.

[22] Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 189.

provides, in the words of von Rad, an "an entirely new picture of Israel, her life, and her religious ideas," it lacks in its ability to address fundamental questions of existence.[23] Thus, concerning methodology, the thesis seeks to answer: How might the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur help to mitigate the ongoing tension between history and theology, thus revealing the *world of the text* (or, in the words of von Rad, recover its authenticity) of Numbers 22-24? Concerning content, it seeks to answer: How might a *world of the text* reading of Numbers 22-24 uncover a possible meaning for ancient Israel? This is an existential meaning, in which past traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present—i.e., myth shaping identity.

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[23] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:417.

PART ONE: THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT

The world behind the text includes everything that cooperates to produce the text, that is, the process of text production (the history of composition) and the subject matter of the text as it took place in the past.[1]

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[1] Schneiders, 167.

CHAPTER 1

NUMBERS 22-24 IN HISTORICAL-CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP:

A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

Old Testament study, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was dominated by

the historical concerns of the previous century. States Walter Brueggemann,

"Nineteenth-century scholarship, in almost every intellectual discipline, had come to

regard historical issues as primary; not surprisingly, Old Testament study was at the

time largely an historical enterprise, asking not only 'What happened?' but 'When

was it written?' The governing assumption was that historical context would

decisively illuminate the intent of the text."[2] With the publication of Julius

Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, a general agreement had

emerged concerning the formation of the Pentateuch.[3] According to John Barton,

three aspects of Wellhausen's work were programmatic for twentieth-century Old

Testament scholarship: (1) the identifying of Pentateuchal sources (and, by

extension, applying source criticism to other biblical corpora), (2) employing those

sources to discover the "life, thought, and religion of Israel in different periods," and

(3) an emphasis on the prophets.[4] From these, Barton delineates three assumptions.

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[2] Walter Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies: A Quick Survey," *Word & World* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 62.

[3] Brueggemann is referring to Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885). Originally published in German in 1878.

[4] John Barton, "Biblical Scholarship on the European Continent and in the United Kingdom and Ireland," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament the History of Its Interpretation: From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)*, vol. 3/2, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 304-5.

First, seeking to write a history of Israel, the historical method was a suitable approach for Old Testament study: "To explain the Old Testament was to explain it historically."[5] Second, the diachronic approach—allowing the uncovering of a "rich variety of religious standpoints…in all their diversity" from source layers—was preferable to one synchronic.[6] And finally, it was important to work with an accurate biblical text.[7]

Seeking a more primitive layer yet, the German scholar Hermann Gunkel posited that oral traditions must lie behind Wellhausen's sources. The search for these oral tales developed into the discipline of form criticism (in English), an approach Gunkel applied to his own area of study: the Pentateuch and the Psalms.[8] By the mid-twentieth century, this search for underlying oral traditions developed into tradition history or traditio-historical criticism. "Tradition history supposes that it is possible to get behind the finished text and to trace the stages by which it developed both orally and in written form: it is thus a refinement of both source and form criticism," states Barton.[9] Two prominent advocates of this approach were Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad, both of whom worked on the Pentateuch.[10]

Underlying both the J and E source, Noth argued for *Grundschrift*, or G, that was common to both. "What G showed," states Barton, "was that the stories of early Israel had developed over a long period, just as Gunkel had argued, and that it was

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[5] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 305.

[6] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 306.

[7] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 306.

[8] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 307-8.

[9] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 308.

[10] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 308.

possible to reconstruct ever earlier stages in their development."[11] For his part, von Rad argued that Deuteronomy 26:5-11 formed the original core, or "cultic credo," of the Pentateuch. Lacking any mention of law-giving, this cultic creed suggested that the original Pentateuchal core was solely *Heilsgeschichte* narrative (contrary to more recent scholarship that views it as a late Deuteronomistic summary).[12]

Turning to Jewish biblical scholarship, S. David Sperling considers three aspects of twentieth-century Jewish scholarship. First, he points to the "Jewish school" of scholars, those who studied or taught at rabbinical seminaries—Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and Hebrew Union College (HUC)—between the 1930s and mid-1970s.[13] Having been exposed to the historical method and philology, many of these scholars studied in Near / Middle Eastern departments, writing only indirectly on the Bible.[14] Second, he notes that the establishment of the state of Israel (1948) fostered cross-cultural exchange between American and Israeli scholars.[15] "Jewish Bible scholars on both sides of the globe emphasized the importance of interpreting difficult biblical Hebrew texts in the light of other (ancient) languages…and of interpreting biblical institutions, laws and narratives in light of 'extra-biblical parallels,'" he states.[16] Finally, Sperling observes the rise of Torah-criticism, as exemplified by the five Jewish scholars featured in the Anchor Bible, as

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[11] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 308.

[12] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 308-9.

[13] S. David Sperling, "Major Developments in Jewish Biblical Scholarship," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament the History of Its Interpretation: From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)*, vol. 3/2, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 381.

[14] Sperling, 381.

[15] Sperling, 381.

[16] Sperling, 381-82.

indicative of this period. "Milgrom and Levine, in contrast to the gentile pioneers of Pentateuchal criticism, have shown real appreciation and understanding of the ancient Israelite cult," states Sperling.[17]

The present chapter examines the historical-critical approach to Numbers 22-24 via a representative sample of three twentieth-century scholars. These scholars—George Buchanan Gray, Martin Noth, and Baruch Levine—exemplify the contours of twentieth-century historical-critical interpretation. Gray's contribution from the ICC commentary series offers a traditional Wellhausian perspective from the turn of the previous century. The scholarship of Noth, in line with his geographical and historical interests, offers fresh insights from the mid-twentieth century. And finally, the Jewish scholar Levine, incorporating the discovery of the Deir 'Alla texts, offers a wholly original interpretation from the last decade of the twentieth century. For each scholar, their position will be examined in two phases: first, their reconstruction of the text and interpretation of the book of Balaam will be reviewed; and second, their findings regarding its *Sitz im Leben* will be discussed, along with critical analysis. Further, four additional readings of the book of Balaam will be considered: a recent (contemporary with Levine) diachronic analysis by John Greene, and three literary analyses by David Marcus, Mary Douglas, and Carolyn Sharp. Each will be reviewed briefly, along with accompanying critical analysis. Each, in their own way, offers suggestive new insights into the *Sitz im Leben* of Numbers 22-24.

Before proceeding, it will be beneficial first to offer a brief summary of the component parts of the book of Balaam. In brief, chapter 22 contains king Balak's two embassies to Balaam, requesting his presence in Moab to curse Israel. These two

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[17] Sperling, 382.

embassies include Balaam's two overnight encounters with YHWH. A third encounter with the angel of YHWH rounds out chapter 22—the familiar episode of Balaam and his ass. The next two chapters contain Balaam's oracles—a pair each in chapters 23 and 24. In addition, chapter 24 ends with three brief obscure oracles.

GEORGE BUCHANAN GRAY (1865-1922)

The investigation begins with the work of George Buchanan Gray (1865-1922), the influential British scholar known for his work in Semitic languages. Trained and appointed at Oxford, he was promoted professor of Hebrew and exegesis of the Old Testament at Mansfield College in 1900.[18] His insightful Numbers International Critical Commentary (ICC), reflecting his textual and philological training and practice, remains influential to this day.[19]

Concerning the composition of the book of Numbers, Gray's perspective is traditionally Wellhausian, understanding it as a composite of JE and P^g.[20] According to his estimation, less than 25 percent of Numbers is JE, the majority being P.[21]

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[18] G. R. Driver, "Gray, George Buchanan (1865–1922)," rev. J. W. Rogerson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33526.

[19] Baruch Levine, the final scholar to be presented here, states, "Gray's commentary has been of the greatest assistance because he possessed a fine philological sense and was a student of biblical poetry (Gray 1913).…Notwithstanding the extensive lapse of time since Gray's commentary appeared, I know of no other modern critical commentary on Numbers that has been as instructive as his." Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20,* Anchor Bible 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 88.

[20] The Judean source J is generally attributed to the 9th century, while the Northern source E is attributed to the 8th century. The combined JE source is thought to originate from the end of the 7th century. The Priestly source P is generally attributed to ca. 500 B.C. George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903, 1912, 1956), xxx-xxxi. Specifically, "P^g denotes the fundamental work, the priestly history of sacred institutions," states Gray. "P^g is the work of a single writer. P^g was written about 500 B.C." Gray, xxxiii-xxxiv.

[21] Gray, xxxiii.

Concerning the book of Balaam in particular, Numbers 22-24, Gray understands it to be composed primarily from the J and E sources. Whereas chapter 22 is its most variegated chapter, chapter 23 appears to be largely E, while chapter 24, J.[22] "The date of the narratives," states Gray, "is the date of the sources (J and E) to which they have been traced, *i.e.* the 9th? or 8th? century B.C."[23] The dating of the oracles, Gray reckons, is inconclusive; they may be attributed to the sources in which they are embedded, or they may be independent—ancient or late.[24] Nevertheless, he favors their antiquity due to (1) their air of national confidence and prosperity, and (2) their connection to "the blessing of Jacob" (Gen 49) and "the blessing of Moses" (Deut 33).[25]

Source Analysis of the Book of Balaam

Following Wellhausen, Gray's distinction of sources begins with the names of God: YHWH (J) and Elohim (E). Analysis of doublets and repeating phrases further delineates the text into separate sources.[26] While in general he attributes Numbers 22 to E, significant portions of the chapter are assigned to J. These include Balak's first embassy to Balaam (22:5-7), a repeated phrase (22:11), Balaam's response to the second embassy (22:17-18), and the familiar ass incident (22:22-35)—an older

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[22] Gray, 313.

[23] Gray, 313.

[24] Gray, 313-14.

[25] Gray, 313-14.

[26] In particular, Gray cites the following as evidence for at least two sources: "(1) the doublet in 22:3a and 3b; (2) the irrelevance of v. 4b after v. 2; (3) the inconsistency of the two definitions of Balaam's home in v. 5, one clause placing it on the Euphrates, the other in 'the land of the children of Ammon' (so read with the LXX); and (4) the parallelism and inconsistency of v. 22-35 with much of what precedes." Gray, 309.

tradition likely incorporated by J. The mixed nature of Numbers 22:36-40 is attributed to editorializing, with verses 37-39 designated as J. Concerning chapters 23 and 24, Gray surmises 23:25 functions as the original conclusion to the E narrative, while 24:1, implying Balaam's first sight of Israel, appears unconnected to the previous chapter.[27] Thus, chapter 23 is largely E, while chapter 24, J. Gray concludes, "Most writers, therefore, are now agreed that the present narrative is a compilation from the two sources J and E."[28]

This division of sources yields two versions of the Balaam narrative. According to J, the earlier account, king Balak sends one embassy to Balaam, after which Balaam replies that he cannot go beyond the command of YHWH (no overnight counsel is sought, but a prohibition is implied). Without consulting YHWH, Balaam sets out in the familiar ass incident, an older tradition subsumed by J.[29] This is Balaam's sole encounter with (the angel of) YHWH, functioning finally as a permission to go. Nevertheless, Gray offers an alternative reading of J. Lacking the original reply of the angel of YHWH (22:35 appears to be an editorial repetition by E), it is suggested that the angel of YHWH urges Balaam to return home.[30] Thus, 22:37 functions not as Balak's welcoming of Balaam to Moab, but as the king's personal embassy to fetch Balaam from his home: "Did I not send unto thee to call

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[27] Gray, 309.

[28] Gray, 309. By "most writers," Gray is referring to William E. Addis, Benjamin Wisner Bacon, C. H. Cornill, August Dillmann, S. R. Driver, G. F. Moore, Rudolf Kittel, and Julius Wellhausen.

[29] Gray, 334. In this regard, the most important point is "(4) the parallelism and inconsistency of v. 22-35 with much of what precedes." Specifically, Gray is referring to the pressure point between v. 20 and v. 22, where God at first gives Balaam permission to go, but then is angry because he went (*without having received Yahweh's permission*: for that is the obvious meaning of Yahweh's anger"). Gray, 309.

[30] Gray, 336.

thee? Why didst thou not come to me? Am I really unable to honour thee?"
(22:37).[31] This alternative reading of J then offers two embassies to Balaam—the
second carried out by the king himself—in accord with the later E account. As Gray
reconstructs J's alternative version of the story: "Balaam sent Balak's messengers
back with the evasive answer of v. 18 (cf. 24:12) … started himself, but went home
after meeting the angel of Yahweh (v. 34) … (and then, after having finally)
received permission from Yahweh, when Balak himself came … return(ed) with
him."[32] Thus, in this alternative J account, Balaam first receives two prohibitions
from going, before receiving a final permission to go.

The later account, from the northern E source, follows more closely the
combined JE version: Balaam receives two embassies from Balak, resulting in two
overnight encounters with YHWH—the first a prohibition, the second a permission
to go. If chapter 23 largely is attributed to E (minus the editorializing of 23:26-34:2)
and chapter 24 to J (minus the addendum of 24:18-24; v. 25 is E according to Gray),
then, if one chooses the alternative reading of J, each version of the story contains
two embassies from Balak, and two oracles by Balaam. The combined JE version of
the story contains Balak's two embassies, Balaam's three encounters with YHWH
(two overnight encounters, one with the angel of YHWH), and Balaam's various
(three, four, or seven, depending on how they are numbered) oracles.

Whether examining the J account, the E account, or the combined JE
document, the basic outline is the same: the embassies and the encounters climax in

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[31] Gray, 336. This translation of the verse is given in Gray, 338.

[32] Gray, 338.

the oracles. By any reckoning, the poetic oracles appear to be the *raison d'être* of the book of Balaam.

The Yahwist's Account of Balaam (J)

Having mapped Gray's division of the book of Balaam into its two component sources, it is possible now to examine more closely his treatment of the text according to these two sources.

The Yahwist's account begins with Moab's presumed fear of Israel (22:5), the precondition of the book of Balaam. Citing Numbers 21, Gray understands this fear as the result of Israel's success over the Amorites and the occupation of their territory (21:21-24 E, or 21:25 J).[33] "This feature in the story may reflect actual historical circumstances. It is in no way improbable," states Gray.[34] According to J, an embassy with reward is sent to Balaam urging him to return with them to curse the king's enemies (22:5-7). Here Gray notes the close affinity between "Balaam son of Beor" (22:5), and "Bela son of Beor," the king of Edom in Genesis 36:32; their identification, he states, is "highly probable."[35] "Balaam played this part (as the one who cursed and blessed) in Hebrew traditions at least as early as the 9th century B.C. (J)," states Gray.[36] According to J, Balaam is an Ammonite (22:5), living close enough for king Balak to pay him a personal visit (in J's alternative account). Based

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[33] Gray, 322.

[34] Gray, 322.

[35] Gray, 324. However, Gray also states, "The connection between the historical king of Edom of say the 12th or 11th century and this traditional figure of the 9th century can be only a matter of speculation." Gray, 315.

[36] Gray, 315.

on Balaam's mode of travel (donkey), and the mention of "Ammon" in v. 5—a mere two to three days' journey away—Gray concludes Balaam lived closer to Moab than the Euphrates.[37] In J, Balaam always refuses Balak's promised rewards.[38]

Echoes from the exodus narrative are present. Israel, as viewed from the perspective of Moab, has come out of Egypt and, like a plague, is likened to locusts covering the face of the earth (22:5; the allusion repeated in 22:11). Whereas Balak reflects the stance of Pharaoh (22:6), unable to control this "vast horde" (22:4), the figure Balaam recalls Moses as YHWH's spokesman. In response to the embassy, Balaam replies that he cannot go beyond the command of YHWH his God, an implied prohibition from returning with the officials (22:17-18). The fees for divination the embassy brings, according to Gray, are common practice in the ancient world, and so should not unduly influence one's opinion of Balaam's character.[39]

According to J, Balaam's next appearance is en route to the king, prompting God's fierce anger for, presumably, not consulting him first.[40] "This is clearly not the original sequel to v. 20f., in which God expressly directs Balaam to go," states Gray.[41] The tale of the ass (22:22-35), a piece of folklore incorporated by J, ensues, portraying Balaam's sole encounter with (the angel of) YHWH.[42] The angel of

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[37] Gray, 333.

[38] Gray, 318.

[39] Gray, 329.

[40] States Gray, "Balaam, in J's narrative, we must suppose, after warning Balak's messengers that he cannot curse or bless except as Yahweh permits (22:18), sets out without consulting Yahweh on the mere question of going or not." Gray, 332.

[41] Gray, 332.

[42] Gray, 334.

YHWH, who Gray understands as "a temporary appearance of Yahweh in human form," gives fright to Balaam's ass, impeding Balaam's progress.[43] After the third such encounter, Balaam unleashes his fierce anger upon the ass, which prompts a response in discernable language. The narrative irony is that YHWH opens the ass's mouth (22:28), yet not Balaam's, YHWH's supposed spokesman. This irony is embedded in the text itself, for as Gray notes, "The same phrase ("And Yahweh opened the mouth of") is used of Yahweh's enabling a prophet to deliver his message, Ezek 3:27; 33:22 (cf. Ps 51:17)."[44] The tale ends with YHWH giving Balaam permission to go. However, in J's alternative account, after his encounter with the angel of YHWH, Balaam returns home. Following this, the king himself pays Balaam a visit urging him to return with him to Moab (22:37-39). The final portion of chapter 22, verses 36-40, acts as an editorial transition by JE into the oracles of E (chapter 23). This editorializing might have suppressed J's alternative account.[45]

Balaam's J oracles follow in chapter 24, but not before the editorializing work of JE in 23:26-24:2. It is here Gray notes the change in source, for in 24:1 the referent is unclear. The fact that "(Balaam) did not resort to divination as at other times" (24:1) cannot refer to the previous oracles (in the JE account), for (1) he did not resort to divination in chapter 23, and (2) if this had been his usual custom, JE would have clarified that point earlier. If the former option, the JE editor must have suppressed this information in E, but if the latter option, Gray suspects 24:1 to be the

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[43] Gray, 333.

[44] Gray, 335.

[45] Gray, 337-39.

original sequel to 22:37 -39.[46] It can be implied, then, that in J Balaam's custom *was* to resort to divination—i.e., the "observation of omens or casting of lots"—to obtain his oracles (24:1, cf. 22:7).[47] Yet as Gray notes, not only does Balaam deliver his messages to Balak "overmastered, like a Hebrew chosen of Yahweh for any special task, by the Spirit of God," but he proves "incorruptible by Balak's proffered gifts."[48] The fact that Balaam speaks via the Spirit of God (24:2), unlike the oracles of chapter 23, is another indication of the change of sources.[49]

The oracles of J, vivid in their use of metaphorical language, are more corrupt than those of E. Unlike the oracles of chapter 23, which consist entirely of distichs, Balaam's first oracle in J (24:3-9) contains 9 distichs and 2 tristichs (4 and 8*cde*).[50] In contrast to E, the oracles begin by introducing Balaam as if for the first time (in the third person): "The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor" (24:3). Since the term *oracle* נאם in the Old Testament usually is used only with the genitive of the divine name (two rare exceptions are 2 Sam 23:1 and Ps 36:2), its use here in connection with Balaam's name is highly unusual. "The usage thus constitutes a remarkable dissimilarity between Balaam's poems and the discourses of the Hebrew prophets who very frequently employ the phrase *the oracle of Yahweh* or the like."[51] The description of Balaam, "the prophecy of one *whose eye sees clearly*" (24:3), is

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[46] Gray, 359.

[47] Gray, 318.

[48] Gray, 318.

[49] Gray, 360. This is a phenomenon, states Gray, not limited to the Hebrews (cf. Gen 41:38). Gray, 360.

[50] Gray, 360.

[51] Gray, 361.

left untranslated by Gray, for he understands the various options to be either intelligible yet unnatural ("who sees truly") or unsound philologically ("whose eye is closed/open"). He concludes, "It is hazardous to base on a phrase so uncertain as the present any speculation as to the manner in which a seer received his communications from God."[52] He likewise believes נפל translated as *fallen down*, as suspect, for he finds none of the interpretive options acceptable.[53]

As the oracle continues (24:5-6), Israel is compared to fertile land and flourishing trees, allusions to the promised land itself. "Israel, enjoying Yahweh's favour, is like a well-watered garden (Is 58:11)" states Gray, "when that favour is withdrawn the people are like a waterless garden (Is 1:30)."[54] Concerning the terms of comparison (the trees), Gray believes the two terms have been accidentally transposed, as "cedars do not grow beside water."[55] The next two lines, "Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water" (v. 7), considered obscure by Gray, can be variously translated. Based on the MT, they allude either to "the fertility of Israel's land…a figure of Israel's prosperity…(or) to Israel's posterity."[56] However, Gray believes the MT to be corrupt. Translating the second line as "His arm shall be upon many peoples" (or, "And his arm be on many nations"), he then finds its parallel in a re-translated first line, "Let the peoples tremble at his might." As he summarizes, "The emended text forms a good

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[52] Gray, 361.

[53] Gray, 362.

[54] Gray, 363.

[55] Gray, 363.

[56] Gray, 364.

introduction to lines *c*, *d*; first (*a, b*) the poet dwells on the fear inspired in other peoples by Israel's might, then on the renown of the Hebrew monarchy."[57]

However, this allusion to the monarchy is obscure. In the second half of verse 7, "Their king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be exalted," Gray dismisses "Agag" as a textual accident, labeling it as anachronistic. "Agag would be just possible if the poem were written during the reign of Agag, before the destruction of the 'Amalekite power by Saul (1 Sam 15); but 'Amalek in the days of Agag was scarcely so formidable a kingdom as to justify such an allusion."[58] He finds the variant "Gog" even less compelling, unless the poem is of a late Messianic composition.[59] Rounding out the oracle, reference again is made to the exodus (24:8), as God brings out one from Egypt having the strength of a wild ox. Gray notes the parallel in 23:22; for the last three lines, however, he understands the text to be emended, corrupt, or both.[60] Concerning the figure of the lion in verse 9a, Gray notes the parallel in 23:24 (along with its identical parallel in Gen 49:9b), while not commenting on the allusion to the Abrahamic blessing (24:9b; cf. Gen 12:2-3).[61]

Balak's reaction to this first oracle in J is fierce; just as God and Balaam's anger had burned חרה earlier in J (22:22 and 27, in the incorporated tale of the ass), so too does Balak's anger burn here (expressed in the "striking together" of his hands). When Balak releases Balaam from service, withholding his reward (24:11),

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[57] Gray, 365-66.

[58] Gray, 366.

[59] Gray, 366.

[60] Gray, 366.

[61] Gray merely states, "Perhaps [it is] a current saying in Israel." Nevertheless, he recognizes it as the climax of the blessing. Gray, 366.

Balaam replies with an oft-repeated phrase in J: he cannot go beyond the command of YHWH, but can say only what YHWH says (24:12-13). Before departing, however, Balaam offers a warning concerning what Israel will do to Moab "in days to come" (24:14). Gray defines this phrase, using a quotation from Driver, as "denoting the final period of the future so far as it falls within the range of the speaker's perspective."[62]

The second oracle in J begins like the first with an introductory formula (24:15b-16; cf. 24:3b-4). The only line distinct from the introduction of the previous oracle (24:16b) highlights Balaam's knowledge as coming from the Most High; i.e., it has been gained via prophetic, and not magical art.[63] Concerning the divine name, he continues, "'Elyon, which was a favourite one with some of the later writers, occurs elsewhere in the Pentateuch only in another song (Deut 32:8) and in Gen 14."[64] Following this, Balaam refers to a mysterious figure using only the third person pronoun, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near" (24:17a). Gray understands this third person pronoun to refer to Israel, these first two lines contrasting future Israel with present Israel. However, the subject of the third and fourth lines of this verse ("A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel," 24:17b) he understands to be a king, the metaphors referring to his historical emergence. The metaphor reverts back to Israel in the fifth and sixth lines (24:17c), describing her future actions towards Moab. Gray renders the final line as "And the 'skull' of all the sons of 'pride'" (an emendation based on Jer 48:45; cf. Isa 16:6,

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[62] S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 74, quoted in Gray, 368.

[63] Gray, 368-69.

[64] Gray, 369.

25:11, Zeph 2:10).[65] Returning to the scepter and star metaphors, Gray suggests, "Line *d* might easily be interpreted of the monarchy as a permanent institution (cf. Gen 49:10, and above, v. 7), but *the star* of line *c* rather suggests a specific individual."[66] He accepts David may fit this profile if v. 18 is original, "then David, as conqueror of both Moab and Edom (2 Sam 8:13f., 1 Kings 11:15f.), would alone seem to satisfy the reference."[67]

Nonetheless, Gray understands 24:18-19 as falling outside Balaam's fourth oracle. It is the first, therefore, of the brief prophecies directed towards various peoples, incorporated into chapter 24 separate from J. "The general sense of the verse is: the Edomites (*Seir* as parallel, cf. Judg 5:4), the enemies of Israel, will become the subjects of the Israelites, while the latter pursue their victorious career."[68] The subjects of the two transitive verbs as indefinite, Gray understands v. 19 as Messianic. "The verse appears to be a general expression of such Messianic hope as is met with especially in the later prophecies: it contemplates the world-wide dominion of Israel and the violent destruction of all who oppose it (cf. e.g. Mic 5:8, Isa 60, especially v. 12, Zech 12:6)."[69]

Although the final three obscure oracles are challenging, Gray nevertheless offers his insights. Since most modern scholars recognize these as incongruent with

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[65] Gray, 369-70.

[66] Gray, 370.

[67] Gray, 370.

[68] Gray, 372.

[69] Gray, 372.

the preceding oracles, their interpretation likewise must reflect their differing origin. As Gray states:

> Unfortunately their brevity, combined with several strange and suspicious features in the text, renders anything approaching certainty in the interpretation out of the question. The present text is in some places unintelligible. Some alternatives might be ruled out if the date could be independently established, but it cannot.[70]

In the first (24:20), the Amalekites are described as "first among the nations," which Gray takes to mean *most powerful* of the nations: "such 'Amalek never was nor, so far as is known, was it ever, while it existed, so accounted; but later legendary or fictitious narratives of ancient Arabic authors described the 'Amalekites as a mighty race."[71] The second line likewise is challenging, for although the Chronicler states Amalek's destruction under Hezekiah (1 Chr 4:42f.), in later passages *Amalek* was used of Israel's contemporary enemies (Ps 83:7). Gray concludes the oracle may be a prophecy of Amalek's destruction written before the time of Saul (with Amalek still powerful), from the time of Saul onwards (with Amalek in decline), or in hindsight, after Amalek's destruction (cf. Exod 17:14).[72]

In the second of the three oracles (24:21-22), the designation *Kenites* has a range of referents, from a people on good terms with Israel (1 Sam 27:10, 30:29; Judg 1:16, 5:24), to a branch of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:6), to a people to be dispossessed from Canaan (Gen 15:19f.).[73] Of this second oracle, Gray finds the first two lines relatively straightforward, the third somewhat suspicious, but concludes

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[70] Gray, 373.

[71] Gray, 374.

[72] Gray, 374-75.

[73] Gray does not state a preference. The national name *Kain* may also have some affinities with Cain, Adam's son. Gray, 375.

that out of the fourth line "no reasonable meaning has ever yet been legitimately extracted."[74]

The final oracle (24:23-24) likewise is obscure, with Gray concluding, "there is little probability that any interpretation of the text as it stands, or as it has been variously emended, reaches the original meaning."[75] He believes the present text cannot be earlier than the Greek period, while others believe the emended text points to the Assyrian (Cheyne) or Mosaic (Hommel) periods.[76] While this final oracle is generally regarded as a prophecy against Assyria, its individual components make that translation difficult. While the *Kittim* appears originally to refer to the inhabitants of Cyprus, it is noted that Jeremiah (2:10) and Ezekiel (27:6) use the designation to refer to Western maritime nations.[77] In later practice the term was used to designate contemporary western threats, such as the Romans (Dan 11:30) or the Greeks (1 Macc 1:1, 8:5). Interestingly, both Daniel 11:30 and 1 Maccabees 1:1 "appear to allude to the present poem, and thus show how it was understood in the 2nd century B.C."[78] Thus, the oracle foretells the overthrow of the Assyrian empire by the Kittim; an event, unfortunately, for which there is no record. One interpretation combines its future and historical referents, seeing it as alluding to the overthrow of the Persian empire (Ashshur; cf. Ezra 6:22) by Alexander the Great (cf.

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[74] Gray, 375. Concerning this fourth line, he sums, "The text must be more or less corrupt; but the corruptions are ancient, for the Versions indicate no real variations." Gray, 376.

[75] Gray, 377.

[76] Gray, 377.

[77] Gray, 378.

[78] Gray, 378.

1 Macc 1:1).[79] It is highly unlikely, Gray believes, that *'Eber* refers to *the Hebrews*; instead, the two terms of v. 24 (Asshur and Eber) must be closely aligned.[80]

The Elohist's Account of Balaam (E)

The Elohist's account, roughly a century later, matches more closely the final JE document: Balaam receives two embassies from king Balak, resulting in his two encounters with YHWH (chapter 22), culminating in his two oracles (chapter 23). Beginning in 22:2 (the first verse of the chapter is attributed to P), the setting again is Moab's presumed fear of Israel due to her success over the Amorites.[81] Concerning king Balak, nothing is known of him outside the biblical text.[82] The term *Amorites* refers to Sihon and his people (21:21, 25ff., 31ff.), not 'Og and his people (21:33-35; cf. Deut 3:1-3), which "appear to be later than the main Deuteronomic history."[83] The third verse contains a doublet indicating two sources; whereas the subject *Moab* is repeated, the object in the second clause, where a pronoun would be expected, uses a new term ("the people of Israel").[84] Gray interprets Moab's fear in verse 4 ("This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field") as the fear of her approach, and not as the threat of conquest. "Moab, very largely a pastoral people (2 Kings 3:4), fears that the Israelite hordes

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[79] Gray, 379.

[80] Gray, 379.

[81] Gray, 322. Regarding 22:1, Gray states, "It belongs to the itinerary which was broken off at 21:11 by the introduction of matter from another source." Gray, 306.

[82] Apart from Balaam, he is mentioned in Judges 11:25. Gray, 322.

[83] Gray, 322.

[84] Gray, 323.

will devour all the pasturage around them," states Gray.[85] The *elders of Midian* appears to be editorial.[86] The one E fragment in verse 5 relocates Balaam to "Pethor, which is near the River," which Gray identifies as "Pitru" on the river Sājūr, near its junction with the Euphrates—a twenty-day journey to Moab. Thus, he concludes, the four journeys of the story require about three months.[87]

In the E source, the first embassy appears to have been redacted in favor of J's account. Nevertheless, Balaam's subsequent encounter with YHWH is retained in verses 8-14 (minus J's repeated phrase of verse 11). Unfortunately, Gray comments little on this first encounter, save for the fact that, in E, such encounters take place at night.[88] Balaam is not given permission to go, and tells the embassy as such (22:12-14). In the second encounter (22:15-21), repeating elements from the first (save for a larger, more honorable embassy), Balaam is given permission to go. Gray defends Balaam's character, believing commentators have unduly maligned his intentions based on the arrival of the second delegation. Instead, he believes this verse speaks more of Balak's attitude than of Balaam's motivations, pure or base.[89] In E, in both encounters (22:9, 20), God opens the conversation, not Balaam.[90] Gray assigns verse 21, the account of Balaam saddling his ass, to E, yet comments that camels were

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[85] Gray, 323. Gray notes, however, that in verse 2, also attributed to E, the threat *is* conquest. Gray, 323.

[86] Gray, 323.

[87] Gray, 325-26.

[88] Gray, 329-30.

[89] Gray, 330-31.

[90] Gray, 331.

more regularly used for long journeys, which would seem better to fit Balaam's home near the Euphrates in E (22:5).[91]

"And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people" (22:41). Thus begins E's account of Balaam's oracles. Concerning Bamoth-baal, Gray notes that "precise and certain identification" of this and the other sacrificial sites in chapters 23-24 has not been made, although all probably were ancient shrines or sanctuaries north of the Arnon.[92] Further, he understands these events as "moving in the realm of poetry, not of fact."[93] Gray's reconstruction of verses 2-5, eliminating textual emendations, reads: "[2]And Balak did as Balaam had said unto him, and offered a bullock and a ram on each altar. [3]And he said to him, I have arranged the seven altars, and offered a bullock and a ram on each altar. And Balaam said to Balak, Stand here by thy burnt-offerings and let me go; perhaps God will fall in with me, and whatsoever he shows me I will tell thee. And he went away…[4]and God fell in with Balaam, [5]and put a word in his mouth."[94]

The first oracle begins (23:7) as Balaam takes up his "discourse" מָשָׁל, a term suggesting poetry with a "declaratory, sententious, or didactic character," similar to that of later Hebrew (e.g., the Book of Proverbs).[95] As Gray clarifies, "The term is never used of the ordinary discourse of the Hebrew prophets, or of ordinary Hebrew

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[91] Gray, 332.

[92] Gray, 340.

[93] Gray, 341.

[94] Gray, 343-44.

[95] Gray, 345.

poetry."[96] And yet, Gray compares Balaam to Michaiah the son of Imlah (1 Kings 22:8ff.), the "conspicuously true Hebrew prophet (who) waits for God to speak, and…repeats what Yahweh says, whether it be pleasant or unpleasant."[97] The "Aram" of Balaam's origin appears to be the region of the Euphrates near Damascus (cf. Hos 12:13), its usage not late, perhaps early.[98] The "eastern mountains," according to Gray, may be "the high ranges of the Syrian desert, visible on the far southern and western horizons from above the lower courses of the Sajur on which the Pethor lay."[99] Gray notes that the parallelism of "Jacob" and "Israel," common to all four poems, is characteristic only of Isaiah 40-55 (17 times) and Micah 1-3 (4 times).[100] As Balaam sees the blessedness of Israel (22:8), he understands that he cannot curse, but instead must bless.[101] A people "not counting itself among the nations" (23:9) can be understood as (1) a people uniquely prosperous and fortunate, (2) a people forming a distinctive state, (3) a people distinguished by its peculiar religion, or (4) Israel's unique position in the world, a result of her unique relation to Yahweh (cf. Exod 19:5 [JE], which is probably a later passage). Gray's preference is the first option.[102] The "dust of Jacob" (23:10) refers to the multitude of his descendents (cf. Gen 13:16; 28:14), its parallel, Gray understands, to be "the myriads

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[96] Gray, 345.

[97] Gray, 318.

[98] Gray, 346.

[99] Gray, 346.

[100] Gray, 346.

[101] Gray, 346.

[102] Gray, 347.

of Israel" (and not her "fourth part").[103] Balaam wishes to die the peaceful death of a

national hero, and to partake in a future as prosperous as Israel's.[104]

In response to Balaam's blessing, king Balak is incensed. Noting the force of

the infinitive absolute (23:11), Gray's translation reads: "And lo! thou hast done

nothing but bless!"[105] Balaam replies that he must speak what YHWH puts in his

mouth (23:12). Balak takes Balaam to another location from which presumably he

can see more of Israel (23:13). States Gray, clarifying the change of location and

repeated attempt:

> Balak's first attempt to obtain a curse from Balaam, like his first attempt to
> get Balaam to come, had been unsuccessful; but he hoped that as Balaam's
> God had changed His mind before, so He might again. Balak's persistence is
> entirely explicable on the analogy of the widely prevalent custom of
> persisting, when oracular replies or omens were unfavourable, till they
> became favourable.[106]

Gray believes from this second location Balaam could see all of Israel, the phrase,

"You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all" (23:13) having

been added by a later hand.[107] The location of the second site, the field of Zophim

(*the watchmen*) on the top of Pisgah (23:14), likewise is uncertain.[108]

Balaam's second oracle, longer than the first (probably due, at least in part, to

interpolation), begins as Balaam again takes up his "discourse" (23:18).[109] He

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[103] Gray, 347.

[104] Gray, 347-48.

[105] Gray, 349.

[106] Gray, 349. As Gray continues, "This view of the inconstancy of God's purpose is not shared by the Hebrew writer, nor attributed by him to Balaam (v. 19). Balak, on the other hand, is led on by it to his own destruction." Gray, 349.

[107] Gray, 349-50.

[108] Gray, 350.

[109] The second oracle consists of 22 lines, or 11 distichs. Gray, 350.

returns to the theme of blessedness: Israel is blessed because God has declared her blessed; God's promise is indeed fact (23:19).[110] Contrary to Balak's wishes, the blessedness of Israel cannot be altered; Balaam's previous blessing cannot be revoked (23:20). Balaam sees neither misfortune nor trouble in Israel; she is secure, saved from disaster by YHWH's glory (23:21).[111] Israel is blessed because of her relationship to her God and king YHWH, primarily exhibited in the Exodus (23:22), which the participle מוֹצִיא renders as still in progress up until entrance into Canaan.[112] Here Gray understands clause *a* as subject and clause *b* as predicate, while the participial clause, referring to the Exodus as past, is attributive to *God,* rendering the verse: "In consequence of God's presence, of what He does for them, therefore, Israel is as irresistible as the wild ox."[113] The proof of YHWH's presence—the reason for the oracle, if the verse is original—is Israel's abstention from magic and omens to discover future or secret things (23:23).[114] Nevertheless, Gray regards verse 23 as an interpolation: "Then v. 23a may be a prose commentator's erroneous explanation of v. 21a (Wellhausen), or, less probably, inserted in anticipation of 24:1 (Dillmann)."[115] Regarding the image of the lion (23:24), Gray only mentions the metaphor's reappearance (in slightly different form)

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[110] As Gray alternatively translates verse 19: *shall he, having promised, not accomplish?—Son of man.* Additionally, Gray notes that this is "the only instance earlier than Ezekiel (who uses it some 90 times) of בן אדם in the singular." Gray, 351-52.

[111] Gray argues that Balaam is the subject of the verbs in 23:21a, not YHWH. Gray, 352-53.

[112] Gray understands—based upon its parallel and continued reference in v. 22—*the king* not to be Israel's human king, but YHWH (cf. Deut 33:5). Gray, 353-54.

[113] Gray, 354.

[114] Gray, 351, 355.

[115] Gray, 357.

in 24:8b-9, and similar metaphors in Gen 49:9, 27 and Deut 33:20.[116] In verse 25, the oracles in E draw to a close: "And Balak said to Balaam, 'Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.'" The Elohist's account concludes in chapter 24; as Gray states, "All that needs to be added is a statement that Balaam departed; this may be found in 24:25 transferred to its present position of necessity by the compiler of the composite story."[117]

It should be mentioned that 23:26-24:2, according to Gray, is the editorializing work of JE: a crafted introduction for the third oracle in the composite story. He adds that in v. 28, *Pisgah* was the original third location, replaced later by *Peor* when J and E came together. "In this case both J and E make the Pisgah the scene of one of the utterances of Balaam, E adding the precise spot."[118]

Sitz im Leben of the Book of Balaam

According to Gray, how do both the Yahwist (J) and the Elohist (E) reveal the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel through the book of Balaam?

As would be expected, YHWH plays a more central role in the account by the southern Yahwist of the ninth century. Only here does Balaam reference YHWH *his* God (22:18). While Balaam resembles a true Hebrew prophet in both J and E, in the former the Spirit of God plays a more prominent role; YHWH himself opens the eyes and mouth of man and beast alike.[119] This continues in the oracles of chapter 24, in which Balaam is characterized as the ecstatic prophet.

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[116] Gray, 357.

[117] Gray, 358.

[118] Gray, 358.

[119] Gray, 318.

In the oracles, although allusions to the monarchy are present, Gray appears reluctant to suggest particular references to Saul and David (24:7b and 24:17, respectively). More prominent in J are allusions to the Exodus; king Balak cannot control this vast horde that has come out of Egypt. If Balak recalls Pharaoh, then Balaam as spokesman of YHWH represents Moses. However, Gray suggests that the central figures of the book of Balaam are not Balak and Balaam, but Moab and Israel. As such, YHWH, as Israel's true king, protects Israel from the machinations of her foes, specifically that of Moab. This very well could reference Moab's subjugation under Omri (*Mesha Stele*), her vassalage under Ahab (2 Kings 3:4-5), her destruction under kings Joram and Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 3:6-7; 2 Chr 20:1f.), or, perhaps, her final subjugation under Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25).[120] However, Gray is more concerned with the motives of the author/redactor—portraying YHWH's empowerment of Israel, and the ruin of those who oppose his purposes—than he is with actual history.

The account by the northern Elohist, roughly a century later, aligns more closely with the final redacted form JE. Based upon 22:4, Gray believes Moab of the eighth-century is more concerned with the loss of her pastureland than she is with her vassalage under Israel.[121] Concerning Balaam in particular, here he is described as "an Aramæan whose home (is) in the region of the Euphrates."[122] This greater distance from Moab may have been the reason J's alternative account (perhaps

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[120] Gray, 370, 323.

[121] Gray, 323.

[122] Gray, 315.

original) was modified, with 22:37 now recounting Balak's reception of Balaam in Moab.[123]

The Elohist's oracles reveal the relationship between Israel and Moab as recorded in the waning years of the divided kingdom. In E, while Balaam still speaks on behalf of YHWH, the oracles of chapter 23 lack the ecstatic resonances of the Yahwist. While not specific to the monarchy or military strength, these oracles nevertheless portray the prosperity and blessedness of Israel in contradistinction to her neighbors, specifically that of Moab. Israel is blessed because of her relationship to YHWH; God has declared her blessed, God's promise is, indeed, fact.[124]

Just as in the individual sources, the protagonists in the final redacted form of the book of Balaam are Moab and Israel, with Moab's presumed fear and hostility portrayed in contradistinction to Israel/Judah's prosperity and self-confidence.[125] Whether in the individual sources or in the combined JE document, the motive of the story is the same, portraying (1) YHWH's good purposes to defend his people, and (2) the doom of those who oppose those purposes.[126] This dual motive mirrors that of the seventh century prophet Micah, who likewise enjoined Israel to rest in YHWH's provision and faithfulness (Mic 6:4ff).[127] Despite the awkward juxtaposition in bringing together the two sources (in particular, 22:22, the opening of the ass incident), Gray surmises the editor has done so—retaining the

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[123] Gray, 337.

[124] Gray, 351-52.

[125] Gray, 315.

[126] Gray, 315-16.

[127] Gray, 316.

distinctiveness of each source—in order to heighten this motive.[128] "Not once nor twice only, but thrice in this final form of the story does Balak persist in his attempt to get Israel cursed; and at each attempt his own doom approaches nearer: for, as the editor has arranged them, the poems rise to a climax," states Gray.[129]

Critical Analysis of Gray

As has been acknowledged in the intervening scholarship, since the book of Balaam functions as an independent unit apart from the book of Numbers, indeed the Pentateuch as a whole, few benefits may be gleaned by applying a Wellhausian division of sources to the text. What may have proved beneficial in analyzing Genesis and Exodus provides little help in analyzing the book of Balaam. As such, it seems questionable to begin an analysis of Numbers 22-24 based upon the names of God. Even in Gray's division of sources, the term *YHWH* is used in the Elohist's account (e.g., 22:13, 19; 23:3, 5, 12, 16, 21).

As the sources are aligned in parallel, certain affinities and distinctions, one from the other, are apparent. While the overarching motive remains consistent (YHWH's faithfulness), the underlying religious presuppositions become obscure (e.g., the portrayal of Balaam as a prophetic figure).[130] Regardless, their content seems scarce material from which to build a *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel. What can be discovered appears to owe more to the dating of the sources than to information provided by the text itself, which is more poetic in nature than historical.

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[128] Gray, 309.

[129] Gray, 316.

[130] Gray, 315-18.

While, characteristic of early twentieth-century interpretation, Gray attempts to determine actual history—e.g., in the phrase, "the prophecy of one *whose eye sees clearly*" (24:3), if the phrase were more certain, Gray states the purpose of such philological work would be to determine *how* a seer received communications from God—he provides little actual historical referents drawn from the text itself. For example, while suggesting the central figures of the ninth-century J source are Israel and Moab, Gray merely provides a number of possible historical referents spanning from the mid-ninth to the mid-eighth centuries.[131] Instead, Gray appears to be more concerned with the motives of the author/redactor, portraying YHWH's empowerment of Israel, and the ruin of those who oppose his purposes.

As an independent unit, then, perhaps little knowledge is gained by relying solely on Wellhausian analysis. While offering a good foundation for further study, Gray's division of sources J and E in the end offers insufficient insight into the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel. This task would be left to later twentieth-century scholars to reconsider interpretive options.

MARTIN NOTH (1902-1968)

The investigation continues with the German Old Testament scholar Martin Noth (1902-1968). Although an accomplished literary critic, Noth, like Wellhausen before him, essentially was a historian.[132] States D. W. McCreery, "He viewed his detailed literary analysis not as an end in itself but rather as an instrument…to reconstruct an

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[131] Gray, 370, 323.

[132] D. W. McCreery, "Noth, Martin," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 511.

objective history of ancient Israel."[133] Beyond literary analysis, Noth used the tools

of (along with his great interest in) geographical and archaeological studies to

analyze biblical traditions.[134] Like Wellhausen, Noth held to the four basic sources

(J, E, D, and P), but maintained also an underlying fifth source in the Tetrateuch,

Grundlage (G), to explain the elements common to J and E.[135]

Unlike Wellhausen, however, who understood the literary formation of these

traditions to span the time from the monarchy to postexile, Noth was more

concerned with their preliterary origins.[136] In this he shared Gunkel's perspective

that the sources J, E, and P were not so much authors, but collectors of traditions,

which "could be traced back to their original, preliterary state."[137] Yet he went

beyond Gunkel (and of course, Wellhausen) in his desire to understand the "final

structure and organization of material in the Pentateuch."[138] As McCreery

summarizes,

> Noth concluded, in agreement with Gerhard von Rad (*Das
> formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch* [1938]), that the cultic,
> confessional statements (e.g., Deut 26:5-9; 6:20-24; Josh 24:2-13), from the
> period of the confederacy, were the seeds from which the Pentateuch grew,
> defining both its form and content. He was confident not only that careful
> traditio-historical analysis could identify and isolate the basic themes of the
> ancient creeds and their elaboration in the Pentateuch but also that it was
> possible to determine their relative significance and age.[139]

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[133] McCreery, 511.

[134] McCreery, 511.

[135] McCreery, 510. As McCreery helpfully explains, this is somewhat akin to the Q source of the Gospels. McCreery, 510-11.

[136] McCreery, 511.

[137] McCreery, 511.

[138] McCreery, 512.

[139] McCreery, 512.

In terms of source analysis, then, Noth takes a mediating position between Wellhausen and Gunkel. As McCreery explains, "Whereas Gunkel tended to focus on the earliest, oral manifestations of biblical traditions and Wellhausen on the latest, written sources, Noth's attention was primarily on the intermediate period, that is, the period of the tribal confederacy when the preliterate traditions started coming together."[140] For example, reflecting his indebtedness to von Rad, Noth viewed J as "an imaginative editor-cum-author who forged the traditions he collected into a literary work that bore the unmistakable signature of his own creative historical and theological perspective."[141]

Noth's source analysis informed his basic thesis that Israel arose as an *amphictyony,* an ancient tribal confederacy bonded together through mutual worship of God and defense of a common religious center—in this case, the worship of YHWH at Shechem (Josh 24:1-27).[142] He believed that the originally independent tribes migrated peacefully into Canaan (contra Joshua's conquest account), bringing together differing tribal traditions and creedal statements. These creedal statements contained five major themes ("guidance out of Egypt; guidance into the arable land; promise to the patriarchs; guidance in the wilderness; revelation at Sinai," in the order of their importance and incorporation), which, eventually coalesced on the "eve of the monarchy" into "a coherent, all-Israelite religious history."[143]

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[140] McCreery, 511.

[141] McCreery, 511.

[142] McCreery, 511.

[143] McCreery, 513.

At this point and for our purposes, Noth's major themes can be summarized as: (1) his interest in the preliterate, oral origins of the pentateuchal sources, (2) his reconstruction of a comprehensive history of ancient Israel, (3) which includes the *amphictyony,* i.e., the prestate, Israelite, tribal confederacy.[144]

Regarding the book of Numbers, Noth was cautious in applying the results of pentateuchal source criticism. Although he recognized the book as part of this larger whole, he also understood its idiosyncrasies. In this, he distinguished between the "old sources," those of the more traditional Wellhausian designation, and the secondary forms of those sources, which he believed were more common in Numbers.[145] As he states, "If we were to take the book of Numbers on its own, then we would think not so much of 'continuous sources' as of an unsystematic collection of innumerable pieces of tradition of very varied content, age and character ('Fragmentary Hypothesis')."[146] In the book of Balaam, Noth saw obvious doublets that led him to divide the narrative between E (Numbers' longest E section): 22:41-23:26 (including two "Balaam discourses"), and J: 23:28-24:19 (also including two "Balaam discourses").[147] These two variants are linked via secondary editorial material (23:27, 29, 30) and apparent additions (24:20-24).[148] Noth understood the

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[144] McCreery, 511.

[145] Noth, *Numbers*, 5. As Noth states, "There is no doubt that the 'old sources,' in so far as they find expression in Numbers, go back to very early traditions which, to begin with, would be transmitted orally before they found their way into the narrative works J and E." Noth, *Numbers*, 11.

[146] Noth, *Numbers*, 4.

[147] While the names of God are a primary means for dividing the sources, Noth issues a warning: "In the narrative context…we encounter a characteristic of the E-source, namely the use of the word 'God' in place of the divine name 'Yahweh' (22:9, 10, 12, 20, 38; 23:4, 27), but the way in which God is designated is no sure guide for literary criticism, since the textual transmission is not entirely reliable." Noth, *Numbers*, 8.

[148] Noth, *Numbers*, 8, 171. Other secondary additions, according to Noth's reckoning, include: 22:4 ("to the elders of Midian"), 22:7 ("the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian"), 22:11

poetical discourses of chapters 23 and 24 as independent and comparatively old (at least those of chapter 24), and 24:20-24 as independent and late.[149] Just as Gray had concluded earlier, source analysis of chapter 22 is challenging.[150] While Noth ascribes the tale of the ass (22:21-35) "definitely" to J, the remainder of the chapter, at best, can be described as a combination of J and E.[151]

Literary Reconstruction of the Book of Balaam

From Noth's perspective, the book of Balaam has "nothing whatsoever" to do with the conquest tradition, but rather evidences the ongoing neighborly state of Israel and Moab in the southern Transjordan.[152] Moab, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, extended northwards as far as the Arnon. Politically, according to Noth, it developed "at a relatively early period," and was ruled by a number of minor kings, perhaps simultaneously.[153] "Throughout their history," states Noth, "(Moab) aspired to acquire the fertile plain north of the Arnon, and at various times they did in fact possess various parts of this plain."[154] When they did persist in moving fairly far

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("and it covers the face of the earth"), 22:36 ("on the boundary formed by the Arnon"), 23:2 ("Balak and Balaam"), 23:10 ("Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!"), 23:13 ("you shall see only the nearest of them, and shall not see them all"), 23:17 ("And Balak said to him, 'What has the LORD spoken?'"), 23:18 ("to me"), 23:23 ("now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!'"), 24:1 ("did not go, as at other times, to meet with omens, but"), 24:3 ("the oracle"), 24:10 ("these three times"), 24:24 ("in the latter days"), 24:15 ("the oracle"), 24:18 ("his enemies"), and 24:23 ("when God does this"). These secondary additions are indicated by brackets in Noth's translation. Noth, *Numbers*, 166-71.

[149] Noth, *Numbers*, 8, 11.

[150] Noth, *Numbers*, 171.

[151] Noth, *Numbers*, 171-72.

[152] Noth, *Numbers*, 172.

[153] Martin Noth, *The History of Israel,* 2nd ed., trans. rev. P. R. Ackroyd (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 155.

[154] Noth, *The History of Israel*, 154.

north beyond the Arnon, which they did early in their history, they came into contact with the tribes of Israel, primarily the Gadites.

The Israelites and Moabites met at the "once-famous" shrine Baal-Peor, on the mountain summit of Peor.[155] "As a *boundary sanctuary* to which the 'peoples' gathered," states Noth, "the sanctuary of Baal Peor enjoyed widespread respect and esteem" among the Israelites to the north, the Moabites to the south, and the nomadic Midianites to the east.[156] "What is more," he continues, "the sanctuary had this prestige at a time when both the Israelites and the Moabites had been settled in the land for some time."[157]

According to Noth, the Balaam story originated in this sanctuary of Baal Peor, and was handed down among the Israelites in this region.[158] This forms the background to the book of Balaam, exhibiting the fact that the two peoples were not always on good terms. As Noth summarizes:

> It is true that there is no mention of warlike altercations with Balak, the "king of the Moabites" in the stories of Balaam, and in the end the *status quo ante* between Israel and Moab remains unchanged, but they do presuppose that the two parties were enemies in spite of their joint participation in the cult of Baal-Peor.[159]

While this and the other Baal Peor stories originally had nothing to do with the "guidance into the arable land" theme, they became connected with the conquest or

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[155] Noth, *The History of Israel*, 155.

[156] Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions,* trans. Bernhard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 74.

[157] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 75.

[158] Noth, *Numbers*, 172. Noth considers the Balaam story (Num 22-24), presenting "the nature and appearance of a 'seer' in a unique and very original way," to be part of the "old sources," very early traditions that would have been transmitted orally before being incorporated into the narrative works of J and E. Noth, *Numbers*, 11.

[159] Noth, *The History of Israel*, 156.

occupation narrative in later tradition. As such, concludes Noth, they "must be regarded as traditio-historically quite indirect and secondary."[160]

Before suggesting his own literary reconstruction, Noth offers Sigmund Mowinckel's theory as to the literary formation of the book of Balaam. As Noth recounts, Mowinckel concluded that J's account of the story was created "out of and for the sake of" the two poems of chapter 24, which he concluded were the oldest elements of the story.[161] Furthermore, states Noth, Mowinckel surmised that E's account of the story was "dependent upon the older one in all passages," including the poems of chapter 23, which were written "in and for this framework."[162] While not agreeing completely with Mowinckel's theory, Noth does find aspects of it plausible. For one, he understands the poems of chapter 24 as independent and prior to J's account, as well as (by comparison) the secondary nature of the poems of chapter 23.[163] Secondly, he agrees with Mowinckel that, in order to be understood, the two poems of chapter 24 are not dependent on the Balaam-Balak legend "either in the present form or in any other form of this legend."[164] Thirdly, as the poems of chapter 24 present Balaam as a known figure, concrete details about him, although

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[160] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 75.

[161] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76. Noth bases his conclusions on Sigmund Mowinckel, "Der Ursprung der Bilʿāmsage," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 40 (1930): 233-71.

[162] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76. As well, according to Noth, Mowinckel concluded that the three obscure oracles at the end of chapter 24 "were composed on the basis of the poems in Num. 24 and were completely adapted to the surrounding story." Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76. Noth bases his conclusions on Mowinckel, 233-71.

[163] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[164] Mowinckel, "Der Ursprung der Bilʿāmsage," 248, quoted in Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

perhaps different than the traditional Balaam-Balak legend, are supplied.[165] The fact

that Balaam reappears in other OT passages, in which he is presented in a different

light, suggests to Noth the complicated history and unoriginality of the Balaam-

Balak narrative.[166]

Nevertheless, Noth does offer his own theory as to the text's literary

formation. Firstly, he appeals to his *Grundlage* (G) source as best explaining the

similarities between J and E; instead of E's dependence on J, both can be traced to a

common source (G), "which was already quite firmly fixed and well developed."[167]

Secondly, at the risk of conjecture due to lack of evidence, he introduces the traditio-

historical method, taking into account Balaam's appearance outside Numbers 22-24

"in admittedly very late and secondary literary contexts in Num. 31:8, 16; Josh.

13:22."[168] The fact that Balaam in these latter references is pictured quite differently

suggests, to Noth, an old, independent Balaam tradition now lost to us.[169] Common

to all literary traditions of Balaam is (1) the sanctuary of Baal Peor and (2) the fact

that Balaam is a "'seer' endowed with 'power' of the word."[170] Although Noth

states, "Beyond this nothing can be ascertained with any degree of certainty," he

nevertheless offers his own imaginative reconstruction:

> Stories about such a man, who once frequented the sanctuary of Baal Peor,
> were told preeminently in the circles of non-Israelite visitors to the sanctuary.
> But the Israelite visitors soon learned about him also; and since he was
> claimed first and foremost by the others, among the Israelites he took on the

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[165] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[166] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[167] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[168] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[169] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[170] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76-77.

form of an evil, hostile magician, who through his word and influence had done all kinds of harm to them.[171]

According to Noth, the Israelite tradition of Balaam divided along Midianite / Moabite lines. In the former Balaam retained this negative image as the "dangerous enemy," which resulted in his death (Num 31:1ff; Josh 13:22), while in the latter his "dangerous power" was overcome not by Israel, but by God himself. "Thus the former pagan magician was actually transformed into an Israelite man of God, and the basis was provided for putting into his mouth prophetic oracles of blessing for Israel such as the two Balaam poems found in Num. 24," concludes Noth.[172] "These poems," he continues, "in turn at least allude to the connection of Balaam with the sanctuary of Baal Peor, a connection handed down in oral recitation from ancient times."[173]

Finally, in his literary reconstruction of Numbers 22-24, Noth postulates the joining together of the Balaam tradition with a Balak tradition, their previous independence evidenced by the linking together of Josh 24:9a with 10bβ.[174] Here Noth offers his most succinct reconstruction of the historical reality behind the literary sources:

> According to the latter tradition, what was involved was a narrative of a dispute between "Israel" and "Moab." Because its setting, like that of the Sihon story, was in southern Transjordan, the narrative at some time was retold as an episode of the occupation which issued in some sort of clear victory for Israel, though the report of this outcome has now been lost in the amalgamation with the Balaam tradition. For basically the Balak tradition serves only to introduce and insert the whole tradition into the theme "guidance into the arable land," while the object continues to be, of course,

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[171] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 77.

[172] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 78.

[173] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 78.

[174] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 78-79.

the communication of the oracles of blessing, which is without any immediate historical consequences. However, the insertion of the story into the theme "guidance into the arable land" rests in the first instance on its connection with the Israelite-Moabite border zone, or alternatively the sanctuary of Baal Peor in southern Transjordan as the territory into which the Israelites advanced, according to the conception of the occupation which came to be standard in the Pentateuch. It also rests on the fact that in general every piece of news regarding a dispute with a neighboring people could bring to mind the matter of the Israelites' possession of the arable land.[175]

Source Analysis of the Book of Balaam

Whereas the general contours between Gray and Noth's division of the book of Balaam are similar, there are differences, especially in regards to chapter 22. For Noth, the Yahwist's (J) account can be found in 22:4-8 (except for perhaps the location note in verse 5) and 22:13-19. This portion includes Balak's two embassies to Balaam, but does not include Balaam's nightly encounters with YHWH. In the first instance Balaam tells the embassy that YHWH has refused to let him go, and in the second merely that he cannot go beyond the command of YHWH (but does not give the embassy an answer). Next, the tale of the ass (22:21-35), an older version of the Balaam story incorporated by J (there is no mention of the events now recorded in 22:7-20), gives no reason for Balaam's going: was he given permission from YHWH? Did he set out on his own accord?[176] At the conclusion of this tale, YHWH gives Balaam permission to go, but to speak only what he tells him to say. The Yahwist's account continues with Balak's reception of Balaam at Moab (22:36-40, although the second half of verse 38 is attributed to E). An editorial section (23:27-

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[175] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 79.

[176] Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

30, sans the location note of v. 28 assigned to J) transitions to Balaam's two oracles of chapter 24. The final four obscure oracles (24:20-24) are not attributed to J.

The Elohist's (E) account, on the other hand, is briefer. After two location notes (22:2 and 22:5), it is found in 22:9-12 (the latter half of verse 12 is editorial, or could be attributed to J), 22:20, and a portion of 22:38 ("The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak"). These elements include Balaam's two nightly encounters with Elohim. In the first Balaam is not given permission to go, but in the second he is given permission, but told only to do what God commands him to do. The Elohist's account concludes with Balaam's two oracles found in 22:41-23:26.

The Yahwist's Account of Balaam (J)

Following an editorial transition (22:1a), the chapter begins with its only true P fragment (22:1b), the itinerary note that anticipates 27:12ff.[177] Since this is not part of the Balaam story, the location where Israel bordered Moab is left open.[178] Owing to its loose connection to 21:21-30, Noth understands 22:2 as belonging to E. After the obvious doublet in verse 3, from verse 4 onwards the J source is in view.[179]

In the Yahwist's account, what Moab fears is not an invasion by Israel, but, as Noth understands it, an "encirclement" ("This horde will now lick up all that is round about us…" 22:4a) preventing them from expansion.[180] The phrase "to the elders of Midian" (22:4a; cf. 22:7) is secondary, reflecting the Midianite tradition of

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[177] Noth, *Numbers*, 171.

[178] Noth, *Numbers*, 175.

[179] Noth, *Numbers*, 175.

[180] Noth, *Numbers*, 176.

Balaam (31:8, 16).[181] The picture of Israel covering the face of the earth ("eye of the

land") (22:5) mirrors that of J in Exodus (Exod 10:5) regarding locusts. King Balak

seeks Balaam's curse to dissipate this "plague," and allow Moab to expand.

Balak sends for Balaam at "Pethor" (22:5), which Noth understands as *Pitru,*

"well known from Assyrian sources, in the most northerly part of Syria, which lies

on a tributary entering the upper Euphrates…not far above where the two rivers

join."[182] He notes this is "in essential agreement" with Balaam's provenance of

Aram, found in the E source (23:7). This location, however, has been questioned due

to its great distance from the events of the Balaam story. While perhaps another

unknown "Pethor" may be referenced, emendations to the text ("which are supposed

to be more original and 'more credible' than the facts given in 22:5aα") might

suggest alternative locations.[183] For example, "in the land of the people of Amaw"

(22:5aβ) might have read the "land of the Ammonites" (which may be an E-variant,

thus leaving open the location of Balaam's homeland), while "Aram" (23:7) might

have been emended to "Edom," making Balaam out to be an Edomite.[184] Regardless,

for Noth, 22:5aα remains the best source for discerning Balaam's place of origin;

according to his reckoning, Balaam "certainly" was not a Moabite, "far less an

Israelite."[185]

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[181] Noth, *Numbers*, 176.

[182] Noth, *Numbers*, 173.

[183] Noth, *Numbers*, 173.

[184] Noth, *Numbers*, 173-74, 176. The latter proposal leads to the question of whether or not Balaam is connected with "Bela the son of Beor," the Edomite king of Genesis 36:32. Noth finds support for this suggestion weak. Noth, *Numbers*, 174.

[185] Noth, *Numbers*, 174.

After Balaam instructs the embassy to lodge for the night while he inquires of YHWH (v. 8), the J account continues with Balaam telling the embassy that YHWH has refused to let him go (v. 13). The embassy returns to Balak, telling him that Balaam has refused to come (v. 14). In response, king Balak sends a second embassy more numerous and honorable than the first, who attempt a second time to entice Balaam to return with them (vv. 15-17).[186] Balaam replies that all of Balak's wealth cannot dissuade him from going beyond YHWH's command (v. 18). He again asks the embassy to stay for the night while he inquires of YHWH (v. 19).[187] Thus far in J, then, Balaam has refused to go with the first embassy, and told the second embassy that he cannot go beyond the command of YHWH. Any encounters with YHWH, up to this point in the narrative, are missing from J. After the second embassy, Balaam is neither permitted nor prohibited to go.

The Yahwist's account continues with the well-known story of Balaam and his ass ("a separate entity from another tradition," determines Noth), in which J narrates Balaam's first encounter with YHWH.[188] Balaam saddles his ass to leave with the embassy, but God's anger is kindled because he goes (vv. 21-22). From the available evidence, Noth concludes:

> The episode of the ass must come from another, presumably older version of the Balaam story, one which was taken over by J just as it stood, in which there was no mention of the events now recorded in 22:7-20 and according to which Balaam had acceded of his own volition to the request of the Moabite ambassadors, with the result that, on the way, he learned for the first time,

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[186] Noth, *Numbers*, 177. "As v. 18 shows, what is meant by this 'honour' is a monetary payment (the word 'honorarium' exactly fits the situation envisaged here)." Noth, *Numbers*, 177.

[187] For vv. 8-20, Noth's commentary has little to say regarding J's account of the narrative. His comments mostly relate to E's account of the narrative, a discussion of which can be found in the next section.

[188] Noth, *Numbers*, 180.

from the encounters with the "messenger of Yahweh," that Balak's demand was against the will of Yahweh.[189]

Even this version of the story, however, must have ended with Balaam going with the delegation, stressing once again that Balaam could only say what YHWH wanted him to say (22:35). "With this verse," concludes Noth, "the exposition of the story once again reaches exactly the same point as it has already reached in v. 20 (E)."[190]

Regarding the "angel of the LORD," Noth understands this "being of unknown origin" to be an agent of YHWH, so that the word he speaks is, in fact, the word of YHWH.[191] This becomes important when considering the final word of the angel of the LORD: to go, but to speak only what *he* tells Balaam (22:35aβ). Thus, even in this alternative tradition subsumed by J, the tension is maintained between Balaam's being told not to go, and his instruction to go, but only to say what YHWH tells him to say.[192]

Noth recognizes the artistic mastery of this episode, commenting on its irony: "At the heart of it lies the idea that an unprejudiced animal can see things to which a man in his willfulness is blind."[193] Noth also spends more time than expected discussing pragmatic aspects of the narrative, such as who was or was not present with Balaam (his servants, the dignitaries), and how they might have reacted to the

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[189] Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

[190] Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

[191] Noth, *Numbers*, 179.

[192] Noth, *Numbers*, 180.

[193] Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

encounter. As well, contra many commentators, he is little concerned with the speaking ass, comparing it instead to the speaking serpent of Genesis 3.[194]

After the tale of the ass (22:21-35), J's account of the narrative continues with Balak's reception of Balaam (22:36-40). Here an E fragment is noted in Balaam's response to Balak (using the term "Elohim" in 22:38aβb). Noth's interest in geography is evident in his reading of textual clues to determine Israel's border with Moab, as well as Balaam's supposed route, which remains unclear.[195] Regardless, Balak meets Balaam at the "frontier of Moab" with respect, reproach, and reward.[196] In the last two verses (22:39-40), sacrifices are offered, seemingly in parallel with the opening of the next section (23:1-2). Noth understands this dual account of sacrifice to be the juxtaposition of J and E, as the next section clearly begins with E. Regarding *this* sacrifice, however, Noth understands its purpose as to bring Balaam into relationship both with Moab's prominent community and their esteemed god(s).[197]

Before Balaam's two oracles of chapter 24, verses 23:27-30 act as an editorial transition between the two sources. In verse 27, Balak, in his continued desire to curse Israel, takes Balaam to yet another place (cf. 23:1-2; 23:23-24). The instructions for sacrifice are likewise repeated (23:29-30). The only new element here is "the top of Peor, that overlooks the desert," (23:28) Balaam's final vantage point. For Noth, this geographic note obviously is not editorial; "It comes, rather,

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[194] Noth, *Numbers*, 179-80.

[195] Noth, *Numbers*, 180-81. Of the two relative clauses in 22:36b, only one is original, the other added for specificity, believes Noth. Noth, *Numbers*, 180-81.

[196] Noth, *Numbers*, 181.

[197] Noth, *Numbers*, 181.

from J and links up quite easily with 22:39-40, i.e., with the last appearance of the J-version. It was worked into the editorial section 23:27-30 because of its relevance."[198] As expected, Noth is interested in this geographical note, surmising that Peor, the name of the mountain, was also the location of the sanctuary of Baal Peor (25:3, 5). Peor must have been part of the mountain range east of the Jordan (25:1-3).[199] At the top of Peor, Balaam had an unobstructed view of the whole desert, seeing most clearly the object of his intended cursing.

For the Yahwist, both discourses of chapter 24 begin with identical introductions of three lines; structure in the body of both is difficult to discern. As discussed above, the J discourses are disconnected from the surrounding narrative. Indeed, the introductions in the third person speak as if nothing is known of Balaam. Thereafter, in both discourses, Balaam speaks in the first person.[200] Weighing the evidence, Noth concludes:

> It is probable that the two discourses of ch. 24 are older than the present Balaam narrative and that they originally existed independently of it and were handed down presumably orally as blessings pronounced over Israel by a seer by the name of Balaam, to whose words an effective "power" was attributed, and concerning whose origin and appearance there was certainly much to relate, namely more or less what was subsequently crystallized in the present Balaam narrative.[201]

In the first oracle, Balaam proceeds apart from omens (a derogatory editorial comment, states Noth), setting his face towards the wilderness (24:1).[202] In so doing,

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[198] Noth, *Numbers*, 188.

[199] Noth, *Numbers*, 188.

[200] Noth, *Numbers*, 189.

[201] Noth, *Numbers*, 189.

[202] Noth, *Numbers*, 188.

seeing Israel dwelling tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God comes upon him. This picture of Israel "dwelling tribe by tribe" is problematic for Noth, for while the term "dwelling" fits his reconstruction of Israel as *amphictyony* (i.e., "firmly settled in the land"), the description of her "tribe by tribe" fits better with the pre-conquest setting of the story.[203] Nevertheless, Balaam here is "represented as an ecstatic prophet who utters his words under direct influence of inspiration."[204] Balaam takes up his discourse (a phrase repeated in this and the following four oracles), and speaks (24:2).

Balaam is introduced by name, along with his father (24:3a), using the term *oracle* (*n^e'um*), a term usually reserved in the Old Testament with the genitive of the divine name (it is only used with a human name in 2 Sam 23:1 and Prov 30:1).[205] The description that follows depicts Balaam the ecstatic; employing all his senses, his eye is opened, he hears the words of God, and he sees the vision of the Almighty (24:3b-4aβ). "Balaam was thus the recipient of divine revelation, both auditory and visionary," summarizes Noth.[206] As a result, he falls down with his eyes uncovered, able to see with his "inner eye" (24:4c).[207]

In the discourse proper, as in the one following, metaphorical language is prominent. Noth dismisses the description of Jacob/Israel in her tents/encampments (24:5) as poetic language, maintaining his historical reconstruction of Israel already

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[203] Noth, *Numbers*, 188-89.

[204] Noth, *Numbers*, 189.

[205] Noth, *Numbers*, 189-90.

[206] Noth, *Numbers*, 190.

[207] Noth, *Numbers*, 190.

settled in the land.[208] The transition from direct address to third person address towards Israel occurs in verse 24:7. The "water flowing from buckets" is employed, for Noth, as a symbol of Israel's "wealth of water" in the region. This leads in turn to Israel's political supremacy (24:7), a "transition to a new subject matter."[209] Here, with its reference to "Agag," Noth posits this discourse must be dated to the time of Saul (1 Sam 15:8ff.), for thereafter "more impressive proofs of Israel's political supremacy could have been adduced."[210] Reference is made to Israel's relationship with her God, manifest supremely in the exodus from Egypt (24:8a)—a relationship that gives Israel great power (cf. 23:22).[211] Noth, for his part, blends the allusions of the ox and the lion together (24:8b-9a), stating the poetry "goes beyond the bounds of historical reality" (believing the text alludes to the kingship of Saul).[212] A later hand, he states, has added the last two words of verse 8: "He (the lion) shatters his (the hunter's) arrows."[213] In a final (emphatic) line, Noth, recognizes the allusion to the Abrahamic blessing (Gen 12:3a), picturing Israel as the mediator of blessing and curse (24:9b).[214]

After this first discourse, Balak's anger is kindled, indicated by the striking together of his hands (24:10).[215] He reproaches Balaam, sending him away without

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[208] Noth, *Numbers*, 190.

[209] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[210] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[211] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[212] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[213] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[214] Noth, *Numbers*, 191.

[215] NB: For Noth, verse 24:10b ("…these three times") is editorial. Noth, *Numbers*, 191-92.

his honorarium (24:10-11). Balaam repeats what he has said earlier, that despite the offer of Balak's wealth, he cannot go beyond the word of YHWH (24:12-13; cf. 22:18). Nevertheless, before departing, Balaam takes the occasion to utter a second, unsolicited discourse. "In this way J includes the final discourse…within the framework of the narrative," states Noth.[216] In this second discourse, Balaam discloses the fate of Balak's people (Moab) by "this people" (Israel). The phrase "in the latter days" (24:14), bracketed in Noth's translation (indicating that it is editorial), can mean, appropriately, "at a later time."[217] While its "pregnant sense" of "end time" (the "eschaton") is possible, Noth states that a messianic interpretation "would have to be a secondary *misinterpretation*, since the content of the original discourse had only a future reference within history."[218]

The second discourse begins like the first with an introductory formula (24:15b-16; cf. 24:3b-4). Following this, Balaam sees a "vague future figure referred to only mysteriously with the third person pronoun (v. 17a)."[219] This figure is compared to a forthcoming star and a rising scepter (24:17b), images that suggest splendor and sovereignty. For Noth, this imagery points to David, whose ascendancy forms the background to this discourse.[220] The discourse pictures David's defeat of Moab and Edom (24:17c-18), facts seen to be foreordained by YHWH.[221] Noth does not explain how David's kingship has made its way into such an early pre-

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[216] Noth, *Numbers*, 192.

[217] Noth, *Numbers*, 192.

[218] Noth, *Numbers*, 192; emphasis added.

[219] Noth, *Numbers*, 192.

[220] Noth, *Numbers*, 192.

[221] Noth, *Numbers*, 193.

monarchial source (the same could be said for the allusion to Saul in J's first discourse). The discourse ends with a general statement concerning Israel's power (24:19).[222]

In reviewing Noth's understanding of J's two discourses, his interpretation of the poetic language should be noted. Where it suits his reconstruction of ancient Israel, he either dismisses historical allusion as poetry, or ignores poetic language, interpreting it as historical. In tying the metaphorical language so closely to his historical reconstruction, his interpretive options are limited. Especially in J's discourses, where the metaphorical language is so rich, this is unfortunate.

The Elohist's Account of Balaam (E)

Due to its brevity, it is difficult to discern much from the Elohist's account in chapter 22. In the main, it is concerned with Balaam's two nightly encounters with Elohim (22:9-12; 20). In the first Balaam is not given permission to go, but in the second he is given permission, but told only to do what God commands him to do. Noth compares the first encounters in both E's (22:9-12) and J's (22:6-8) accounts, concluding that both sources "contained an account of Balak's embassy to Balaam."[223] In regards to subject matter, these two accounts run parallel; nevertheless, there are slight distinctions (e.g., in 22:8 Balaam takes the initiative, while in 22:9, God takes the initiative).[224] However, the conclusion of each is the same: Balaam is prohibited from agreeing to Balak's request. Verse 12 describes this

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[222] Noth, *Numbers*, 193.

[223] Noth, *Numbers*, 177.

[224] Noth, *Numbers*, 177.

in two different ways: in the first half of the verse Balaam is forbidden to go with the delegation (22:12a), while in the second half he is told not to curse Israel (22:12b). While 12a clearly is E (using "Elohim"), 12b, according to Noth, very well may be J due to the repeated '*rr* "to curse," as also found in 22:6ab.[225] This implies that J, as well as E, "contained an account of instructions given by Yahweh to Balaam ('you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed'), an account which has been for the most part suppressed by the E-variant."[226] As in the first encounter (22:9), *Elohim* appears in the second encounter (22:20), with God again taking the initiative. Against verse 12a, however, this time God permits Balaam to go, but only if he does what God tells him to do. It appears, then, that E originally contained both of Balak's visitations, as well as God's differing responses. Noth concludes that verse 20 marks the end of E's version of the opening sequence.[227]

The Elohist's account continues in 22:41, tracing an alternative account of the sacrifices offered in J (22:39-40). Here it is Balaam who takes the lead offering burnt sacrifices, and not Balak. Noth understands the location of these sacrifices as ambiguous, translating "Bamoth-baal" not as a proper name, but as "a high place of Baal."[228] While Balak offers the sacrifices (23:3aα, 6a), Balaam acts as priest (23:4bβ), building seven new altars and standing alone. What is important for E, according to Noth, is the distancing of Balaam from Balak's sacrifices, so that he might better encounter God and his revelation.[229]

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[225] Noth, *Numbers*, 177.

[226] Noth, *Numbers*, 177.

[227] Noth, *Numbers*, 178.

[228] Noth, *Numbers*, 182.

[229] Noth, *Numbers*, 182.

Concerning form, Balaam's first discourse appears remarkably intact;
displaying an even pair of stanzas of three lines each, the second stanza giving
reason for the first.[230] In regards to content, Noth suggests it is closely related to its
surrounding narrative. Although he states that priority cannot be easily decided, he
believes the first discourse probably was composed for the narrative, and so comes
from the same tradition.[231] The poetry references Balaam's origin; "the eastern
mountains" indicating "the range of hills that traverse all the regions of the Syro-
Arabian desert," while "Aram" is located "in central Syria…as far as the
Euphrates."[232] This language could include the reference to "Pethor" mentioned by J
(22:5a), or perhaps this reports an alternative tradition concerning Balaam's
provenance. As Balaam sees the blessedness of Israel, he understands that he cannot
curse, but instead must bless. The final line ("Let me die the death of the righteous,
and may my final end be like theirs!" 23:10b) appears odd both in content and in
form: it is out of place to speak of Israel/Jacob's death, and it stands outside the
discourse's clear parallelism.[233] Weighing the evidence, Noth concludes that a later
hand has added this distich to the discourse.[234]

Balak is incensed. Balaam responds by repeating what he has said
previously, that he can speak only the words of YHWH, a response that is more
typical of J than E. (Noth does not comment on the use of YHWH here, nor in 23:3,

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[230] Noth, *Numbers*, 183.

[231] Noth, *Numbers*, 183.

[232] Noth, *Numbers*, 183.

[233] Noth, *Numbers*, 184. "They fall outside the framework of the two groups of 3:3 lines (vv. 7b, 8 and 9, 10a) and, with their personal reference, appear strange in the context of the discourse." Noth, *Numbers*, 184.

[234] Noth, *Numbers*, 184.

23:5a, 23:12, 23:16, 23:21, and 23:26; its use in 23:17b may be editorial.) Balak responds by taking Balaam to another place, one where he can see all of Israel; with a clearer view, presumably the curse will be more effective.[235] The geographical note is of interest to Noth. While the field of "Zophim" ("spies," or "those who see") connotes a place offering a wide view, the term "Pisgah" hints at a more specific location. Owing to its use in Deuteronomy 3:27 and Joshua 13:20, it must refer to a mountain or mountainous region "to the east of the lower Jordan valley or of the northern end of the Dead Sea."[236] This confirms Noth's belief that Moab's influence stretched north of the Arnon, and that in this area (viz., Pisgah) a conflict arose between Israel and Moab.[237] Following this, sacrifices again are made, and Balaam again separates himself to meet with YHWH, returning to offer his second discourse.

Balaam's second discourse is longer than the first. While it lacks recognizable stanzas, its rhythm and parallelism are similar. Nevertheless, it is "much less self-contained and much less of a unity than the first," states Noth.[238] In regards to content, although "various themes are juxtaposed with no relation between them," important relationships can be established with both the surrounding narrative and J's first discourse (24:3-9).[239] Like E's first discourse, Noth believes

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[235] Noth, *Numbers*, 184-85. Noth does not say why he believes from this second location Balaam can see "all of Israel (properly)." He does state, however, that the text "you shall see only the nearest of them, and shall not see them all" (23:13) has been added later, this second hand believing that even from this second location, Israel was too numerous to be seen all at once. Although Noth does not elaborate, one presumes this later hand has the entire JE story in view, seeking a progression from the first to the third vantage points. Noth, *Numbers*, 184-85.

[236] Noth, *Numbers*, 185.

[237] Noth, *Numbers*, 185.

[238] Noth, *Numbers*, 185.

[239] Noth, *Numbers*, 186.

this second one was composed for the narrative and comes from the same tradition. This is particularly apparent in the first four lines (23:18b-20; cf. 23:23), which make mention of the previous narrative (23:11-17).[240] Its relationship to J's first discourse is more challenging, as clear parallels exist between the two (23:22 and 24:8, and 23:24 and 24:9a), leading one to ask which discourse has priority. Noth opts for J's, "for in 24:8, 9a the comparisons with wild beasts are found next to each other, whereas in 23:22-4 they are separated by a reference to the narrative situation."[241] He proposes, therefore, that E's second discourse was composed for the Balaam narrative, yet the author has augmented it with material "from other current 'Balaam discourses'" ready at hand.[242]

The Elohist's second discourse returns to the theme of blessedness. Contrary to Balak's wishes, the blessedness of Israel cannot be altered, Balaam's previous blessing cannot be revoked (23:18-20). Israel is blessed because of her relationship to her God and king, YHWH, exhibited primarily in the exodus (23:21-22). The predicate in 23:22b is ambiguous: are the "horns of the wild ox" referring to "God" or to "Jacob/Israel"? Noth opts for the latter:

> The former alternative (probably preferable on the basis of the present text, although the latter should probably be emended on the basis of 24:8a) leads to a statement which reminds one of the fact that in the ancient east, and especially in Mesopotamia, ox horns are known as symbols of divine power and of divinity in general. Since, however, vv. 21ff. are dealing with Israel and her state of blessedness, the phrase in v. 22b is surely referring to Israel in the sense that she, through her God, is endowed with enormous power.[243]

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[240] Noth, *Numbers*, 186. However, Noth does not address the differing names of God (viz. YHWH and El, vv. 19-20 referring back to vv. 11-12).

[241] Noth, *Numbers*, 186.

[242] Noth, *Numbers*, 186.

[243] Noth, *Numbers*, 187.

As a result, Israel is immune to Balak's attempt to curse (23:23a). Noth understands the latter half of this verse to have been added secondarily (23:23b). He has surprisingly little to say in regards to the image of the lion (23:24; cf. 24:9a), but that it closes out the second discourse.[244]

Balak ends the endeavor. Balaam has gone far enough, blessing Israel twice now instead of cursing her at least once. Balaam repeats that he can only obey YHWH (23:26; cf. 23:12), bringing E's account of the narrative to a close. "The note of finality in vv. 25-26," states Noth, "indicates that in what follows we are no longer dealing with E."[245]

The Obscure Discourses of Chapter 24

While Noth does discuss the final three discourses (which he now calls "sayings") of the book of Balaam, determining they belong to neither version of the original Balaam story, he has rather little to say. What he does discuss, as expected, pertains solely to geographical markers and issues of dating. While admitting that the first two sayings (towards the Amalekites [24:20] and the Kenites [24:21-22]) do have relevance for the Balaam tradition (cf. 24:7b; 24:17b-18), both are too vague or late, he concludes, to determine their origin or occasion.[246] The final saying (24:23-24) is likewise indeterminate, as "the text is obviously corrupt and the original wording can

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[244] Noth, *Numbers*, 187.

[245] Noth, *Numbers*, 187.

[246] Noth, *Numbers*, 193. Noth states, "The Amalekites were a confederacy of nomadic tribes on the southern edge of Palestine and the Kenites dwelt in the south-eastern part of the Judaean hill-country." Concerning Asshur, he determines the saying could not have come earlier than the emergence of neo-Assyrian power (middle of the eighth or possibly the ninth century B.C.). Noth, *Numbers*, 193.

be reconstructed only hypothetically."[247] The Kittim—originally designating those

of Kition in Cyprus—in the Old Testament generally refers to those threats coming

from the west (e.g., the Macedonians of Alexander the Great, the Romans [Dan

11:30]).[248] Thus, Noth determines that the third saying cannot be dated earlier than

the time of Alexander. Owing to the fact that "Asshur" refers, as it does in the later

literature, to the Seleucid empire, he concludes it is probably even later.[249] He adds

that "Eber," in this context, is indeterminate, concluding, "From the point of view of

subject-matter this last saying has nothing whatsoever to do with the Balaam

story."[250]

Sitz im Leben of the Book of Balaam

According to Noth, the oldest elements of the Yahwist's account are the poetic

discourses found in chapter 24. Here, from the sanctuary of Baal Peor (whose

location is inferred from the geographical note of 23:28), the man of God Balaam

pronounced blessings over tribal Israel. In the earliest tradition Balaam is a seer

endowed with power, his words incorporated by Israel to describe her political

hegemony over Moab in the Transjordan. The narrative elements of J have been

constructed around the discourses. While both Israel and Moab participated in the

cult of Baal Peor, the narrative describes land disputes between the two peoples. In

the Yahwist's account, what Moab fears is an "encirclement" preventing them from

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[247] Noth, *Numbers*, 194.

[248] Noth, *Numbers*, 194.

[249] Noth, *Numbers*, 194.

[250] Noth, *Numbers*, 194.

expansion.[251] Here, allusions to the exodus, the "guidance out of Egypt" theme, are apparent; only later will the Balaam narrative be adapted to its present setting, that of "guidance into the arable land." In this final redaction, Balaam is described as an ecstatic prophet of YHWH. Unexplained by Noth, however, are allusions to both Saul and David in the discourses (perhaps these are later redactions by J?).

In the Elohist's account there are less specific allusions that would help to determine its *Sitz im Leben.* While the discourses display a more general theme of blessedness, the location note found in 23:14 is important, confirming for Noth his belief that Moab's influence stretched north of the Arnon; in this area (viz., Pisgah), a conflict arose between Israel and Moab. Here, Israel is described as being endowed with enormous power. (Perhaps this suggests Israel's great influence in the area during the ninth century?) Although Noth does not address the many references to YHWH in E's discourses, Balaam's relationship to Elohim bears mention. In chapter 22 it is God who takes the initiative in his encounters with Balaam, while in chapter 23, in order better to encounter God and his revelation, Balaam must separate himself from Balak and his sacrifices. The implied message is that with separation comes religious power (cf. 23:9b).

Critical Analysis of Noth

In Noth's analysis, the interests of mid-twentieth century interpretation are apparent. While he incorporates Wellhausian sources, his traditio-historical approach seeks a mediating position between oral tradition and written sources. As evidence that stories of early Israel had developed over a long period, he appeals to a common

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[251] Noth, *Numbers*, 176.

Grundlage (G) source for similarities between J and E. Concerning Balaam in particular, noting the disparity in his biblical references, Noth suggests an old, independent Balaam tradition now lost to us.[252]

Through his detailed literary analysis, Noth attempts to reconstruct an objective history of the *amphictyony*. However, working through his analysis of Numbers 22-24, it is unclear how his reading of the text illuminates the intermediate period of the tribal confederacy. Despite now being incorporated into the theme of "guidance into the arable land," Numbers 22-24, according to his reckoning, reflects instead the ongoing land disputes between prestate Israel and Moab in the southern Transjordan (even as both participated in the cult of Baal-Peor). However, this appears to minimize the oracles of blessing—Noth's stated object of Numbers 22-24—as merely describing Israel's political hegemony over Moab.[253] Furthermore, by appealing to a now lost tradition of Balaam, Noth's historical reconstruction lacks evidential support.

Therefore, considering Noth's analysis of Numbers 22-24, one must question its usefulness at uncovering the world *behind the text*, i.e., actual history—what *really* happened. Despite his appeal to objectivity, much in Noth's analysis appears to be speculative.

Excursus: Pentateuchal Sources Revisited

Before completing this survey of twentieth-century historical-critical approaches to Numbers 22-24, it will be helpful first to consider the evolution of Pentateuchal

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[252] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 76.

[253] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 79.

source theories during this period. Rolf Rendtorff, like Noth, was skeptical of the Pentateuch's literary unity. Rendtorff argued that the Pentateuch's narrative blocks, such as the patriarchal and exodus narratives, developed independently of each other.[254] This theory "undermines the idea of four sources running as it were horizontally through the whole Pentateuch," states Barton, "and suggests instead that the various blocks of material were linked together relatively late, with only rather faint redactional hands being demonstrable. This leaves the Documentary Hypothesis in tatters."[255]

Erhard Blum expands upon Rendtorff's approach. Blum argues against distinct J and E elements, with the patriarchal narrative having been developed over roughly five hundred years (from the reign of Jeroboam I). At some point, the Pentateuchal material was subjected to editing by the Deuteronomist. Priestly material, existing independently, then was applied to the existing texts as a redactional framework (rather than as a separate source, as traditionally considered).[256] Summarizes Barton: "The conclusion of Blum's very detailed work is that there is a pre-priestly strand *("vor-priesterliche Komposition"*, KD) and a priestly strand *("priesterliche Komposition"*, KP): all other supposed sources fail to stand up to scrutiny. Both KD and KP derive from the Persian period, probably from the fifth century BCE."[257]

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[254] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 309.

[255] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 309-10.

[256] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 310.

[257] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 310.

Thus, via Blum, Noth's traditio-historical approach is realized; the traditional Pentateuchal sources are rejected over a procedure in which a growing body of material is "knitted together" by a priestly redactor.[258] The German term *Fortschreibung*, roughly translated as "accretion," imagines a process whereby scribes add to the text, perhaps taking it in a new direction, but not destroying what already is there; texts grow by gradual accretion.[259] Thus, Barton summarizes:

> By the end of the twentieth century there was a general consensus that one can be sure of only two things about the sources of the Pentateuch. One is the existence of P in some form: the priestly material is easily discerned, and has a coherent theology and chronology. The other, which follows analytically, is the presence in the Pentateuch of 'non-P', stories and laws that do not show the hand of the priestly writer or redactor. But the dating and exact stratification of the non-priestly material is now entirely a matter of dispute.[260]

BARUCH LEVINE (1930-   )

The investigation concludes with the work of Baruch Levine (1930-   ), a contemporary Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible. Levine represents the comparativist school of biblical studies; employing his knowledge of Semitic languages, he applies Near Eastern evidence to biblical interpretation.[261] His work is a fitting conclusion to the tripartite investigation first begun with Gray, for he states (and amply demonstrates) his indebtedness to Gray's prior scholarship. In particular,

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[258] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 310.

[259] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 310-11.

[260] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 311. The most recent work in pentateuchal criticism shows no different or greater consensus than Barton depicts. See Jan C. Gertz, Bernard M. Levinson, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

[261] Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Baruch A. Levine: A Brief Biography," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine,* ed. Robert Chazen, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), ix, xii.

he builds upon Gray's textual and philological work by incorporating the discovery of the Deir 'Alla texts. In light of this new evidence, Levine offers a fresh interpretation of the book of Balaam.

Concerning the book of Numbers, Levine understands the fourth book of the Pentateuch to be composed largely of non-Priestly (JE) and Priestly (P) sources. He describes the composite JE source, dated approximately to the seventh century B.C., as "primarily historiographic in substance and narrative in form."[262] It is comprised of earlier Judean (J) and northern (E) sources, attributed to the ninth to eighth centuries (or earlier). Distinct to Levine's reconstruction, however, is a Transjordanian (T) source, primarily the poetry of Numbers 21 and 23-24, understood to be a subsource of E. Turning to the other major source of Numbers, Levine understands P to be the output of priestly writers, chronologically subsequent to JE. While P designates this "later stage…of Torah literature," Levine concedes that priestly writers have also "recast and expanded upon" the earlier JE traditions to suit their own purposes.[263] Thus, it becomes difficult to analyze in isolation the individual sources.[264]

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[262] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 48.

[263] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 49.

[264] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 49. "As regards the book of Numbers," states Levine, "the primary challenge is to explain how priestly writers recast the JE traditions and expanded upon them, thereby reconstructing the record of the wilderness period so as to focus on their central concerns." Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 49.

Literary Analysis of the Book of Balaam

Scholarly consensus holds that the book of Balaam is an independent literary unit. Levine suggests three reasons for this conclusion.[265] First, if Numbers 22-24 were to be removed, the previous JE historiography would proceed uninterrupted. Having already encountered the Edomites (Num 20:14-21), the Amorites (Num 21:21-35), and the Ammonites (Num 21:24), Israel, on the plains of Moab (Num 22:1), would be left to face yet another relapse and a second census (Num 25:1ff). The book of Balaam, however, adds a significant new chapter to this narrative. Second, unlike the rest of the Pentateuch, the book of Balaam is told not from the perspective of Israel, but from that of an opponent, i.e., Moab. Heretofore unknown as a significant foe, the Moabites are pictured as threatened by Israel; king Balak takes it upon himself to eliminate this threat. What follows, summarizes Levine, is "a dramatic confrontation between the Moabites and Israelites, one charged with magical overtones and bearing religious messages."[266] A third and final reason to consider the independence of the book of Balaam is the difficulty scholars have in identifying individual sources.[267] As was evident in the previous analyses of Gray and Noth, the distribution and consistency of the divine names YHWH and *'Elōhîm* defy categorization. "These divine names," states Levine, "often alternate with each other in the ongoing narrative, making it virtually impossible to identify discrete sources on the basis of such usage."[268]

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[265] Levine, *Numbers 21-36,* 137-38.

[266] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 137.

[267] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 137.

[268] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 137-38.

This final reason is one of two ways in which Levine's analysis differs most strikingly from his twentieth-century predecessors. Whereas each generation (S. Mowinckel [1930], O. Eissfeldt [1939], W. F. Albright [1944], W. Gross [1974], H. Rouillard [1985]) offered new insights advancing the discussion (e.g., differentiating between prose and poetry, separating the tale of the ass from the rest of the narrative, and identifying couplets), all relied on traditional source criticism. Instead, Levine opts for the literary analysis of Rofé, who argued the futility of using source criticism on the Balaam texts.[269] Instead, Rofé suggests the narrative writer of Numbers 22-24 was more than a redactor of previous sources, but an original author who, nonetheless, was aware of previous J and E writings concerning the Moabites and the seer Balaam. As Levine summarizes,

> As a consequence, we must employ a less rigid method of literary analysis if we are to define the relation of the Balaam narratives to the Balaam poems. What is eminently clear is that the poems speak for themselves, and that the narratives are predicated upon a different casting of Balaam. *According to the interpretation to be adopted here, the Balaam narratives take their cue from the poems, but they reinterpret the issues reflected in them. The narratives represent a later composition, emanating from a very different circle of biblical authors.*[270]

This leads to the discovery of the Deir 'Alla texts, whose publication in 1976 revealed new options in the critical analysis of the Balaam pericope. "Rarely has the recent discovery of an extra-biblical source had so direct a bearing on the interpretation of biblical texts," asserts Levine.[271] This, then, is the second way in which Levine's analysis differs most significantly from that of his predecessors; his

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[269] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 207. Levine is referring to the following work by Rofé: A. Rofé, *The Book of Bileam* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Simor Publishing, 1981).

[270] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 207-8; emphasis added.

[271] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 41.

thesis is predicated upon this discovery: "The basic question regarding the Balaam

poems may be formulated as follows: 'To which divine power or powers was

Balaam bound?'"[272] This is the one question driving his research. To be sure, the

Deir 'Alla texts raise intriguing questions:

> We must explain why it was that Balaam presents himself as one powerless
> to curse Israel and bound to the will of divine powers that favor Israel. One
> would have expected him to appeal to the power of the gods of Moab, or to
> that of his own gods, whether Aramean or Ammonite, as differing traditions
> would identify his origins. Instead, it is stressed from the outset that Balaam
> was constrained by powers solidly on Israel's side, and who are protecting
> Israel from harm. There is no battle between divine powers; no challenge by
> Balaam.[273]

Despite noted differences from the book of Balaam (e.g., YHWH is not

mentioned), the Deir 'Alla texts offer startling similarities to the Balaam poems in

terms of form and content, not to mention the fact that "Balaam son of Beor" is

named more than once (his portrayal similar yet different from that in the

pericope).[274] If Levine's theory is correct, that the Deir 'Alla texts represent "an

indigenous literary creation" from the first half of the eighth century B.C. in the

Jordan Valley (where they were found), then it can be inferred that the biblical

Balaam poems likewise were written in Gilead, a place of known Israelite

settlement.[275] "Viewed in their Transjordanian context," posits Levine, "the Deir

'Alla inscriptions may have been written by a Transjordan Israelite, thereby

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[272] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 41. The short answer: "It turns out, therefore, that both literary sources present Balaam as a messenger of El." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42.

[273] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 41.

[274] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208-9.

[275] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208. Levine notes that the Israelite community in Gilead can be traced from the United Monarchy (as far back as the tenth century B.C.) to the deportation of the northern tribes in the mid- to late-eighth century B.C. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208.

representing the literary creativity of that community."[276] This, then, is Levine's

most notable contribution to the analysis of Numbers 22-24: the designation of the

Transjordanian repository (T) containing the creative output of the Gilead Israelites,

including the biblical Balaam poems and Isaiah 14 (the parable of the King of

Babylon).[277] Levine suggests this archive was preserved, along with the writings of

the Elohist and other northern Israelite prophets, during the era of Northern Israel's

dominance in the Transjordan.[278] However, in defending the Israelite authorship of

the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, he cites the biblical Balaam poems themselves: "The

strong literary affinities with biblical literature, and in particular with the biblical

Balaam poems, support this hypothesis, although the inscriptions themselves provide

no historical indicators."[279] This reasoning appears somewhat circular; without

ancillary historical evidence, his theory, while suggestive, is nevertheless conjecture.

Since the poetic oracles, by his reckoning, precede the prose portions of the

narrative, Levine's primary interest lies with the former. Like the early eighth

century B.C. Deir 'Alla inscriptions, the oracles in his analysis draw upon "a

veritable pantheon of West Semitic divine powers—El, Shaddai and Elyon, of whom

the most prominent is El."[280] While YHWH in the Balaam oracles is a "member

deity" of this pantheon, in the Deir 'Alla texts he is wholly absent, leaving Levine to

conclude that both originated from a repertoire of El literature written prior to the

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[276] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208.

[277] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42.

[278] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208-9.

[279] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 230-31.

[280] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42.

northern kingdom's captivity by Assyria.[281] El, then, according to Levine, is the chief deity from whom Balaam received his oracles—not YHWH. Thus, the *Sitz im Leben* of the oracles points to a time prior to 852 B.C. (the same period as the Heshbon Ballad)—prior to the reappearance of Mesha the king of Moab—during Israel's dominance in North Moab.[282] The prose portions of the book of Balaam— apparently written later once the synthesis of El and YHWH had been completed— realign this attribution from El to YHWH, seemingly to justify theologically Israel's divine right to the land east of the Jordan.[283] The final four sayings attached to the Balaam poems, according to Levine, are too enigmatic to determine their *Sitz im Leben.*

The Balaam Poems

Source Analysis

While YHWH is not mentioned in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, its veritable pantheon of Transjordan deities is invoked in the biblical Balaam poems. In the first and second poems, both El and YHWH are called upon.[284] In the third and fourth poems, El, Shadday, and Elyon provide Balaam his revelations.[285] Characteristics otherwise attributed to YHWH are ascribed to El, including Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Num 23:22, 24:8). In other words, Levine does not understand El and YHWH as

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[281] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42-43.

[282] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 44.

[283] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 43.

[284] In Numbers 23:19, 22, 24, "El alone is named as the divine actor." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 218.

[285] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 218. YHWH receives only passing mention as one planting trees, Numbers 24:6.

synonymous terms, but (along with Shadday and Elyon) as distinct West Semitic deities.[286] He states:

> We are reading original El literature that has been adapted to include YHWH, the God of Israel, but not to reduce El, or Elyon and Shadday for that matter. It may be more reasonable to hypothesize that YHWH has been admitted into the regional pantheon, than to assume that El has been absorbed by YHWH![287]

Nevertheless, his hypothesis runs counter to the biblical portrayal, where Israel's liberation from Egypt and conquest of the Promised Land is attributed to YHWH. As Levine states, however, this account was accepted only after the synthesis of El and YHWH had taken place, "when the reinterpretation of Israelite religion enunciated in Exodus 6 had been accepted."[288]

This conclusion is drawn from the Deir 'Alla texts themselves, in which El (as evidenced from Combinations I and II)—Balaam's own chief god—is not only the chief deity of the compound, but is favorable to Israel, as well. "Israel has been blessed by the regional pantheon, not only by YHWH, the national God of Israel. It is not only YHWH, but also El, Elyon and Shadday who are on Israel's side against Moab, and against all who oppose Israel," observes Levine.[289] Thus, when both El and YHWH had blessed Israel, Balaam had no choice but to follow suit. As Levine summarizes:

> This is the message of the Balaam poems. It is here proposed that the Balaam poems speak for a circle of biblical authors who had not yet synthesized El

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[286] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 218.

[287] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 221-22. He states that except for Numbers 23:8, "there is probably not a single clear case of the direct parallelism *'El//YHWH*, or *YHWH//'El* in all biblical literature." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 222. Thus, even in the parallel of Numbers 23:8 (perhaps especially in), lest the parallelism loses its potency, the two divine names must refer to distinct deities. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 222-24.

[288] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 43.

[289] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 224.

with YHWH, and had not deprived El of his individual identity. They were rather devotees of a regional pantheon that was traditional within Israelite society. …Such ideas seem to have been especially prominent in Gilead of Transjordan, where the biblical Balaam poems were most probably written. The Transjordanian Israelites who authored the Balaam poems projected this regional orientation onto Balaam, a non-Israelite. They depicted Balaam as a devotee of El, but as one who was aware that YHWH, Israel's national god, also belonged to the regional pantheon.[290]

This raises the issue of monotheism: when did Israel adopt the practice of worshiping YHWH alone? While some scholars (Y. Kaufmann, J. Tigay) believe this practice was established early in Israel's national life—the norm from which Israel routinely deviated—the majority hold to a later date, probably just before the Babylonian exile.[291] Levine holds this majority position, believing that even if Israel knew of YHWH early on, it does not follow that they understood him as the one alone to be worshipped. "He may have been identified as one among a regional pantheon, which included Baal, El and Asherah, and, at times, probably Ashtoreth," states Levine.[292] While the Bible provides more evidence regarding the rejection of Baal, Levine believes the changing perception of El follows a similar trajectory.[293] Just as the name Baal eventually was banned from Israelite names, in an opposite phenomenon, once El was absorbed into YHWH, El assimilated into Israelite names. "To put it another way," sums Levine, "In later times, a devout Israelite monotheist would give his son an El name, because Yahwism had assimilated the cult of El. The

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[290] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 225.

[291] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 225-26.

[292] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 226.

[293] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 226.

same would not be allowable with respect to a Baal name, since the Baal cult had been condemned."[294]

Precisely when this occurred is unknown, but Levine believes the pantheon, including an unsynthesized El, was still being drawn upon from well into the eighth century B.C.[295] Thus, the Balaam poems, according to Levine, were written before this synthesis took place. "What is remarkable about the Balaam poems," states Levine, "is that they reflect a religious climate in which El was one of the deities worshipped by Israelites alongside YHWH, and in consonance with Israel's neighbors in Transjordan, Phoenicia and Syria. The regional pantheon was a pan-national phenomenon, in which Israel was a participant."[296]

Balaam's first poetic oration (Numbers 23:7-10)

Balaam's first oracle can be divided into two parts, the first half describing Balaam's relationship with Balak (23:7-8), the second conveying Balaam's wonder of Israel (23:9-10). Balaam has been summoned from Aram, "from the mountains of Qedem" (*mēhararê qedem*), according to Levine's translation.[297] Citing Albright, he believes this most likely refers to "the mountainous region of northeastern Syria, and southward of it."[298] Although Levine understands Balaam as a Transjordanian

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[294] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 228.

[295] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 228. Nevertheless, religious practices were shifting; the Deuteronomic movement, originating in the north in the eighth century, denounced this pantheon along with its cultic objects. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 228-29.

[296] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 229.

[297] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 163, 168. Levine understands "Qedem" as a parallel term for "Aram." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 168.

[298] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 168. Levine is referring to the following work by Albright: W. F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 3 (September 1944): 207-33.

(probably from Ammon or Edom), he sees little warrant to read *'Edôm* here instead of *'Arām*.[299] Balaam is requested to *'ārāh* "execrate" Jacob and *zō'amāh* "pronounce doom" upon Israel, the two verbs in emphatic-imperative form.[300] The first occurs in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), which resembles Egyptian execration texts targeting retaliation against towns and districts that failed to pay tribute.[301] The second is denominative of *za'am* "rage, fierce, anger," and may describe "the effects or consequences of rage and fury, namely, 'gloom, destruction.'"[302]

In the following verse, Levine leaves untranslated Hebrew El: "How can I curse whom El has not condemned, and how can I doom whom YHWH has not doomed?" (23:8).[303] Neither El nor YHWH (pre-synthesis in ancient Israel) has given Balaam divine approval to curse Israel, an interpretation based upon the verbal forms *'eqqōb* and *qabbōh*.[304] As diviners were subservient to divine authority in the ancient world, so Balaam was powerless to act against El or YHWH who had not given him this authority. "This is the nuance conveyed by the unexpected utilization of the Piel infinitive absolute, *qabbōh* 'to condemn,' a step further along the way to doom than cursing."[305]

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[299] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 168.

[300] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 169.

[301] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 169.

[302] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 169.

[303] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 164, 173.

[304] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 169.

[305] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 173.

In a marked transition to the second half of the oracle, Balaam expresses his personal insight as opposed to his professional opinion.[306] Levine calls the second hemistich of verse 9 "one of the most elusive in all of Scripture" due to the Hithpael form *yithaššāb* (pausal).[307] Combined with the adverbial *lebadad* "alone, apart," the phrase could refer to (1) Israel not being "counted" among the nations due to her distinct relationship to God (by comparing the Hithpael to the Niphal), (2) Israel being secure against attack because of her seclusion (relationship between *lebādād* and Hebrew *betah, lābetah*), (3) or Israel as a self-sufficient fighting force, achieving military victory independent of allies (by examining context—Israel's might is expressed in the next verse).[308] Understanding military overtones in *š-k-n* ("to dwell" as "encamping"), Levine opts for the third option, translating verse 9 as, "It is truly a people encamped apart, and unallied with other nations."[309]

The first hemistich of verse 10 offers its own interpretive conundrum, for while the verbal forms of the parallel lines are well known (*m-n-h* "count" and *s-p-r* "number"), the nominal forms (*'āpār* and *rōba*) are less clear.[310] Looking to various Hebrew and Akkadian cognates, the following options have been proposed: (1) Hebrew *rōba'* = *reba'* meaning "a quarter" ("And who has numbered [even] a quarter of Israel!"), (2) the Hebrew root *r-b-'* in the Hiphil, meaning "to inseminate, breed" ("and the increment of Israel"), or the Akkadian cognate *turba'u* meaning

[306] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 168, 173.

[307] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 174.

[308] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 174-75.

[309] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 164, 175.

[310] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 175-76.

"dust cloud" ("And who can measure the dust cloud of Israel?").[311] Levine, however,

opts for another Akkadian term *rebītu,* from the root *rebû,* which can be best equated

with the French term "quartier," or, a district of a city. He finds an Akkadian cognate

epēru for Hebrew *'āpār,* meaning "territory, soil; area volume," rendering the entire

hemistich "Who can chart the terrain of Jacob, and who can measure Israel's

quarterland?"[312] What is being counted or numbered, then, is not so much the dust or

the Israelites themselves, but the territory they are occupying.[313] "The sense of this

verse is that the Israelite encampment is vast beyond measure," states Levine.[314]

In the final stich of Balaam's first oracle, Levine understands the Hebrew

term *yešārîm* as synonymous with *gibbôr* ("hero, warrior;" cf. Ps 112:2).[315] Thus,

instead of its usual religious or moral interpretation (*yešārîm* = "upright"), Levine's

translation alludes to a heroic Israel "destined to be victorious; a people able to rely

on its own forces without the support of allies."[316] He cites the English term

"valiant"—conveying both heroism and merit—as its nearest equivalent. Israel "the

valiant" is victorious because YHWH fights for her.[317] To this, Balaam identifies,

wishing to share in the afterlife of the worthy dead. "May I die the death of the

valiant, and let my afterlife be as his!" (23:10b).[318]

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[311] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 176.

[312] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 164, 176.

[313] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 177.

[314] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 175.

[315] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 177.

[316] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 177.

[317] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 178.

[318] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 164, 177-78.

Balaam's second poetic oration (Numbers 23:18-24)

Balaam's second oracle builds upon themes in the first, subtly transitioning to the

theme of battle.[319] The second oracle, like the first, can be divided into two parts, the

first half conveying the faithfulness of El and the assistance of YHWH in battle

(23:18-21), the second describing the power of El and his openness with Israel

(23:22-24).[320]

Balaam entreats Balak to "Arise…take heed!" (23:18), the construction *benô*

Sippōr (instead of the standard *ben*) similar to *benô Be'ôr* in the third and fourth

poems (Num 24:4, 15).[321] The next verse (23:19) extols the reliability of divine El,

in contradistinction to "often unreliable humans."[322] While *ben 'ādām* "son of man"

(cf. Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8) parallels *'enôš* "human, person" in Psalm 8:5, the parallelism

of *'ādām//'îš* ("person//man") is common (cf. 2 Sam 7:14, Isa 52:14).[323] More

important here, however, is the parallelism between *kizzēb//hitnāhēm,* the first term

meaning to disappoint expectation (cf. Isa 58:11b), the second—comparing the

Hithpael pausal form to the Niphal—meaning to renege (cf. Ps 110:4). Thus,

Levine's translation, "El is no human that he would fail, nor a mortal man that he

would renege."[324]

In verse 20, Levine reads *l-q-h* as a Qal passive, *lūqahtî* ("I was brought,

summoned"), suggesting Balaam was selected for a complex mission. "Balak

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[319] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 180-81.

[320] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 181.

[321] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 181.

[322] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 182.

[323] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 182.

[324] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 165, 181-82.

'brought' him to curse Israel, but the directives of El had more authority; he had

'brought' Balaam to bless Israel!" states Levine.[325] While the first instance of *b-r-k*

in the hemistich seems to indicate an infinitive absolute, Levine interprets the second

as the same. Thus, the subject is not El's blessing in the past (cf. 22:12), but

Balaam's in the present, rendering the verse, "I *was summoned* to bless, and bless [I

must]; I cannot revoke it!"[326] The rationale for doing so is offered in the next verse

(23:21). Noting that the combinations *hibbît 'āwen* ("countenance any harm") and

rā'āh 'āmāl ("brooks no harm") are "highly unusual," Levine offers what he calls "a

more subtle" translation.[327] Instead of understanding the verse to refer to YHWH's

protection over Israel from future distress, looking to similar usage in Habakkuk

1:13 (cf. Hab 1:3), Levine's translation suggests that El's divine attributes will

protect Israel in the present (the pronouns here referring to verse 19).[328]

Nevertheless, YHWH is Israel's divine king, whose "battle cry" is heard in her midst

(cf. Isa 41:21, 44:6, Zeph 3:15).[329]

Emphasis reverts to El and his power in the second half of the oracle: "El,

who rescued them, liberated them," a refrain found in the third oracle, as well.[330] The

second half of the verse continues this description, its most plain sense stating that El

has "antlers like those of a wild ox," the "wild ox" an image of power and symbol of

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[325] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 182.

[326] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 165, 182-83.

[327] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 184.

[328] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 183-84.

[329] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 165, 184.

[330] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 184. Levine notes the unusual syntax in verse 22; instead of a relative *heh,* the relative subordination is conveyed via a Hiphil participle. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 184-85.

deities in the ancient world.[331] Some, however, on theological grounds, have rejected

this zoomorphic interpretation; reading the indirect object pronoun (*lô*) as referring

to Israel rather than to God, they interpret the verse as referring to God's power

assisting Israel rather than to God himself. For Levine, however, the zoomorphic

interpretation is "more dramatic…less deflected," and less influenced by

"theological apprehensions."[332]

The terms *nahaš* and *qesem* in verse 23, "augury" and "divination," refer to

the interpretation of omens (celestial, in the latter case). Together, they fall under the

biblical prohibitions (cf. Deut 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17), the latter prohibited in

Leviticus 19:26 and Deuteronomy 18:14.[333] The prepositional *beth* here is important,

for it can convey more than one sense. If it indicates position ("*in* Jacob, *among*

Israel"), then it would convey that these practices are not found in Israel (for God

reveals all). If it describes opposition ("*against* Jacob, Israel"), then it would indicate

that these practices are ineffectual against Israel (for God protects his people).

Levine opts for the "simpler" of the two, the first option, but concedes the

preposition may work as a double entendre.[334] Important for Levine, Balaam in the

Deir ʿAlla inscriptions is described as *haqqôsēm,* a reader of celestial omens.[335]

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[331] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185. The *rīmu* ("wild ox") in Akkadian symbolizes divine or royal power. "The antlers of the wild ox" in biblical poetry also conveys power (cf. Deut 33:17; Ps 22:22, 92:11). Finally, Levine states, "Like the lion and the swooping eagle, the wild ox is a way of depicting deities." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185.

[332] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185. "The antecedent of the indirect object pronoun *lô* 'to him, for him' has been taken to be Israel, yielding the rendering: 'Is for him (= for Israel) like the horns of the wild ox.'" Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185.

[333] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185.

[334] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185.

[335] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 185.

Levine understands the adverbial *kā'ēt* to indicate "now, at this time" (cf. Judg 13:23; 21:22).[336] The verb *pā'al* "to do" is also important, for it provides a "dictional link" between the biblical Balaam poems and the Deir 'Alla inscriptions. States Levine, "Here we read that Israel is informed as to 'what El does,' whereas in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, Balaam says to his companions: 'Be seated, and I will inform you what the Shadday-gods are about to do, and go, behold the acts of the gods!' (Deir 'Alla, Combination I)."[337] Unfortunately, Levine's translation of this hemistich is rather wooden: "Jacob is promptly informed; Israel—what El plans to do."[338]

The final verse of the oracle compares Israel to a lion, "the unerring predator who never loses his prey" (Amos 3:4; cf. Ezek 22:25).[339] For Levine, the metaphor is powerful yet still somewhat ambiguous, stating, "it is unclear at every point whether the poet is speaking of lions or of Israel."[340] He believes its portrayal of lions is unrealistic; because lions feed on their prey while lying down in their lairs (Gen 49:9), Levine interprets the verb *'ad yō'kal terep,* "until he eats the prey," as anticipatory ("until he has prey to devour').[341] Also, while lions may drink the blood of their prey, they would not drink the blood of slain enemies (*halālîm*). Of course, Israel would not either, so a more thoroughgoing metaphor is needed. Just as Ezekiel portrays God's vengeance on Israel's enemies, their flesh and blood consumed by

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[336] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[337] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[338] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 165.

[339] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[340] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[341] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

the birds and wild animals (Ezek 39:17-20; cf. Deut 32:41-42), so too here is drinking the blood a "metaphor for the utter defeat of one's enemies."[342] Nevertheless, the overall effect of the hemistich is clear, "discouraging to any would-be attacker of Israel."[343]

Balaam's third poetic oration (Numbers 24:3-9)

Balaam's third oracle begins with the same name formula found earlier in the second (23:18), i.e., *benô Be'ôr*, rendered as "Beor's own son."[344] Levine notes the parallel construction between 23:3 and 2 Samuel 23:1; both Balaam and David, described as sons of their fathers, speak oracles, followed by the formulation: "*ne'ūm haggeber* + a self characterization."[345] He notes *ne'ūm* ("speech, oration," cf. Jer 23:31) "is used with reference to both human and divine utterances."[346] Balaam is "the man whose eye is opened," an enigmatic construct phrase (repeated in 24:15) that has offered much speculation. In this, Levine sides with Albright, who, according to Levine, "divided the words differently, and read: *štmh 'n = šettammāh 'ên[ô]* 'whose eye is pure, clairvoyant.'"[347] As Levine states, "Albright's interpretation has gained wide acceptance, and may be of ancient origin" as evidenced in the LXX translation: *'o 'alêtlhinôs 'orôn* ("the pure vision"), as well as the Samaritan Targum ("whose eye

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[342] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[343] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 186.

[344] The final *waw* perhaps indicates an anticipatory genitive. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 191; cf. 181.

[345] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 191.

[346] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 191.

[347] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 191-92. Here Levine is referring to Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," 207-33.

is open, uncovered") and Onkelos ("who sees well").[348] Its connection to the Song of

Deborah (Judg 5:7), via relative *še* (= *ša*), for Levine is not unexpected.[349]

Two important issues remain in Balaam's title (here restored from the fourth

oracle): the phenomenology of his visions, and the divine names (*'Ēl*, *'Elyôn*, and

Šadday). Concerning the first, Balaam is the one with an open eye (*šetūm hā'ayin*),

with eyes uncovered (*gelûy 'ênāyîm*). Comparing this latter idiom to *gillāh 'õzen,*

meaning "to open up the ear" (2 Sam 7:27; 9:15), Levine understands Balaam as

having extraordinary vision. "Phenomenologically," he states, "we are speaking of a

degree, or a kind of clarity, or openness of vision unattainable by most humans," i.e.,

clairvoyance unbound by space or time.[350] This is reinforced by Levine's decision to

restore from the fourth oracle the second hemistich of Numbers 24:16, *weyōdē'a*

da'at 'elyôn "Who is privy to Elyon's knowledge."[351] Relying upon Gray's analysis,

he states Hebrew *da'at* can refer both "to what humans know, and to divine

knowledge."[352] In other words, what God normally would withhold from human

awareness, he may reveal to select individuals such as prophets. Here in the titulary,

Levine draws connections to Balaam's titulary in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions.

Whereas here in Numbers 24:4 Balaam sees "a vision of Shadday" (*mahazeh*

Šadday), in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions (Combination I, lines 1-2), he "beheld a

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[348] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 192. Here Levine again is referring to Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," 207-33.

[349] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 192.

[350] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 193.

[351] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 193. This decision, according to Levine, is supported by the LXX and balances the versification. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 193.

[352] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 193. See also Gray, 368-69.

vision, according to the utterance of El" (*wyhz mhzh kmś' l'*).[353] "Use of the term

mahazeh/mhzh links the biblical orations with those from Deir 'Alla," states

Levine.[354] Balaam's "falling (asleep) or with uncovered eyes" (*nōpēl ûgelûy 'ênaym*)

is interpreted as his ability to employ both dream (trance) and waking visions.[355]

Likewise, "the Deir 'Alla inscriptions also speak of a nocturnal dream vision."[356] In

summary, states Levine, "He (Balaam) is able to induce all sorts of visions."[357]

Indebted to the prior scholarship of D. N. Freedman, Levine offers his

rationale for leaving untranslated the divine names.[358] Just as in Numbers 23:8 he

had left untranslated *'El*, believing its synthesis with YHWH had not yet taken place

(nor its designation as a common noun), so here in Numbers 24:4 he leaves

untranslated *Šadday* and *'Elyôn*, likewise questioning whether or not they were

understood by the author(s) of the Balaam poems as synonymous with YHWH.

Levine appeals to Weippert in his understanding of *Šadday,* most likely a Hebrew

cognate of Akkadian *šadû* "mountain," as having "the adjectival force of a gentilic,

yielding the meaning 'one of the mountain; the one residing on the mountain.'"[359]

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[353] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194.

[354] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194.

[355] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194. Levine cites Genesis 15:12 (Abram's deep sleep), Job 33:15 (Job's nocturnal dream visions), and 1 Samuel 19:23-24 (Saul's apparent hypnotic trance). Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194.

[356] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194.

[357] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194.

[358] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 194-95. Freedman's analysis is presented in D. N. Freedman, "Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry," in *Magnalia Dei: Essays on the Bible and Archeology in the Memory of G. E. Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 55-108.

[359] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195. Weippert's discussion is found in Manfred Weippert, "Erwägungen zur Etymologie des Gottesnamens *'El Šaddaj*," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 111, no. 1 (1961): 42-62.

Thus, he understands the (primarily) patriarchal name of God *'Ēl Šadday* (Gen 17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 43:14, 48:3, 49:25, Exod 6:3) as "El, the Shadday," or "El, the mountain god."[360] This suggests other associations: the God of Israel is called *sûr* "rock, cliff" (Deut 32:18, 37, 2 Sam 23:3, Isa 51:1), and YHWH is associated with Mount Sinai (Deut 33:2, Judg 5:5).[361] Levine notes Shadday also occurs independently; besides here in the Balaam poems, it is also found in Genesis 49:25, Ezekiel 1:24, Psalm 68:15, and multiple times in Job.[362] However, more important for Levine is its connection to the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, where an apparently plural gentilic form *šdyn* (= *šaddāyîn*) occurs in parallel with *'lhn* "gods."[363] While El, the proper divine name of a Syro-Canaanite deity, is preserved in Scripture, understanding *'Elyôn* is more difficult.[364] Deriving from the verbal root *'-l-h* "to ascend," *'Elyôn* is adjectival in form (*'ly*), meaning "the highest one, the supreme god."[365] While occurring frequently in biblical literature in combination with YHWH (Ps 7:18, 21:8, 47:3) and El (Gen 14:18-20), as here in Balaam's titulary, it occurs also independently (Deut 32:8, Ps 9:3, 46:5, 91:1, 107:11).[366] These divine names are key to Levine's understanding of the *Sitz im Leben* of the Balaam poems. As Transjordanian biblical

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[360] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195.

[361] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195.

[362] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195.

[363] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195. States Levine, "From its usage in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions it would appear that Shadday may have originally represented a type or class of gods, rather than designating the name of a particular god." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195.

[364] Levine is certain of El's original function "as a proper divine name in biblical literature," despite its eventual synthesis with YHWH and use as a common noun. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 195-96.

[365] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196.

[366] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196.

literature, both the poems and the Deir 'Alla inscriptions appear to draw from the same El repertoire. Although the cultural context would be similar, they would be intended for different circles of worshippers. While both reflect a West Semitic pantheon of deities (El, Shadday, and Elyon), here in the biblical Balaam poems YHWH likewise is included.[367]

The third oracle is rich in metaphorical language. The Israelite encampment is described as a lush garden (24:5-6), the adjective *tôb* ("lovely") conveying an aesthetic quality.[368] The parallelism of *'ōhel//miškān* 'tent//dwelling' is not uncommon in biblical literature (2 Sam 7:6, Isa 54:2, Ps 78:60, Job 21:28).[369] Three types of trees here are pictured: *nehālîm* "date palms," *'ahālîm* "aloes," and *'arāzîm* "cedars;" as depicted in other biblical sources, YHWH or *'Elōhîm* "God" plants trees or gardens (Gen 2:8, Ezek 28:13).[370] Continuing the arboreal imagery in verse 7, based upon the feminine plural *dāliyyôtāw* "his boughs" (Ezek 17:6, 19:11, 31), Levine translates the singular *dalyāw* as "his boughs" (cf. Jer 1:16).[371] He cites as evidence for this interpretive choice Ezekiel's use of trees to picture kings or nations (Ezek 17, 19:11, 31:1-14). Nevertheless, with the appearance of the term *zar'ô* "his seed," the imagery shifts from trees to people: "Like a strong well-watered tree, Israel has boughs and, with the force of double entendre, Israel will have seed; that

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[367] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196.

[368] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196. The exact phrase occurs only one other time in biblical literature, in Song of Songs: "How beautiful (*mah tōbû*) are your acts of love, more than wine!" (Song of Sol 4:10). Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196.

[369] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196.

[370] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 196-97.

[371] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 197.

is, descendants in the land."[372] Israel's king is exalted over the Amalekite ruler

Agag, the only biblical reference found in the time of Saul (1 Sam 15).

Despite reference in the previous verse to Israel's king, Levine holds that

Numbers 24:8 ("El, who brought him out of Egypt, has horns like a wild ox"), like

Numbers 23:22 before it, acts as a refrain. "As there, so here, it interrupts the theme,

and the poem promptly reverts to mighty Israel. It is Israel who devours inimical

nations, and crushes their bones," states Levine.[373] He notes that the verb *yegārēm* is

"a denominative, from *gerem* 'bone' (Gen 49:19, Prov 25:15, Job 40:18);" in effect,

then, "bone" appears twice in the same verse (*'esem* and *gerem,* "he crushes their

bones").[374] Following the Syriac Peshitta, he translates the final verse "And smashes

his *loins*" (cf. Deut 33:11); not only does this extend the theme of crushing bones,

but, by eliminating *hissāw* "his arrows" (cf. Deut 32:42), it militates against what he

sees as a Masoretic intrusion.[375] In verse 9, the sequence of simple past tense verbs

sans conjunctions (*kārā', šākab*: "He crouches, he lies down") is typical, he

suggests, of early Hebrew poetry.[376] The third oracle ends with the formula of

blessing and cursing, a reverse take on Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen 27:29).

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[372] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 197.

[373] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 197.

[374] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 189, 197.

[375] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 197-98.

[376] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 198.

The fourth poetic oracle begins, as does the third, with Balaam's full titulary (24:15-16). The two are identical save for the relative adjective *'ašer* "who, that" absent here, perhaps indicating a secondary addition (in the third oracle).[377]

The oracle proper begins with three couplets (24:17), the first translated as, "I see it, but not now; I envision it, but not soon." By translating the masculine pronouns as "it," the couplet becomes a statement about the prophetic oracle itself, not about what follows in the subsequent couplets. Levine defends his decision to translate *qārôb* "near" as "soon," suggesting elsewhere the adjective is applied to both space and time (Isa 13:6, Ezek 7:7). Thus, according to his translation, the content of the prophetic oracle "will occur in the distant future, and is not imminent."[378] Commenting on the interpretive conundrum of the second couplet, Levine notes the two key parallelisms: the verbal *dārak//qām* and the nominal *kôkab//šēbet*. While Levine is confident the verse speaks of "an Israelite ruler…destined to conquer much of Transjordan," how the terms are translated in parallel remains difficult:

> The question is whether the metaphor begins with reference to a star and continues with a meteor, using celestial imagery throughout, or whether the verse projects an applied metaphor from the outset, beginning with a sovereign, depicted as *kôkāb* "star," and continuing with *šēbet* "ruler, sovereign."[379]

Although his translation reads: "A 'star' marches forth from Jacob; a meteor rises from Israel," Levine understands the verse as offering a dual metaphor.[380] "Star" can

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[377] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 199.

[378] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 199.

[379] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 199-200.

[380] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 190, 199, 201.

refer to a hero, which may also allude to the "military-celestial" language found in biblical and post-biblical Hebrew literature.[381] "And so," concludes Levine, "*kôkāb* may, in the present verse, allude to the Israelite king, David, who was to subdue large parts of Transjordan."[382] Levine's translation of the third couplet, via his use of the masculine pronoun, continues his description of the Israelite king: "He strikes the brow of Moab, the *pate* of all the people of Seth."[383] Appealing to Ugaritic mythology, he notes the verb *m-h-s* "to strike, smash" describes the death blow of a warrior-god (likewise in 24:8).[384] This description of the conquering warrior, smashing the "brow" of Moab and the "pate" of the people of Seth, should be taken metaphorically, according to Levine. Both nominals, he argues, occur in topographical contexts: *pē'āh* "sidelock, brow" used to indicate the edge of a field (Lev 19:9, 23:22) or border areas (Ezek 47:17), and *qōdqōd* "pate" by appealing to an Akkadian cognate, *qaqqadu*.[385] "The Israelite conqueror will subdue both the borders and interior of Moab and the land of the people of Seth," states Levine.[386]

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[381] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 201. "Military terminology is often used in referring to heavenly bodies as God's 'host, forces,' his *sābā'* (Isa 40:26, and cf. Ps 147:3)." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 201. Levine also makes reference here to another of his articles: Baruch A. Levine, "From the Aramaic Enoch Fragments: The Semantics of Cosmography," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 1-2 (Spring-Autumn 1982): 311-26.

[382] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 201.

[383] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 190, 201.

[384] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 201-2. Concerning its association with the God of Israel, see Deut 32:39. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 198.

[385] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 202. It should be noted that Levine arrives at *weqodqōd* "pate," instead of the infinitival form *weqarqar* "and the overturning of–," by appealing to the present verse's paraphrase in Jeremiah 48:45 (with its thematic allusions to the Heshbon Ballad of Numbers 21). Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 202.

[386] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 202. While noting that "Moab" and the "land of the people of Seth" are parallel designations, the ethnographic identity of *benê Šēt* remains uncertain. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 202.

The final two verses (24:18-19), according to Levine's translation, function

in parallel; both describe an enemy invasion and subsequent deportation of her

citizenry: "Edom shall be a land depopulated; Seir—depopulated by its enemies.

Jacob shall subdue *them,* and deport survivors from *Ar*" (24:18-19).[387] The repeated

yerēšāh, unique to verse 18, suggests not only seizure or possession of territory, but

also its resultant state of being: depopulation by an enemy invader (cf. Ezek

14:22).[388] "Such will be the fate of Edom-Seir at the hands of its enemies," states

Levine, understanding the last three words of verse 18 as a refrain: "Israel prevails in

battle!"[389] Likewise in verse 19, it is the deportation of survivors that is in view.

Apart from the Masoretic reading, *weyērd miyyaʿqōb* "One of Jacob shall rule,"

Levine follows Albright in rearranging the consonants, moving the prepositional

mem to the previous verb (so it becomes an object suffix). Basing this suffixed form

on the root *r-d-h*, Levine's translation reads: "Jacob shall subdue *them.*"[390] While

'-b-d can be translated "to destroy," here Levine translates the Hiphil *he'ebîd* from

two Akkadian roots: *abātu* A (active) "to destroy" and *abātu* B (stative) "to flee; to

disappear" ("to remove" in the D-stem), arriving at "to deport." States Levine,

"Often this verb, both in its stative and causative stems, connotes exile, flight and

dispersal" (cf. Deut 9:3b).[391] Instead of *'îr* "town, capital city," Levine reads the

final term of verse 19 *'Ār*; i.e., Ar of Moab, just north of the Arnon (cf. Num 21:15,

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[387] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 190, 202-4.

[388] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 202.

[389] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 203.

[390] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 190, 203.

[391] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 203.

28). If verse 18 is original, these final two verses may function as a brief prophecy against Edom, offering either geographic scope (from south [Edom] to north [Moab]), or by focusing on its capital city (reading Masoretic *ʿîr*).[392]

The Balaam Poems: *Sitz im Leben*

According to Levine's reconstruction, both the Deir ʿAlla inscriptions and the biblical Balaam poems were composed by Gileadite Israelites, the former by those who worshipped El alone, the latter by those who worshipped YHWH, "but not exclusively so."[393] As he states, "The similarity of the Deir ʿAlla language to biblical Hebrew, and the thematic affinities between the two versions of the Balaam saga, would surely allow for the above conclusions."[394] Answering his original thesis, Levine summarizes:

> In effect, the Balaam orations of Numbers 23-24 are stating that El, head of the regional pantheon, had redeemed Israel from Egypt and was now bringing this people to its land. The deities of the regional pantheon, whom Balaam served, and who were headed by El, had commanded him to bless Israel, forbidding him to pronounce curses upon this people who was blessed by them. To put it simply, Balaam's own chief deity, El, was rendering him powerless! This is why there is no battle of divine powers in the Balaam poems.[395]

While carbon 14 dating ascribes the Deir ʿAlla inscriptions to 800 B.C. or thereafter, Levine presumes they remained on the walls of the Deir ʿAlla compound

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[392] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 204. Some have suggested that verse 18 is an interpolation, leaving no mention of Edom in this fourth oracle. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 204.

[393] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42.

[394] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42.

[395] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 43.

throughout the eighth century until the Assyrian invasion (734-721 B.C.).[396]

Although they refer to some unspecified disaster, the inscriptions do not contain

historical indicators. "All we can say," states Levine, "is that, if our interpretation is

correct, Balaam was memorialized in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions for having saved his

land and people, namely, the area of the Valley of Sukkoth and its population, from

some past calamity."[397]

Thus, the discovery of the Deir 'Alla inscriptions raises the possibility that

the biblical Balaam poems were written by Transjordanian Israelites. While the

Heshbon Ballad (Num 21) confirms Israel's sovereignty over northern Moab, the

biblical Balaam poems offer theological warrant for claims to the Transjordan.[398] "It

is reasonable to hypothesize that the four Balaam poems, which extol Israelite power

and hold out no hope whatsoever to the Moabites (and possibly to the Edomites,

either) or to the Amalekites, reflect the same realities as those of the Heshbon Ballad

preserved in Numbers 21."[399] According to this hypothesis, Levine ascribes the

biblical Balaam poems to the early ninth century B.C., when king Omri and his

successors were consolidating power in North Moab, before king Mesha's liberating

campaigns.[400] Thus, he sees a clear corollary between the Heshbon Ballad and

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[396] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42, 230. Levine states, "It would be reasonable to date the biblical Balaam poems to the same period, and to suggest that we have represented in them a particular phase in the development of Israelite religion. The synthesis of El with YHWH…and the triumph of exclusive Yahwism were yet to be actualized." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 42-43. However, he goes on to specify the time period of the biblical Balaam poems as prior to 852 B.C. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 44.

[397] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 231.

[398] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 43.

[399] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 231.

[400] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 231.

Balaam's fourth poem, with the "star" arising from Jacob/Israel referring to Omri.

Likewise, he understands the third poem parallels the fourth—the defeat of the

Amalekites to the west of the Jordan (cf. Num 13:29) corresponding with the defeat

of the Moabites to the east.[401] According to his reckoning, "the first two poems say,

in effect, that Israel cannot be ejected from Transjordan, that they are a powerful

force occupying a vast area of settlement. Once again, the period that best fits these

descriptions is the first half of the ninth century B.C., the period preceding Mesha's

campaigns."[402] If Levine's reconstruction is correct, the Heshbon Ballad and the

Balaam poems are relegated to the same era (before 852 B.C.), the Balaam poems

antedating the Deir 'Alla inscriptions by more than fifty years.[403]

The Balaam Prose Narratives

Source Analysis

Levine eschews traditional J and E source analysis in the book of Balaam. As

previously stated, the divine names, in particular, cannot be used to distinguish

between the sources. Instead, Levine understands the pericope as an independent

unit, the work of one author using diverse sources. "In effect," he states, "the Balaam

narratives represent a commentary on the poems."[404] Unlike the poems, El is not

mentioned; the Balaam narratives are strictly monotheistic in outlook. "The premise

of the narratives is that all Balaam's activities were controlled by Israel's God,

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[401] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 231-32.

[402] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 232.

[403] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 232.

[404] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 234.

designated either as *YHWH* or *'Elōhîm*."[405] In the author's understanding of the poems, *'ēl*, *'elyôn* and *šadday* are used to designate of the God of Israel.[406]

<p align="center">The invitation to Balaam (Numbers 22:2-21)</p>

In 22:4, and again in 22:7, Levine suggests reference to "the elders of Midian" is an interpolation, a priestly redaction to account for later conflicts with the Midianites.[407] "The priestly writers saw to it that Midianite hostility was also projected into the wilderness period," he states.[408] In verse 7, Balaam is brought *qesāmîn* ("payment for divination"). Levine notes that, according to Gray, the same term may indicate both "the act and its reward or its result"; thus "to divine" may also indicate payment (brought in advance) for Balaam's service.[409] Levine notes that in Joshua 13:22, Balaam is designated a *qôsēm* "diviner" (his only given title in the Hebrew Bible), while in the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, he is entitled *hzh 'lhn* "a divine seer."[410]

Regarding the identification of Balaam's homeland, Levine outlines the (minimum) two traditions found in the Balaam pericope. In the one, Balaam is from Aram in northeastern Syria (23:7); in the other, he is from the Transjordan, and linked to the Midianites (Num 31:8) and an Edomite king (Gen 36:32). Owing to this latter allusion, Levine suggests that the author of verse 5 is making explicit Balaam's

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[405] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 234.

[406] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 234.

[407] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 144-45.

[408] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 94-95.

[409] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 150-51. Levine is referencing Gray, 329.

[410] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 151.

connection with the Edomites, for, he states, "the correspondence of the two names, of the diviner and of the Edomite king, can hardly be incidental."[411] He goes on to speculate that Balaam could very well have been this first Edomite king. Nevertheless, verse 5 "gives out contradictory messages, with indications of successive redaction by advocates of one or another tradition concerning Balaam's origin."[412] His own view, however, is that "Pethor," although unidentified, was located on the river in the land of the Ammonites (the Jabbok/Zerqa), making Balaam from the Transjordan. The inscriptions found at tel Deir 'Alla, located nearby in the Valley of Sukkoth, likewise identify Balaam as a Transjordanian.[413] "So Balaam," he concludes, "whatever his specific nationality, resided in or near the land of the Ammonites."[414]

In verses 6, 11-12, Levine comments on *'-r-r* "to execrate, curse" (also *q-b-b*), as well as its antonym *bērēk* "to bless"—prominent themes throughout Numbers 22-24. "These two verbs express the tension between Balak and Balaam," states Levine. "Balak would like Israel to be cursed, and Balaam cannot do this."[415] Forms of *'-r-r* and *q-b-b* are likewise found in Numbers 22:17, 23:11, 24:10, as well as Numbers 23:8, 13, 27, and 28. "It seems," states Levine, "that the narrator is playing on usual forms and variant morphological realizations in an effort to

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[411] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 147.

[412] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 148-49.

[413] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 148.

[414] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 148.

[415] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 150.

emphasize the theme of malediction, and to resonate with the diction of the poems."[416]

<center>Balaam arrives in Moab (Numbers 22:36-41)</center>

According to Levine's translation, king Balak greets Balaam at *'Îr Mô'ab*: "Ir of Moab, which is on the border marked by the Arnon, (and) which is at the (nearest) extremity of the border."[417] However, he notes the geographic description matches that of Numbers 21:13-15, Deuteronomy 2:18, and Isaiah 15:1, "where undoubtedly the same site is written *'Ār (Mô'āb)*."[418] This does not, however, help specify Balaam's provenance. States Levine, "In the present instance, Balaam was coming from the east, or the northeast, so that from that perspective, one would speak of the upper courses of the Arnon as being the nearest extremity of the Moabite border to him."[419] The place of Balak's meeting with Balaam does not help in this regard; states Levine, "It was simply proper for the king of Moab to greet his guest at the border of his own country, which, at the time, was marked by the Arnon."[420] Levine understands Balak's sacrifice in verse 40 as distinct from that of Numbers 23:1-2. Noting the verb *z-b-h* is derived from *zebah* "meal," this sacrifice is a prepared feast to honor Balaam. As a result, "Balak…sent portions of the slaughtered sheep and cattle to Balaam and the chieftains who were with him."[421] In the morning, Balaam

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[416] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 152.

[417] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 143, 160.

[418] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 160. According to Levine, Gray notes this as well. Gray, 286.

[419] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 160.

[420] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 160.

[421] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 161.

<center>99</center>

is taken up to Bamoth-Baal, identical to *Bāmôt Ba'al 'Arnôn* "Bamoth-Baal-on-Arnon" in (the suggested reading of) the Heshbon Ballad (Num 21:28).[422] From this site, just north of the Arnon, Balaam would be able to see "the nearest extremity of the Israelite camp."[423]

Balaam begins his work as Balak's diviner (Numbers 23:1-6)

The sacrifice offered is a burnt offering (23:3): *'ōlāh,* a term derived from the verb *'-l-h* "to ascend," which describes, according to Levine's understanding, the sacrificial flame burning upward.[424] He states that in ancient Near Eastern practice, the *'ōlāh,* was offered first, as a sort of trial run in order to test the god's responsiveness.[425] Balaam's walking (*h-l-k*) amongst the altars is related, perhaps, to *nehāšîm* "omens;" after his statement in the second oracle that *nahaš* "augury" has no place in Israel, Balaam's walking and searching for omens cease before the third oracle (Num 24:1).[426] The *dābār* "word" Balaam receives from YHWH is technical, states Levine, parallel with *tôrāh* "instruction" (Isa 2:4), a message from God (Jer 18:18).[427]

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[422] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 161.

[423] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 161.

[424] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 166.

[425] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 162.

[426] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 166.

[427] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 167.

<center>Balak's anger and disappointment (Numbers 23:11-17)</center>

In this brief narrative interlude, Levine notes how the prose narrator has taken cues

from the poetic oracles, demonstrating the latter's priority. For example, in verse 11,

the Hebrew verb *leqaḥtîkā* "I brought you," shares an affinity with the poetic diction

of Numbers 23:20, where the infinitive absolute of *bēraktā bārēk* conveys a similar

nuance of selection for a specific purpose.[428] Likewise in verse 13, the sense

conveyed by *'epes* + direct object, translated as "only the [nearest] edge of him," is

one of restricted vision at this second vantage point. According to Levine's

understanding, Balaam had been overwhelmed at the first vantage point seeing the

entirety of the Israelite camp (the prose narrator taking his cue from Balaam's first

poetic oration [23:9], and not from its narrative introduction [22:41]); perhaps his

execration would be more successful if he could see only its nearest extremity.[429] In

verse 14, Levine presumes the location markers Pisgah and *Śedēh Sōpîm* are both

toponyms.[430] In verse 17, he believes Balak's question, "What has YHWH spoken?"

is significant; "it shows that Balak is beginning to get the point, recognizing that

Balaam must communicate the message God places in his mouth."[431]

<center>The continuing narrative (Numbers 23:25-30)</center>

Balak tries a third time, once again believing Balaam's vision holds the key to a

successful curse. "The presumption is that a change of vantage point might induce

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[428] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 179.

[429] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 164, 179-80.

[430] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 180.

[431] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 180.

the God of Israel to allow a curse, even though Balaam had stated that the God of

Israel would not permit this," states Levine.[432] Once again, seven altars, along with

the requisite number of sacrifices, are prepared at "the summit of Peor that overlooks

the wasteland" (23:28).[433] Levine suggests that Peor may refer to the same site as

Baal-Peor. "Even if not," he continues, "the two locales could not have been far

from each other (Num 21:13, Judg 11:22)."[434]

Balaam blesses Israel and eschews divination (Numbers 24:1-2)

Contra Numbers 23:3, here Balaam does not "walk about in search of omens" (24:1),

but seeks to bless Israel directly.[435] The verb *šôkēn* "encamped" (24:2) suggests

military preparedness. The *rûah 'elōhîm* "the spirit of God" was upon Balaam,

which Levine understands as the spirit of prophecy. As he clarifies, "This is the first

time it is said of Balaam that he prophesied with God's spirit, and this statement

clearly reflects a changing perception of Balaam's role. No longer a pagan diviner,

he has become a prophet."[436]

Balaam and Balak part company (Numbers 24:10-14)

In language reminiscent of Numbers 23:11, Balak lashes out at Balaam, symbolized

through the striking together of his palms (24:10). In the following verse, "Balak

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[432] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 163.

[433] Levine's translation. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 165.

[434] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 187.

[435] Levine's translation. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 188, 190-91.

[436] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 191.

paints Balaam a loser, who could have reaped great rewards had he been willing to

pronounce execrations against Israel," states Levine.[437] Balaam repeats what he has

said previously (22:18): he cannot go beyond the word of YHWH (24:12-13).

Balaam returns to his people, but not before telling Balak "what this people will do

to your people" in future days (24:14).[438] Concerning this time period, "Hebrew

be'aharît hayyāmîm 'in the days to come' refers to the future, but not necessarily to

the distant future," states Levine. "It is typical of prophetic rhetoric (Isa 2:2, Mic

4:1)."[439]

The Balaam Prose Narratives: *Sitz im Leben*

Regarding the context of JE, Levine believes the writers of J (from Judah and the

Negeb) and E (from northern Israel) inserted the realities of their respective locales

and eras (the settlement, the monarchy) into the wilderness period, of which little

historically is known.[440] "By so doing," states Levine, "the JE authors laid a

foundation for later realistic relations between Israelites and some of their enemies—

such as the Amalekites, Midianites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites—as well as

between the Israelites and some of their friends."[441] A discussion of the *Sitz im

Leben*, then, involves identifying these later realities in order to discern the interests

and concerns of the JE historiographers themselves. In effect, these JE

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[437] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 198.

[438] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 189, 199.

[439] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 199.

[440] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 89.

[441] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 89.

historiographers were seeking to justify later Israelite policies by grounding such

hostilities or friendships to the period of the wilderness.[442] However, later

emendations by later editors must also be taken into account. As Levine cautiously

notes:

> The modern critical scholar of the Hebrew Bible is aware, however, that the
> received text of Numbers, as compiled from various literary or documentary
> sources, reflects the literary creativity, as well as the policies, ideologies, and
> attitudes, of later periods of Israelite history.[443]

Needless to say, while Levine is confident the Balaam narratives followed

the Balaam poems, he is less certain as to when they were composed. If the author(s)

of the prose narratives reinterpreted the poetic oracles under the rubric of exclusive

monotheism, then, by Levine's reckoning, they were written at a "considerably later

period," after the synthesis of El and YHWH had taken place.[444] Since the author(s)

seems to be familiar with JE, or at the very least, its component parts, then the

Balaam narratives were composed after the seventh century B.C.[445] Reminds Levine:

> It has already been explained that these narratives do not lend themselves to
> the usual breakdown into J and E, or even resemble JE, which is the product
> of the 'braiding' and 'hinging' of the two sources. The Balaam narratives
> seem to be the work of an author who was acquainted with JE, or at least
> with its component parts, and who spun a tale of irony, amplifying cues
> provided by the Balaam poems.[446]

For his part, Levine speculates the ass incident of Numbers 22 may be postexilic.[447]

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[442] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 97.

[443] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 89.

[444] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 43.

[445] Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 48-49; Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 237.

[446] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 237.

[447] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 237.

The Tale of the Jenny (Numbers 22:22-35)

Levine holds the position that, in agreement with others before him, Numbers 22:22-35—the Tale of the Jenny—is a negative recasting of the Balaam tradition based upon later biblical (and some postbiblical) traditions.[448] These include Deuteronomy 23:5-6 (implying Balaam's desire to curse Israel), Joshua 13:22, 24:9-10, and Numbers 31:8, 16 (Balaam's death as punishment for his role in the Baal-Peor incident). The end result is an interpolation meant to mock Balaam; although ordinary people and prophets could see divine messengers, "the noted clairvoyant (could not) see what his jenny saw!"[449] Levine outlines how this later author has taken literary cues from the JE narrative (the donkey [22:21; cf. 22:22], the men *hā'anāšîm* [22:20; cf. 22:35a], the two squires [22:21; cf. 22:22, Gen 22:3]) to weave his own "picaresque tale," effectively mocking Balaam.[450] The tale ends just as it had begun (22:35a; cf. 22:20), suggesting strongly the interpolation. Indeed, without it, the Balaam narrative would flow just as well.

Levine does not mention the dissonance between 22:20 and 22:22, but he does see a correlation between God's anger and the angel stationed (*wayyityaṣṣēb*) on the road as an adversary. The story, he comments, is "narrated in a way that blurs the identities of God and of his divine messenger," noting the Hithpael, *hityaṣṣēb*, "elsewhere describes the posture of divine beings in theophany (Exod 34:5, 1 Sam 3:10)."[451] The Hebrew *lešāṭān lo* "confronting him as an adversary" suggests

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[448] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 139, 154.

[449] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 154-55.

[450] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 155.

[451] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 155.

"diction of the late, preexilic historical books, rather than with postexilic literature," for the latter tend to "define the common noun *śātān* with the definite article (cf. Zech 3:1, Job 1:7)" or treat Satan as a proper noun.[452] The use of the Hebrew *š-l-p* in verse 23, restricted to "unsheathing a sword," can be compared to *weharbô šelûpāh beyādô*, "his sword was unsheathed in his hand," in Joshua 5:13; since the latter belongs to the "primary stratum of the Book of Joshua," this also suggests a late preexilic (or early postexilic) date for the Tale of the Jenny.[453] Levine understands a progression in Balaam's journey (22:23-27), "from a road that cut through a field, to a path cutting through a vineyard, and finally, to a very narrow part of the vineyard path," the angel leading him into a dead-end trap.[454] After Balaam's third strike against his beast, "YHWH opened the jenny's mouth, so that she spoke to Balaam" (22:28).[455] Comments Levine, "Speech comes naturally to humans, but not, of course, to animals, who are given this exceptional faculty in fables."[456]

YHWH also opens, or "uncovers," Balaam's eyes (22:31), a motif repeated in the third and fourth poetic oracles (24:4, 16).[457] In verse 32, Levine translates Hebrew *derek* as "voyage, mission" (cf. 1 Sam 21:6) like Akkadian *harrānu*, but admits his translation "for the mission was pressing upon me" (*kî yārat hadderek*

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[452] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 155.

[453] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 156.

[454] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 157.

[455] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 142, 157.

[456] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 157.

[457] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 158.

lenegdî) is speculative.[458] Nevertheless, it bolsters Levine's position that Balaam's

journey was "a mission undertaken at divine command, or with divine

endorsement."[459] As Levine summarizes, "both Balaam and the angel had set out on

their respective missions; the angel to bind Balaam to God's command before

allowing him to continue, and Balaam to foil Balak's plan by pronouncing

providential blessings over Israel."[460] The Tale concludes with Balaam admitting his

guilt (22:34), and the angel of YHWH instructing Balaam (1) to return with "the

men" (*hā anāšîm*), (2) to speak only what he is told, and (3) Balaam returning with

the chieftains of Moab/Balak—exactly the point where the narrative had ended

before the Tale had begun (22:20-21); an example, notes Levine, of "hinging."[461]

Balaam as an International Prophet (Numbers 24:20-24)

Three brief oracles remain, appended here, Levine notes, without introduction. The

first is the Amalekite oracle, Numbers 24:20. As in the previous four oracles, the

idiomatic expression *wayyiśśā' mešālô wayyō'mar* "He recited (literally 'raised,

lifted') his balanced verse, speaking" begins each of the remaining three.[462]

Balaam's vision (*wayyar'*) of the Amalekites conveys both his ability to see them as

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[458] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 143, 159. He states, "This is only a guess at the meaning of the text, because the verb *y-r-t* occurs elsewhere only tentatively in Job 16:11-12." Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 159.

[459] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 158. He also draws upon the Hebrew *šālôš regālîm* "three times" (22:28, 32), where in Exodus 23:14 it is used in the context of pilgrimage. Likewise, three verses later (Exod 23:17), *šālôš pe'āmîm* is used synonymously (cf. Num 24:10). Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 157-58.

[460] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 158.

[461] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 159.

[462] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 167.

a people, as well his ability to see their fate.[463] The prophecy rests on the contrast

between *rē'šît* "first, foremost" and *'aharît* "last" (cf. Deut 11:12, Isa 46:10).

Hebrew *rē'šît* can convey both *first in time* and *first in status*; both are incorporated

into Levine's interpretation: "Amalek, an ancient nation, the first encountered by the

Israelites in battle, was once powerful and numerous, but was ultimately done in."[464]

Their *'aharît* "fate, destiny," is *'adê 'ōbēd* "gone forever," which suggests to Levine

that the Amalekites "would lose (their) collective identity…would be

deported…would cease to exist, as such."[465]

The second is the Kenite oracle, which begins in the same manner as the one

previous. In the parallelism of the first stich—*môšāb* "seat residence, settlement" (Ps

107:4, 7, 36) is parallel with *qēn* "nest"—Levine understands allusion to Petra (cf.

Isa 49:16).[466] Nevertheless, despite Edom's secure fortress, Cain will be "trampled

like a ravaged field," his translation based on the stative, Piel denominative of *be'îr*

"cattle, herd," meaning "a place trampled by cattle" (cf. Exod 22:4; Isa 5:5).[467] This

will happen "at the time Assur takes you captive," Levine reading *'ad-māh* as

"when" (cf. Judg 5:7; Song of Sol 1:12; Dan 7:9).[468]

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[463] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 204.

[464] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 204.

[465] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 204-5.

[466] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 205.

[467] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 205.

[468] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 190, 205. States Levine, "This is preferable to Gray's reading of the hemistich as a rhetorical question: 'How long will Assur take you captive?'" Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 205. However, Gray states, "No reasonable meaning has ever yet been legitimately extracted." Gray 375. Eventually, Gray concludes, "The text really yields no sense." Gray, 376.

The final oracle concerns the invasion of the Kittim. Unlike the previous two oracles, Balaam's vision here is not included; otherwise, it begins as the rest. Levine favors an older reading of consonantal *mśmw 'l*, translating *miśśemō'l* "from the Northland" instead of *miśśūmô 'ēl* "from his placing, (namely), that of *'ēl*."[469] The Masoretic reading, he believes, is the result of a "tendentious correction" to clarify God's ability to save.[470] Clarifying his translation, Levine states, "The sense is that few from the Northland (i.e., Assyria and Syria) will survive when the ships sent by the Kittim (i.e. Cyprus) invade."[471] Based upon both biblical (Gen 10:21-22; Josh 24:2-3; Ezra 4:10-11) and non-biblical (Neo-Assyrian/New-Babylonian) texts, *'ēber* refers to territory beyond/west of the Euphrates; i.e., Upper Syria.[472] The Hebrew verb *'innû* is a technical term meaning, "to render tributary, to subject, subjugate," in a political sense (2 Kings 17:20; cf. Gen 15:13, Exod 1:12, Deut 26:6).[473] Assyria and Syria will be subjugated by the Kittim; the Hebrew *Kittîm* related to Kition, a port city on Cyprus (cf. Dan 10:30).[474] They, too, will be *'adê 'ōbēd* "gone forever" (cf. 24:20).

Levine suggests that these three brief oracles have been appended to the four Balaam poems "to give Balaam a reputation as a prophet to the nations."[475] He thus looks for thematic links between the appended oracles and the Balaam poems, such

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[469] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206.

[470] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206.

[471] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206.

[472] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206.

[473] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206-7.

[474] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 206.

[475] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 237.

as the connection between the Amalekites (24:20) and Agag (24:7), and between

Cain (24:21-22) and Edom (24:18) (although, in the latter case, both could have been

appended). Establishing a connection with the third appended oracle is more

difficult; perhaps the best that can be offered is its connection to the one prior,

making it "once removed" from the Balaam poems, themselves.[476]

Due to the enigmatic nature of these appended oracles, establishing their *Sitz

im Leben* is, in the words of Levine, "unlikely."[477] Nevertheless, making note of

Raabe's work, Levine makes an "educated guess," linking the Kenite oracle to

Obadiah via its "overall diction and themes."[478] Referencing Lipinsky's work,

Levine links the third appended oracle to Isaiah 23, also citing its dictional link (Isa

23:1).[479] Nevertheless, these conjectures, he confesses, "are hardly adequate to the

task of identifying historical settings reliably."[480]

Critical Analysis of Levine

What has been gained by such an exhaustive survey of Levine's analysis of Numbers

22-24? While perhaps too many philological details have been reviewed, that is, in

fact, the point: once the text has been analyzed in such atomistic detail, it becomes

difficult to interpret as an artistic whole. Of course, this is not the goal of historical-

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[476] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 238.

[477] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 207.

[478] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 238. Levine is referring to the following work by Raabe: Paul R. Raabe, *Obadiah*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 31-33.

[479] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 238. Levine is referring to the following work by Lipinsky: Edward Lipinsky, "The Elegy on the Fall of Sidon in Isaiah 23," in *Eretz Israel*, H. L Ginsberg vol. 14, ed. Menahem Haran (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1978):79-89.

[480] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 238.

critical analysis, which seeks instead to uncover the history of ancient Israel. In this, Levine's analysis is reflective of later twentieth-century Jewish scholarship; demonstrating proficient use of the historical method and philology, he interprets texts and other biblical institutions in light of cognate ancient languages and extra-biblical parallels.

Concerning the book of Balaam, Levine argues for a bifurcate text, the narratives representing a later composition than that of the poems. Concerning the poems, Levine posits that they, along with the Deir 'Alla texts, were included in the Transjordanian repository (T)—an archive containing the creative output of the Gilead Israelites during the era of Northern Israel's dominance in the Transjordan.[481] While the "star" of Numbers 24:17 may reflect David's hegemony, it is, in fact, referencing Omri's campaigns to quash Mesha's insurgency. While YHWH was a member deity in a regional pan-national pantheon, El was, in fact, the chief deity of the Gilead Israelites.

In this way, by incorporating the discovery of the Deir 'Alla texts into his analysis of Numbers 22-24, Levine has offered suggestive new insights into the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel. However, in defending the Israelite authorship of the Deir 'Alla inscriptions, he cites the biblical Balaam poems themselves—somewhat circular reasoning that lacks ancillary historical evidence. Likewise, by appealing to the elusive Transjordanian (T) source, his insights remain as speculative as those from previous generations.

Nevertheless, Levine states, "These (Deir 'Alla) texts, written in a local or regional language akin to Hebrew, have brought biblical scholarship nearer to *its*

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[481] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 208-9.

ultimate goal of identifying the historical *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Balaam poetic

orations, and of their narrative accompaniments."[482] While this definition of the goal

of biblical scholarship may be too limiting, it certainly is not uncommon. According

to his own definition, then, has Levine's scholarship been successful? Are we today

closer in "identifying the historical *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Balaam poetic orations"

than we were in previous generations? Further investigation will be needed to help

answer that question.

GREENE: BALAAM AND HIS INTERPRETERS

Drawing upon such twentieth-century historical-critical approaches, John Greene

offers an original thesis specific to the book of Balaam. In his monograph *Balaam*

and His Interpreters, Greene argues that redactional "authors," along with post-

biblical writers, have employed the Balaam figure and oracles attributed to him to

ask: "Who can speak for God?" Greene summarizes his argument thusly:

> (1) Balaam was a famous monarch/seer reputed to have been an effective
> diviner.
>
> (2) As a result of his divining efficacy, he became a legend among the
> members, especially the priests, of the petty kingdoms of the eastern Levant
> between the 10th and 5th centuries B.C.E.
>
> (3) Ancient Israelite priesthoods warred with each other over the issue of
> sacerdotal hegemony: wars reflected in the source strata of the Pentateuch
> and "Balaam's" role within them.
>
> (4) Later priestly trajectories continued to craft insider/outsider arguments
> around the Balaam figure and type.
>
> (5) In some cases, Balaam's words were severed from his figure and type and
> were utilized by the Qumranities, the Samaritans, the writer of 1 Enoch, or
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> (6) The figure was embellished by later Samaritans (Pilti), Josephus (the
> Balaam speech), and Al Kisa'i.

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[482] Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 138-39; emphasis added.

(7) Balaam was remotely remembered by certain writers of works contained in the New Testament, the Babylonian Talmud, and medieval Samaritan works.

(8) Modern short story and political-scientific writers found Balaam the figure, or words attributed to him, helpful in articulating social and political concerns.[483]

Thus, Greene maps a historical trajectory whereby Balaam the figure, along with those words attributed to him, have been politicized for sacerdotal hegemony.

Beginning with the 1967 discovery of the Deir 'Alla text, whose central figure likewise is named "Balaam son of Beor," Greene notes commonalities between the two mantic figures: (1) he is described as a *hzh*/seer, and (2) he communicates with deities through dreams.[484] While Greene understands Balaam as a sovereign, in the Deir 'Alla text he functions as a priest/king/seer/spokesperson/covenant mediator.[485] As a "seer of the gods," states Greene, Balaam of the Deir 'Alla text is portrayed as "a monarch who headed a 'covenanted community.' The covenant *partners* comprised a council of deities who intended to redress a grievance against the 'covenanted community' by way of cosmic conflagration."[486] This aligns well with Levine's description of Balaam

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[483] John T. Greene, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Traditions*, Brown Judaic Studies 244 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), xi-xii.

[484] Greene, 164.

[485] Greene, 164. Greene offers three lines of reasoning for Balaam's status as sovereign: (1) Balak's message to Balaam (Numbers 22:5-7 and 15-17) suggests communication between co-equals, (2) similarities between Balaam son of Beor (Num 22:5) and the twelfth or eleventh century B.C.E. king of Edom, Bela son of Beor (Gen 36:32), and (3) the fact that priest-kings were common in the ANE. "It seems likely," states Greene, "that underlying the numerous accounts of Balaam was a monarch who was famous for his abilities as a diviner—and who, like the others, became a legend: in his time and…well beyond." Greene, xi.

[486] Greene, 163.

drawn from the Deir ʻAlla text as mediator of a regional pantheon of West Semitic divine powers.

This extra-biblical Balaam is the first of many Balaam figures Greene traces through subsequent literary layers. However, the Deir ʻAlla Balaam is distinct; not only does its existence suggest Balaam was a historical figure, but that subsequent literary uses were due to his apparent renown. States Greene, "The figure *and* type, *Balaam*, will be shown to have lent themselves well to the analytical and hermeneutical needs of several generations of ancient Israelite thinkers who found it both necessary *and* convenient to group certain problem-solutions around him."[487] For Greene, analyzing the trajectory of the Balaam figure— famous prophet, priest, and diviner—functions as an entryway into the subject of prophecy, divination, and magic.[488]

Moving from the Deir ʻAlla text to the biblical text, Greene employs Richard Elliott Friedman's 1987 updating of the Documentary Hypothesis. In his *Who Wrote the Bible?* Friedman proposes identities for the presumed "authors" behind the source strata:[489]

J (A Jerusalem-based work reflecting a southern perspective.)

E (A work reflecting the critical perspective of the Shiloh-based priesthood.)

JE (A work reflecting the interfacing of the J and E source strata.)

P (A negative reaction by Jerusalem-based, Aaronid priests to the conciliatory perspective of JE.)

D (A Shiloh priestly backlash reaction to P.)

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[487] Greene, 5.

[488] Greene, 5.

[489] Greene is referring to the following work by Friedman: Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987).

R (A redactional attempt, accredited to the priest-Scribe Ezra, to bring the preceding hypothesized strata into harmony.)[490]

Thus, using Friedman's schema, based upon the book of Balaam's discerned redactional layers, Greene offers his own historical reconstruction. In this, he argues that Numbers 22-24, a literary mosaic, has undergone four major recensions.[491]

The J source stratum (tenth century B.C.E.): Here the Balaam figure is offered as a type of a formerly non-Israelite priest who now is accepted as a legitimate priestly colleague. As type, he might have been a local Yahweh-loyal prophet/priest/diviner in territory conquered or controlled by David.[492]

The E source stratum (sometime between 922 and 722 B.C.E.): Since the E source is the least well-defined, it is difficult to discern here a clear Balaam type. Nevertheless, had more information been available, Greene is certain this Balaam type would be cast negatively. Most likely produced by insider Shiloh priests zealous for the worship of Yahweh, this northern source would have been wary of outsider diviners. This recension places Balaam's provenance in the north.[493]

The JE source stratum (post-722 B.C.E.): Here the prior two strata are combined resulting in a conciliatory position. After the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, refugee priests were absorbed into the Judean priesthood. Once again, as outsiders were legitimized, this Balaam type serves as the model *par excellence* of the Judean priesthood. [494]

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[490] Greene, 7.

[491] Greene, 65-66.

[492] Greene, 66.

[493] Greene, 66.

[494] Greene, 67.

The P source stratum (post-JE stratum; late eighth to early seventh century

B.C.E.): Much earlier than the traditional P source, this stratum is a response to the

JE stratum. Once again, as outsider priests were disdained, this recension presumes

efficacious sacrifices only can be offered by authentic priests of Yahweh. Greene

argues the recension's preoccupation with Assyria belies its production during the

reign of King Hezekiah of Judah.[495]

The D source stratum (sixth century B.C.E.): In this subtle response to the P

recension, Balaam asks questions characteristic of the Deuteronomistic reform

movement: "Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not

fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke

it" (Num 23:19b-20). Greene does not consider this a major recension.[496]

Having considered the evidence, Greene summarizes his position:

> The Balaam of Numbers 22-24 was a figure utilized by various *warring*
> groups of priests/prophets against each other's ideal self-concept and type-
> concept. One group saw in him an archetypical priest, prophet, diviner,
> magician to be emulated. Another perceived in him the archetypical outsider
> and mantic type to be vigorously spurned. Thus, the word and concept of *war*
> link all the material we have just considered.[497]

During three of the recensions (1, 4, and 5), the southern kingdom of Judah literally

was preoccupied with war (the first, under David, was offensive). The third

recension, having been produced after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel,

likewise is associated with war. The final recension R (the present form of the

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[495] Greene, 67.

[496] Greene, 67-68.

[497] Greene, 65.

Balaam cycle), which attempted to harmonize the previous recensions, is postexilic, produced under Ezra.[498]

This battle for sacerdotal hegemony continued through the postexilic period, as both the Qumranites and later the Samaritans sought to answer: Who is the *legitimate* spokesperson for God?[499] The Qumranites relied on those words attributed to Balaam, pressing the oracular passages into service for an eschatological war.[500] The Samaritans, for their part, openly denied the "prophetic" dimension of the priestly office—except for their own expression of it.[501] And the author of 1 Enoch, similar to the Qumranites, pressed Balaam's words into an apocalyptic war.[502] As Greene wryly comments, "Balaam was truly the man for all priestly-needed seasons."[503]

Critical Analysis of Greene

Through diachronic analysis, Greene has reconstructed a historical trajectory whereby Balaam the figure and those words attributed to him have been politicized for sacerdotal hegemony. In each layer of the text, redactional "authors" have employed the Balaam figure and oracles attributed to him to ask: "Who can speak for God?"

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[498] Greene, 68.

[499] Greene, 165.

[500] Greene, 165-66.

[501] Greene, 166.

[502] Greene, 166-67.

[503] Greene, 165.

In the three twentieth-century historical-critical interpretations previously reviewed, Numbers 22-24 has been considered a composite of J and E. Thus, concerning the text's production, these scholars have focused on those traditional historical settings. If a *Sitz im Leben* can be determined from the text, by their reckoning it reflects a time period anywhere from prestate Israel to the divided monarchy. Greene, however, relying heavily on Friedman's 1987 updating of the Documentary Hypothesis, suggests that Numbers 22-24 underwent multiple recensions over a five-hundred-year period—from the united monarchy to postexile. This proposal is an outlier to current theories of Pentateuchal composition.[504]

While on the one hand this could align well with Blum's proposal, which understands the patriarchal narrative as having been developed over roughly the same five-hundred-year period (however, obviously, Numbers 22-24 is not a part of the patriarchal narrative); on the other hand, Blum's model emphasizes the Persian period, as both the priestly (P) and pre-priestly (non-P) strands are "knitted together" by a priestly redactor. Therefore, any resultant *Sitz im Leben* more than likely would reflect the fifth century B.C. rather than any specific historical period over the course of the previous five hundred years.

Thus, while Greene's interpretation is suggestive, it relies too heavily on one (outmoded) theory of composition without warrant. His proposed redactional "authors" remain speculative, especially the P, D, and R recensions. The E-layer Balaam is completely fabricated. It is not clear how Greene determines such clearly delineated major shifts with each recension based solely on the final form of the text.

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[504] NB: Obviously, Greene's use of Friedman's schema assumes a different model of Pentateuchal source criticism than contemporary theories (e.g., Blum's KD and KP).

His conclusions are plausible, but so could any number of other hypotheses based upon the same data; much is inferred without objective evidence.

Thus, Greene offers yet another speculative reconstruction just as different as the three interpretations before it. With Greene's historical analysis, one cannot be certain of what *really* happened. While he offers an intriguing hypothesis, the world *behind the text* remains elusive.

MARCUS, DOUGLAS, AND SHARP: LITERARY ANALYSES

Additionally, three literary analyses reading the book of Balaam as a whole briefly will be reviewed and analyzed. While scholars have noted satirical elements present in the folk tale of Balaam and his ass, it can be argued likewise that the entire book of Balaam shows evidence of both satire and irony. David Marcus reads the folk tale alone as an example of anti-prophetic satire. Mary Douglas, for her part, understands the whole of the Balaam narrative as political satire. And finally, Carolyn Sharp reads the entire Balaam pericope as dramatic irony.

In *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, David Marcus examines four biblical stories that function as anti-prophetic satire. His first study concerns a foreign prophet—the story of Balaam and his donkey (Num 22:21-35)—laying the foundation for subsequent studies concerning Israelite prophets. "All four satires then serve the purpose of ridiculing the prophets for behavior which, to the authors (and readers) of these satires, was considered objectionable and unacceptable," states Marcus.[505] He goes on to describe the characteristic features of

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[505] David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 8.

satire, which include elements of fantastic events, grotesqueries, distortions, irony, ridicule, parody, and other rhetorical features.[506] "A text may be identified as a satire if it has a target which is the object of attack, either directly or indirectly, and has a preponderance of (these) essential attributes of satire."[507] Many of these attributes are present in the story of Balaam and his donkey.

The folk tale contains fantastic situations in both the appearance of the angel of the LORD and the visible speech of Balaam's beast.[508] The story of Balaam and his donkey likewise contains numerous examples of irony: (1) Balaam boasts of his skill as a professional seer, yet cannot see what is plain to his beast; (2) Balaam boasts of his obtaining knowledge from the Most High (Num 24:16), yet must admit that he did not know (Num 22:34); (3) Balaam lauds the power of his words, yet must use a stick to control his own donkey, whereas his beast uses words to teach Balaam.[509] The tale also exhibits "measure for measure irony," in which Balaam's anger at his donkey for disobedience mirrors that of God's anger toward Balaam for the same.[510] Ridicule and parody also are prominent in the folk tale. Balaam is ridiculed in numerous ways: (1) through his undignified portrayal, (2) through his impulsive rage, (3) through his obliviousness talking to an animal, (4) through the contrast between him and his donkey (their demeanor and roles change places), and (5) through his ignorance of the customs of proper discourse.[511] Concerning parody,

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[506] Marcus, 9-27.

[507] Marcus, 9.

[508] Marcus, 31.

[509] Marcus, 32-33.

[510] Marcus, 33.

[511] Marcus, 34-37.

Balaam, not conforming to the expected behavior of a professional seer, is contrasted

both with Samuel (1 Sam 3) and Abraham (Gen 22).[512] Rhetorically, the folk tale of

Balaam and his ass uses a three-fold motif and a type of concentric arrangement.[513]

Summarizes Marcus:

> When they are added together with the other satiric elements outlined above
> we see that the story contains all the elements necessary for satire. The
> purpose of the satire is to belittle Balaam and expose him to ridicule.
> Through the satire, it is demonstrated that Balaam, supposedly the best of his
> profession, is not such an expert after all. He is no match when faced with
> real competition like the angel of the Lord [sic]. In terms of 'seeing', he is
> even bested by his donkey.[514]

Having considered the literary evidence, Marcus speculates on the historical

circumstances underpinning the use of satire. According to the genre, an

identification with a specific individual is uncertain; Balaam represents a type of

non-Israelite seer.[515] Nevertheless, Marcus holds that Balaam is a legitimate prophet:

"Balaam, even though he is not an Israelite, communes with God and transmits His

word."[516] Thus, Balaam is satirized not in spite of, but *because of* his legitimacy.

While the inserted folk tale of Balaam and his donkey generally is attributed to the

Yahwist, its role in the final form of the text reflects the concerns of later generations

who sought to delegitimize Balaam as a foreign prophet of Israel's God. "Such a

negative depiction of Balaam would conform to other biblical (Deuteronomistic and

Priestly) and post-biblical traditions which are critical of him," states Marcus.[517] In

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[512] Marcus, 37-39.

[513] Marcus, 39-41.

[514] Marcus, 41.

[515] Marcus, 162-64.

[516] Marcus, 164.

[517] Marcus, 166-67.

this way, satire is used to advocate the traditional perspective that only an Israelite seer can speak for Israel's God.

Next, in her essay, "Balaam Delivers God's Blessings on All Israel," Mary Douglas understands the entire book of Balaam as political satire. Based upon rhetorical analysis, she identifies a ring (or chiastic) structure in the book of Balaam, as well as in the book of Numbers in which it is embedded. As such, she understands the book of Balaam as synecdoche for the book of Numbers:

> It is a distanced and condensed summary of the main theme. To know what the story of Balaam is doing in the book of Numbers, we therefore need to know the main theme of the book. Or because the whole is in the part, the story of Balaam may be allowed to point for us the meaning of the book, and the book will tell us who is being satirized.[518]

Framed by the book's two censuses, Douglas understands the book of Numbers to concern the land promise: "Though the prologue does not mention land rights, it is made clear that the Lord's promise of land for the descendants of Abraham is what the counting is about."[519] This message contains two parts: (1) all the sons of Jacob (except the Levites) are the heirs, and (2) all the Lord's promises, i.e., "all the prophecies made in his name," are fulfilled.[520] States Douglas, "It is well in line with the book's interest in prophecy that Balaam as the mouthpiece of the Lord repeats the old prophecies which have been fulfilled within the story's bounds, and utters some new ones."[521]

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[518] Mary Douglas, "Balaam Delivers God's Blessings on All Israel," in *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97.

[519] Douglas, 97. NB: Throughout her text, Douglas does not capitalize the tetragrammaton. Therefore, when citing Douglas, it will remain uncapitalized.

[520] Douglas, 97.

[521] Douglas, 97.

Concerning Numbers 22-24, Douglas identifies God's command to Balaam—to do or to say only what he puts in his mouth—as the outer parallel rungs of its structure (Num 22:20 and 24:13).[522] This phrase, repeated midway when Balaam first encounters Balak (22:38, perhaps indicating a chiastic climax?) is likewise repeated in the folk tale (22:35). While this structure appears to emphasize the *source* of Balaam's prophecy, Douglas maintains the synecdoche likewise defines its *purpose*: directing the reader to the central theme of the book of Numbers. Thus, in her reading, the book of Balaam underscores the fulfillment of God's land promise for Abraham's descendants. This is achieved principally through intertextual allusions found in Balaam's oracles (Num 23-24).

Douglas rightly notes the prominence of *blessing* in the book of Balaam, as well as its significance. "A blessing had the solidity and projectability of a covenant," she states, surmising this may explain the book of Balaam's echo of the Akedah.[523] "All the readers of Numbers would have known that in Genesis the angel of the Lord blessed Abraham for his obedience in the binding of Isaac (Gen 22:15-18), and that the Lord blessed Isaac (Gen 26:2-5)."[524]

Douglas also rightly identifies intertextual allusions to the blessings over the sons / tribes of Israel in Balaam's oracles. She notes the combination of Jacob's blessing upon Judah and Moses' blessing upon Joseph in Balaam's second oracle: "the horns of the wild ox" (Num 23:22b; cf. Deut 33:17a) and "As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself" (Num 23:24a; cf. Gen 49:9b). Whereas Jacob's

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[522] Douglas, 95.

[523] Douglas, 98.

[524] Douglas, 98.

blessing implied one ruler—Joseph's peaceful prosperity subject to Judah's royal dominion—the amalgam in Balaam's second oracle, she argues, implies a combined Israel.[525] This is reinforced in Balaam's third oracle, where not only are the ox and lion metaphors repeated, but also the garden and water imagery recalls Judah's blessing upon Joseph (Num 24:6-7a; cf. Gen 49:22). "Notice that Jacob and Israel are not two separate persons," she states, "their blessing goes on in the masculine singular, they definitely share one prosperous future."[526] This third oracle ends in the blessing and cursing formula spoken over Abram by the LORD (Gen 12:3) and to Jacob by Isaac (Gen 27:29). "This blessing is the crux of the whole story," reminds Douglas.[527] Finally, this reading is reinforced through Balaam's unsolicited oracle, in which Jacob's blessing over Judah concerning royal rule is extended to include both Judah and Joseph (Num 24:17b; cf. Gen 49:10a)—"Jacob and Israel" used in apposition to signify the whole of Israel (the name of Judah is not used in Balaam's oracles).[528] Thus, as synecdoche, the book of Balaam portrays in miniature the themes of the book of Numbers: the land promise will be fulfilled as the whole of Israel defeats her enemies.

How, then, does the book of Balaam act as political satire? Here Douglas's argument transitions to the post-exilic period, when Judah's political rivals consisted of the Persian provinces of Moab, Edom (later Idumaea), and Samaria—"the most threatening neighbor of all…richer, more populous, and politically better placed."[529]

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[525] Douglas, 100.

[526] Douglas, 101.

[527] Douglas, 100.

[528] Douglas, 101-2.

[529] Douglas, 103.

In this political climate, the priestly editors were concerned for the unity of Israel: "Balaam's divinely inspired blessings on Israel carry the essential priestly message to Judah and Samaria, that they are destined to be one great people."[530] However, as divisions between Judah and Samaria calcified in the sixth to fifth centuries, evident through the establishing of two cultic centers—one in Jerusalem and one in Gerizim—the priestly editors realized they had failed.[531]

Now the Balaam story can be read as political satire. Here, the three main protagonists of the story represent political figures in post-exilic Judah. Balaam represents a colonial governor along the lines of Ezra or Nehemiah; King Balak, a distant ruler such as Nebuchadnezzar or the King of Persia; and the patient she-ass, the people of Israel.[532] With the backing of Persia, the governor imposes strict exclusionary policies upon the people—a policy opposed by the priestly faction.[533]

Douglas returns to the land promise: "The theological doctrine at issue was whether all the sons of Jacob should inherit the land. The sense of 'land' in Numbers is the eschatological 'land'. This would include the rights of the sons of Jacob to be treated as heirs of the promise. Sharing the promise they would share the land."[534] Nevertheless, in time, the priestly agenda for unity was disavowed, giving rise to the discrediting of Balaam in Numbers 31.[535]

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[530] Douglas, 90.

[531] Douglas, 104-5.

[532] Douglas, 105.

[533] Douglas, 105-6.

[534] Douglas, 106.

[535] Douglas, 107.

Finally, in *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, analyzing the irony of prophetic performance, Carolyn Sharp examines the "Oracular Indeterminacy and Dramatic Irony in the Story of Balaam."[536] In conversation with Baruch Levine's commentary on Numbers, Sharp argues for dramatic irony throughout the whole of the Balaam pericope.

Noting questions concerning Balaam's character, Sharp begins by reviewing briefly the reception history of Balaam the individual. Considering (1) the intra-biblical representations, (2) the LXX translation, and (3) the extra-biblical reception of the Balaam traditions, she offers two points:

> First, the divergent ways in which different ancient readers understood Balaam's authority and his motivations illustrate the contextual needs (theological and political) of those interpretive communities in their own historical moments, but they may also be responding to the dynamic between the "said" and the "unsaid" in the story of Balaam. Second, the marked ambivalence in Balaam's reception history shows a consistent reader alertness to the possibility of significant disjuncture between the character of Balaam and the truth of his words and self-representation.[537]

Sharp then pivots to an analysis of the Balaam narrative itself. In this, she is concerned with three issues: (1) signals concerning the unreliability of Balaam's voice, (2) textual ambiguities contributing to the (mis)representation of Balaam and his God, and (3) dramatic irony uncovered as the plot unfolds.[538]

Sharp begins by noting a number of signals suggesting the unreliability of Balaam's voice. First, rhetorical analysis of the use of the names of God suggests a discrepancy between Balaam's knowledge about God and the narrator's knowledge

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[536] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 134-51.

[537] Sharp, 136.

[538] Sharp, 136.

about God.[539] Second, Balaam's withholding of information (e.g., that Israel is blessed and, therefore, cannot be cursed) manipulates Balak, alerting the reader to Balaam's suspect voice.[540] Third, Balaam curses Moab, Edom, Amalek, and the Kenites only after he understands that he will not receive Balak's remuneration.[541] And fourth, Balaam's "hyperbolic and narratively ungrounded" claims overstate his relationship with Israel's God (22:18).[542]

The reliability of Balaam's voice continues to be questioned in the folk tale, in which his abilities of discernment are ridiculed. As recounted in Marcus's analysis above, elements of irony abound in the story of Balaam and his ass. Here, however, Sharp suggests the donkey story may offer more than just ridicule; as an intercalary insertion, it also functions to fill gaps in the narrative. "We learn that he (Balaam) is undiscerning and lacks credibility," states Sharp. "This intercalation shapes the reader's understanding of what will follow in the oracle-giving. Equally important, the reader is encouraged to bring a retrospective skepticism to what has already transpired in the narrative, namely, Balaam's apparent obedience to God."[543]

Having suggested the unreliability of Balaam's voice, raising suspicions concerning his character and motives, Sharp moves to Balaam's oracles. Here, she considers the textual ambiguities that may contribute to a (mis)representation of Balaam and his God. If Balaam has proved thus far to be an unreliable narrator, then

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[539] Sharp, 136-37.

[540] Sharp, 137.

[541] Sharp, 138.

[542] Sharp, 138.

[543] Sharp, 140.

his blessings over Israel likewise may be suspect. At the very least, the oracles warrant further scrutiny.

Based upon clues within the text, Sharp offers a skeptical reading of Balaam's oracles. In the first oracle, as Balaam pictures Israel as "a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations!" (Num 23:9b), Sharp considers this to be a moment of telegraphing to Balak: Israel is without allies and vulnerable.[544] "Balaam is managing to say two things at once, meeting the requirements of the LORD while not yet jeopardizing his fee from the Moabites."[545] As Balaam ends his first oracle, his words are evasive: "Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!" (Num 23:10b). With the term "valiant" a suitable substitution for "upright" (*yĕšārîm*), Sharp considers this "an ambiguous rhetorical flourish because the death of the valiant, presumably, is a death in (glorious) battle,"—a description that would please both Balak and God.[546] As Sharp summarizes,

> Balaam has brilliantly avoided committing himself so far, employing mercurial and ambiguous language in order to pander to the LORD and Balak simultaneously. A straightforward blessing this first oracle is not. If these are potentially dangerous ambiguities for Israel—and I think they are best read as exactly that—then we are beginning to glimpse the unsettling possibility that since the LORD put these words into Balaam's mouth, it may be the LORD's perspective on the "blessing" of Israel that is ambiguous.[547]

Such ambiguities continue in Balaam's second oracle. As Balaam begins: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Num 23:19a), Sharp considers those instances where God has, in fact, appeared to

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[544] Sharp, 141-42.

[545] Sharp, 142.

[546] Sharp, 142.

[547] Sharp, 143.

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change his mind (e.g., Gen 6:6, Num 22:20, 22).[548] Continuing, God's ultimate aim to bless Israel is questioned, as the rhetorical questions: "Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num 23:19) become real. Suggests Sharp: "God will protect and bless the Israelites unless they fall away in apostasy, in which case God will become their worst enemy and destroy them without mercy—precisely what happens at Baal-Peor (Num 25)."[549] According to this reading, Sharp understands "He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel" (Num 23:21a) as conditional (i.e., God will not *tolerate* misfortune or trouble), implying that "God's blessing and protection are available only so long as God finds no iniquity in Israel."[550] Sharp continues this conditional reading: "God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel" (Num 23:22-23a), understanding God's protection contingent on Israel's abstention from enchantment and divination.[551] Since the text is elliptical, Sharp likewise reads: "Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain" (Num 23:24) as pertaining to Moab, not to Israel, the ambiguity of Balaam's words playing each side against the other.[552] She also considers the editor's perspective: "These ambiguities serve also the purpose of the ironist behind the story, who may be intent on drawing

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[548] Sharp, 143.

[549] Sharp, 143-44.

[550] Sharp, 144.

[551] Sharp, 144.

[552] Sharp, 145.

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the reader into constructing the powerful unspoken threats behind these 'blessings' of Balaam."[553]

Concerning Balaam's third and unsolicited oracles, Sharp considers their different and earlier source. She notes Balaam's hyperbolic praise in his description of Israel (Num 24:5-7), normally "a classic flag for those looking for irony," but here it is not so clear.[554] Even ambiguity concerning the wild ox is not present here: God clearly is the one devouring Israel's enemies (Num 24:8). While signals for irony may appear to be lacking, Sharp considers another major clue.

These are the oracles of "the man whose eye is opened" (Num 24:3c, 15c), the term (*šĕtum*) an ambiguous adjective that can mean either "open" or "shut." "The word is extraordinarily rare—known in biblical Hebrew only in these two oracles— and it carries with it a heavy freight of semantic ambiguity," she notes.[555] This ambiguity appears to be intentional: "The ironic play on these two semantic senses would be both artful and highly appropriate to the ambivalent characterization of Balaam by other literary means in the material."[556] Balaam describes himself in this way; while he appears to boast of his clear vision, the narrator and reader are all too aware of his blindness.[557]

Concerning the unsolicited oracle, which Sharp considers Balaam's fourth, she characterizes Balaam speaking "unambiguously and in his own voice."[558] This is

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[553] Sharp, 145.

[554] Sharp, 145.

[555] Sharp, 146.

[556] Sharp, 146.

[557] Sharp, 147.

[558] Sharp, 147.

Balaam lashing out at Balak and cursing Israel's enemies. Her characterization of Balaam is unequivocal: "the choleric ravings of an impotent charlatan" who speaks apart from God's authorization.[559]

Thus, Sharp argues for the use of dramatic irony throughout the Balaam pericope. In her threefold argument, she asserts that (1) Balaam's voice is represented as unreliable, and (2) ambiguities in the oracles suggest Balaam's attempt to manipulate both Balak and God. Rather than a straightforward blessing, the oracles may function as a warning against apostasy.[560]

Sharp's final issue concerns dramatic irony uncovered as the plot unfolds, specifically as it concerns Israel, the passive character in the background. "This, then, is a major dramatic irony that skewers not Balak, and not Balaam, but the oblivious Israelites."[561] In this, Sharp notes the close literary connection between Numbers 22-24 and Numbers 25. As God actively has been working to bless the Israelites, protecting them from the aggressions of Moab, they haplessly are stumbling into their worst apostasy since the Golden Calf incident.[562] Sharp supports this interpretation from Micah 6:3-5; reading "from Shittim to Gilgal" (Mic 6:5b) as sites of apostasy, she concludes, "Micah connects the blessing of Balaam with the ironic disobedience of the people thereafter, in an inner-biblical reading that moves in the same direction as Numbers 22–25 does."[563]

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[559] Sharp, 147.

[560] Sharp, 148.

[561] Sharp, 148.

[562] Sharp, 148.

[563] Sharp, 150.

Thus, Sharp offers one possible reading of the ironic metanarrative of Numbers 22–25:

> Israel is relying too smugly on the divine promise to Abram that the one who blesses Israel will be blessed and the one who curses Israel will be cursed (see the explicit allusion to Gen 12:3 in Balaam's third oracle, 24:9). God may allow himself to be manipulated by an avaricious, unreliable foreign seer in order to protect Israel from the enemies that threaten Israel all around—this even though Israel itself remains oblivious to the mortal danger that looms on all sides. But God is powerless to protect Israel *from himself* if the abundantly blessed Israel continues to pursue exogamous sex and idolatry.[564]

What might such a work of dramatic irony seek to convey to Israel post-exile? Sharp considers it a warning: with abundant blessing comes unavoidable accountability.[565] "In diaspora, the threat of destruction from enemies without is more than matched by the community's proclivity for destruction from within. The hyperbolically blessed Israel ignores that ironic truth at its peril. Such is the conviction of the author of Numbers 22–25."[566]

Critical Analysis of Marcus, Douglas, and Sharp

Three perspectives briefly have been considered. Marcus's reading, that of anti-prophetic satire in the folk tale alone, is the most straightforward. The preponderance of evidence presented makes for a compelling argument: Balaam the foreign prophet is mocked because he dares to speak on behalf of Israel's God.

Douglas's reading, that of political satire from the entire book of Balaam, offers much to be admired. Discerning a synecdochical relationship, she interprets

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[564] Sharp, 150.

[565] Sharp, 151.

[566] Sharp, 151.

the book of Balaam in the context of the book of Numbers, and vice versa. She rightly considers the significance of blessing in the book of Balaam, along with intertextual allusions concerning that blessing in the oracles (e.g., the blessings over Judah and Joseph). Her reading considers the distinct use of the terms "Jacob" and "Israel." However, by arguing for the land promise as the sole fulfillment of Balaam's oracles, Douglas disregards a messianic reading—even when such a reading may fit the evidence just as well.

Sharp's reading, that of dramatic irony from the whole of the Balaam pericope, is the most nuanced and sophisticated of the three. While she engages well with the textual evidence and scholarly literature, by reading into the text's ambiguities, her interpretation is the most speculative. Positively, she considers the book of Balaam in context with its subsequent chapter; in this she notes an intertextual echo (Exod 32) and employs an inner-biblical reading (Micah 6). She also offers a plausible explanation for the pericope's confounding mix of the names of God. However, despite arguing for dramatic irony throughout the whole of the Balaam narrative, Sharp's use of evidence to support that claim is selective. While this pertains to her use of material in the oracles, surprisingly she ignores a crucial component of the narrative itself: Balak's rising anger between the oracles. If Balaam truly is attempting to placate both Balak and God, Balak's increasing protestations seem to belie that fact. As well, by considering the unsolicited oracle as separate from the third, she renders it void of divine inspiration. Not only does this negate its oft-noted messianic aspect, but the oracle as a whole then is used to paint Balaam pejoratively. As well, her interpretation of the pericope hinges on Israel's portrayal passively in the background, while other reasonable explanations may exist for such a depiction.

Having considered these literary analyses, how might each shed light on the historical setting behind the text's production and/or reception?

Marcus distinguishes between Balaam's prophecy and Balaam the prophet. While he considers Balaam's prophecy as legitimate (hence, the reason for the satire), as a foreigner speaking on behalf of Israel's God, the editors, he argues, consider Balaam the prophet as illegitimate; Deuteronomistic and Priestly traditions are critical of him. The satire in the folk tale advocates the traditional perspective that only an Israelite seer can speak for Israel's God.

For Douglas, the political satire is directed not at Balaam, but at the Judean governors during the Persian era. In her imaginative reconstruction, the priestly editors are satirizing the governors' call for separation by advocating for political unity: Jacob and Israel are "destined to be one great people."[567] However, once the editors' initiative fails, Balaam is disparaged. Thus, it is not clear how the final redaction portrays these two distinct time periods simultaneously: first Balaam is used to promote unity, then after the initiative fails, he is vilified. For Douglas, in order to justify her reading, the historical players must be squeezed into the satirical caricature. While her interpretation is plausible, it is not the most elegant of solutions.

For Sharp, the dramatic irony is directed not at Balaam or the Judean governors, but towards Israel herself. In her speculative reconstruction, Numbers 22-25 is a warning to the diaspora concerning corruption from within. Israel is blessed, but they are also accountable to God. They must *set themselves apart* lest they be destroyed by God. In the Persian era, this would pertain at least in part to Judah

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[567] Douglas, 90.

setting herself apart from the Samaritans—the complete opposite conclusion reached by Douglas, who argued the editors are advocating for the *unity* of Judah and Samaria. Thus, based upon the very same data, two different literary analyses have reached opposite conclusions.

CONCLUSION

The present chapter has examined Numbers 22-24 via a representative sample of three scholars exemplifying the contours of twentieth-century historical-critical interpretation. The scholarship of George Buchanan Gray, the most traditionally Wellhausian of the three, has applied textual criticism to understand the text via its representational sources. The scholarship of Martin Noth, seeking a mediating position between oral tradition and written sources, has been concerned with the intermediate period of the tribal confederacy. And the scholarship of Baruch Levine, incorporating the discovery of the Deir 'Alla texts, has offered distinct insights into the regional pantheon and political intrigues of the Transjordan.

In seeking to determine the life and religion of ancient Israel, each historical-critical scholar has offered his own perspective of what *really* happened (the world *behind the text*). While Gray's philological work attempts to determine actual history, what can be discovered owes more to the dating of sources than to information provided by the text itself. For Noth, Numbers 22-24 reflects the ongoing land disputes between prestate Israel and Moab in the southern Transjordan; however, he appeals both to a presumed common *Grundlage* (G) source and an independent Balaam tradition now lost to us. For Levine, the book of Balaam reflects the political intrigues and religious milieu of Israel's dominance in North

Moab ca. ninth century B.C.; however, he likewise appeals to an elusive

Transjordanian (T) source to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel.

In addition to these three historical-critical scholars, four additional studies

reading the book of Balaam as a whole have offered further insights into a proposed

Sitz im Leben of ancient Israel. For John Greene and the literary analyses of David

Marcus, Mary Douglas, and Carolyn Sharp, each scholar has offered his or her own

insights as to what *really* happened (the world *behind the text*). For Greene, the

Balaam narrative's multiple recensions reflect five hundred years of sacerdotal

warfare. For Marcus, Deuteronomistic and Priestly editors have delegitimized

Balaam the prophet, while for Douglas and Sharp, the Balaam pericope has been

used at cross-purposes—to promote both political unity *and* separation—during the

Persian era. While each perspective offers fascinating insights into a possible *Sitz im*

Leben of Numbers 22-24, it should be acknowledged that each perspective *is*

different. While these distinctions are perfectly acceptable (owing to each scholar's

individual interests and period of study), if one wishes to understand the *truth* of

history, it becomes difficult if not impossible to reconcile these differences.

American author Ursula K. Le Guin, whose husband was a historian, had this

to say (in conversation with writer and conservationist Jonathan White) concerning

the nature of history:

> History is one way of telling stories, just like myth, fiction, or oral
> storytelling. But over the last hundred years, history has preempted the other
> forms of storytelling because of its claim to absolute, objective truth. Trying
> to be scientists, historians stood outside of history and told the story of how it
> was. All that has changed radically over the last twenty years. Historians now
> laugh at the pretense of objective truth. They agree that every age has its own

history, and if there is any objective truth, we can't reach it with words. History is not a science, it's an art.[568]

In other words, even for historical-critical scholars, as well as those approaching the text from differing perspectives (yet operating within a historical framework), determining the world *behind the text* is, in the end, an imaginative reconstruction. While the use of imagination is to be applauded in any discipline, especially in biblical scholarship, one must acknowledge that the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel (as derived from Numbers 22-24)—the ultimate goal of such scholarship, at least according to Levine—remains unknown. If such historical-critical inquiry is a search for the truth of what *really* happened, then, at least in regards to the book of Balaam, the search hardly has been productive.

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[568] Jonathan White, *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2016), 105. The interview was conducted sometime between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s.

EXCURSUS I

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a story about a story. It is a story about belief. It is a story about God. *Life of Pi* is a story about stories, about how stories teach about life. It is a story about God that illustrates how faith is as vital to life as reason is to living.

Life of Pi is not a story about religion. While the adult Pi Patel describes himself as a Hindu Christian, the novel/film goes out of its way to include every major world religion—all of which the young Pi seems inexorably drawn to include into his own personal pantheon. For this, he is lampooned by his father: "So, Swami Jesus, will you go on the hajj this year?…Or will it be to Rome for your coronation as the next Pope Pi-us?" he wryly questions. "You only need to convert to three more religions to be on holiday for the rest of your life."[1]

Both of Pi's parents respond differently to the "new India" of the 1970s. Believing God had failed him when he was a child with polio, Pi's father extols the virtues of reason (not to mention Western medicine). However, Pi's mother, believing religion is the only link to her past, teaches Pi about the mysteries of faith: "Science can teach us more about what's out there, but not what is in here," she says with a hand to her heart. "Art, music, literature—they all spring from our faith."[2]

Nevertheless, during this first part of the novel/film set in Pondicherry, India, as young Pi matures, he loses the enchantment of his faith. While he is captivated by a young woman (in the film), their relationship is cut short when Pi's father decides to move the family to Canada. As zookeepers, he will sell their animals in North

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[1] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi: a Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 70.

[2] *Life of Pi*, directed by Ang Lee (20th Century Fox, 2012). Subsequent quotes, likewise, are taken from the screenplay.

America. While on board their Japanese transport ship, they encounter some colorful characters, including a surly French cook and an admittedly happy Buddhist sailor. During a typhoon, the ship capsizes; while his family perishes, Pi escapes on a lifeboat along with a few animals.

The heart of *Life of Pi* is Pi's journey on the Pacific Ocean. At first unbeknownst to him, his most fierce animal companion is Richard Parker, the family's wild tiger. While the other animals are eliminated fairly quickly, Pi and Richard Parker remain; their journey at sea becomes a battle of wills. Throughout their 227 days at sea, they learn to depend upon each other to survive. Richard Parker never is tamed.

At the beginning of this journey, Pi prays: "God…I give myself to you. I am your vessel. Whatever comes…I want to know. Show me." Throughout these months, God remains present (as represented, in the film, through Vishnu's subliminal silhouettes). As Pi acknowledges God's faithful provision and protection, his earlier childish faith is given opportunity to mature.

Towards the end of their months at sea, God appears through a storm. Reciting the Fatiha of the Koran, Pi declares: "Praise be to God, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful!" Richard Parker is afraid. "Why are you scaring him!" Pi pleads to God. "I've lost my family—I've lost everything! I surrender! What more do you want?" Pi surrenders all; through his suffering, he has come to genuine faith. As a light sprinkle baptizes him, a rainbow appears, rounding out his Noahic resonance. "God, thank you for giving me my life. I'm ready now," he prays.

After a brief episode on a dangerous yet restorative island, Pi and Richard Parker wash ashore in Tomatlán, Mexico. While the tiger unceremoniously walks away, Pi is rescued by locals and taken to an infirmary. While recovering, two

officials from the Japanese shipping company arrive to interview Pi. With insurance claims to settle, they seek to discover how the ship sank. However, they also wish to understand Pi's incredible story.

Life of Pi ends as it begins: in present day Toronto, as a writer comes to interview the adult Pi. He had been told by a mutual friend that Pi had a story that would make him believe in God. Now, at the end of their time together, he does not quite know what to say. Pi recounts how the shipping officials likewise had found his story unbelievable. "We need a simpler story for our report," one of the men told Pi. "One our company can understand. A story we can all believe." "Without surprises? Without animals or islands?" asks Pi. "Yes," he said. "The truth."

In response, Pi tells the men an alternate account of his journey at sea, only this time each of the animals is replaced by a person from the Japanese transport ship: the cook, the sailor, and Pi's mother. All ended up dying on the lifeboat…except for Pi.

Back in the present day, the writer, having been given Pi's copy of the men's report, comes to the realization that Pi is the tiger. While Pi never acknowledges this, instead, he asks the writer a question. "I've told you two stories about what happened out on the ocean. Neither explains what caused the sinking of the ship, and no one can prove which story is true and which is not. In both stories, the ship sinks, my family dies, and I suffer." "True," the writer replies. "So which story do you prefer?" asks Pi. "The story with the tiger," replies the writer. "That's the better story." "Thank you," answers Pi. "And so it goes with God."

PART TWO: THE WORLD OF THE TEXT

The world of the text (is) a work, an artistic entity constructed according to a particular genre… (Such) a literary work clears a space, creates a world, into which the reader is invited.…The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative reality.[1]

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[1] Schneiders, 167.

CHAPTER 2

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND PAUL RICOEUR

INTRODUCTION

An important bridge from the *world behind the text* to the *world of the text* begins

with Karl Barth. With the publication of his Romans commentary in 1919, Barth

broke with nineteenth-century historical-critical precedent, advocating instead for a

more theological approach to the text.[2] Revelation, he argued, would not be found in

those layers *behind* the text, but in the text's authority upon the believer; i.e., where

humankind encounters God.[3]

This radical approach had far-reaching consequences. Even though Barth

was not necessarily interested in Old Testament studies *per se,* his influence upon

the discipline in the mid-twentieth century was great: "He attracted to his urgent

theological enterprise a great company of those who would become the most

influential and defining Old Testament scholars in the next generation," states

Walter Brueggemann.[4]

Two of those scholars were Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, biblical

critics in their own right, who, nevertheless, sought to move beyond historical

criticism to a more theological approach. Through their Old Testament theologies,

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[2] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 62. Brueggemann is referring to Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwin C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University, 1933).

[3] John Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School and the Growing Opposition to Historico-Critical Bible Studies. The Concept of 'History' Revisited—*Wirkungsgeschichte* and Reception History," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament the History of Its Interpretation: From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)*, vol. 3/2, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 101.

[4] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 63.

both, in their own way, attempted to systematize God's interaction with humankind through history. In his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Eichrodt employed the Reformed-theology-friendly concept of covenant; "that is, the durable God-Israel, God-world relationship that is definitional for the faith of Israel in the Old Testament."[5] Von Rad, in his more-influential *Old Testament Theology*, focused on God's "mighty deeds" in history by cataloging "God's 'miracles' in the life of Israel."[6] States Brueggemann, "It is impossible to overstate the emancipatory power of von Rad's work."[7] While history was integral to both Old Testament theological approaches, the tensive relationship between history and theology persisted. As Brueggemann states concerning von Rad, in particular, "the vexed relationship between the relativity of history and the normativeness of theological claim" had not been resolved.[8]

Incorporating such systematizing attempts, the emergent Biblical Theology Movement largely collapsed with James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Criticism*, which argued that the idea of a "Hebrew world-view" linguistically was indefensible.[9] Nevertheless, not all were willing to surrender a Barthian perspective. States Barton:

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[5] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 63. Brueggemann is referring to Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967).

[6] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 64. Brueggemann is referring to Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962).

[7] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 64.

[8] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 64.

[9] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105. Barton is referring to James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1961).

One of the people who accepted but also mourned the demise of the Movement was Brevard S. Childs, then teaching at Yale Divinity School, who noted that there was a risk of a return to pure historical criticism with no attempt at theological synthesis, and who tried to establish a new basis for a theological approach to Scripture. The Biblical Theology Movement, for all its faults, had at least tried to respond to Barth's call for a theologically sensitive reading of the Bible, and Childs believed this call was still relevant and urgent. He set about constructing a new way of doing biblical theology.[10]

Childs's ensuing canonical approach read the Old Testament as Scripture: "In a Barthian vein, the aim is to read the Old Testament not simply as a collection of ancient religious texts but as the Church's (and the Synagogue's) Holy Scriptures."[11] Thus, within the community of faith, the biblical books are considered to be (1) authoritative, (2) coherent (with each other), and (3) inspiring in their final form.[12] To ignore this, "is to deprive oneself deliberately of the only context within which they can possibly make sense."[13] Scholars who have incorporated (but not necessarily adopted) Childs's approach include R. W. L. Moberly, Francis Watson, Christopher Seitz, and Rolf Rendtorff.[14]

While a canonical approach never reached a consensus understanding, its influence has been widely felt—from interest in "final form" exegesis to receptivity towards "pre-critical" (e.g., the Fathers, the Reformers, the Rabbis) exegesis.[15] The "theological" interpretation of Scripture has been one such movement; while attempting to take seriously the religious claims of biblical texts, it has not

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[10] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105.

[11] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105.

[12] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105.

[13] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105.

[14] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105.

[15] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 105-7.

abandoned historical criticism, but has moved into areas deemed more productive. States Barton:

> Biblical criticism may have been needed in the past to challenge interpretations that had hardened under the dead hand of ecclesiastical authority. But to insist on it as the one valid approach now that the threat comes instead from the excessive secularism of the modern world is misguided. Indeed, historical criticism has by now itself hardened into a form of domination from which we need emancipating once again.…In short, historical criticism is no longer critical but simply a new form of authority— a passport into the guild of biblical studies rather than a tool for questioning authority, as it originally was. Many scholars today share Childs's belief that it is time to move on.[16]

Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, the dominant patterns of Old Testament studies were being questioned. "It became apparent that the nearly triumphant, mid-century consensus of Old Testament studies had relied upon a finally untenable combination of Barthian *normativeness* and nineteenth-century *historicism*, a combination that under scrutiny could not be sustained," states Brueggemann.[17] The ensuing breach between theology and history resulted in "the *depriviledging* of history, its claims and methods," while simultaneously opening up "a *new pluralism* in methods, perspectives, and constituencies."[18]

By the end of the twentieth century and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first, this new pluralism has yielded a multiplicity of diverse approaches to Old Testament criticism. David Clines has grouped these into three "contemporary" methods, those related to: (1) literary criticism, (2) structuralism, and (3) ideological criticism.[19] Barton, for his part, categorizes such new approaches under the headings

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[16] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 106-7.

[17] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 67.

[18] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 67.

[19] David J. A. Clines, "Contemporary Methods in Hebrew Bible Criticism," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament the History of Its Interpretation: From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The*

of (1) advocacy readings, (2) literary study of the Bible, (3) postmodernism, (4) reader-response criticism and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and (5) New Historicism.[20] In light of such diversity, this brief introduction concludes by considering those approaches most relevant to a *world of the text* reading. Barton's understanding will be adopted under the broad headings of *existential*, *theological*, and *literary* approaches.

Embodying the *existential* approach, Paul Ricoeur has been credited with drawing the distinction between the *world behind the text* and the *world in front of the text*.[21] As both a philosopher and a proficient biblical critic, Ricoeur is distinctly qualified to help bridge this gap. While he affirmed historical criticism, he also "called for the scholar and indeed everyone to be interested not only in what lies behind the text but also in what lies 'in front' of it: that is, to interact with the text as something that speaks to the reader and makes an *existential* claim."[22]

Following the influence of both Barth and von Rad, the *theological* approach is best exemplified by Brevard Childs's canonical approach. While not opposed to

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Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries), vol. 3/2, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 149. Briefly, methods related to literary criticism include: genre criticism, rhetorical criticism, New Criticism (including narratology), reader-response criticism, reception criticism, and "intertextuality." Methods related to structuralism include: structuralism proper, poststructuralism, and deconstruction. Methods related to ideological criticism include: feminist criticism, gender criticism, materialist or political criticism, postcolonial criticism, minority criticism, cultural criticism, autobiographical criticism, and psychoanalytical criticism. Clines, 149-69.

[20] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 108-21.

[21] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 330. It should be noted that while Barton uses the phrase "world in front of the text," the present project consistently uses the phrase "world of the text" equivalently.

[22] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 330; emphasis added.

the historical method, Childs reads the final form of the biblical text as the

community of faith's "Scripture."[23] In this way,

> Childs distances theological claims he finds in the text from any judgment
> about history that may be "behind the text." His powerful alternative to
> "history" is "canon," that is, the larger shape and theological claim of
> scripture in which any particular text is located. The enduring importance of
> Childs's work is his effort to interrupt and reverse the long-standing
> dominance of historical-critical study that has sapped the vitality and courage
> of theological interpretation.[24]

And finally, due to structuralism's influence upon literary theory, the *literary*

approach includes aspects of both. In literary work, the object of study likewise is

the final form of the text. As summarized by Brueggemann, the literary, rhetorical

approach

> pays close attention to the actual workings of texts as an intentional system
> of signs. The point of such work is to see that the text is not simply "report"
> or "history," but a characteristic act of generative imagination that conjures
> an alternative world well beyond what is taken to be given.…It is now a
> principal work of scholarship to notice what texts do, how they function, and
> how they form worlds that are outside and alternative to our taken-for-
> granted systems of power and meaning.[25]

As structuralism's influence waned, various poststructuralist movements have

become more prominent, including reader-response criticism. "Postmodernist

criticism takes it for granted that meaning in texts is generated not by the author but

by the language-system in collaboration with the reader: it is ultimately in the

reader's control to decide on the sense of a text," summarizes Barton.[26]

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[23] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 330-31.

[24] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 69.

[25] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 68.

[26] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 332.

In practice, reader-response criticism takes either a "hard" or a "soft" form. In the former, a text's meaning resides with the reader alone (albeit within an interpretive community), while in the latter, meaning emerges from a dialogue between text and reader.[27] Ricoeur's approach—defending the needs of the reader without abandoning historical criticism—embodies the latter.[28] Adopting Barth's notion of a "second naïveté"—in which, in a "post-critical" era, a pre-critical naïveté is impossible—Ricoeur understands biblical criticism as the necessary precondition one must move *through*.[29] "In Ricoeur," states Barton, "we have, not opposition to historical criticism, but a desire to move on from it to engage with what he calls 'the world in front of the text'—that is, to make the text come alive for the modern reader. This again has certain affinities with the canonical approach, though its evaluation of historical criticism is perhaps more positive."[30] Needless to say, Ricoeur also believed that historical criticism, in certain ways, had run its course. In a 1990 interview with friend and biographer Charles Reagan, he states, "To know who wrote what at what time is completely useless in understanding the text. So, the most interesting works written on the Bible are written not by exegetes but by literary critics, like Frank Kermode and Robert Alter."[31]

Thus, from Barth to Ricoeur, the hegemony of the historical method has been, and continues to be, challenged. "It is impossible to overstate the energy and

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[27] Barton, "Biblical Scholarship," 332-33.

[28] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 119.

[29] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 119-20.

[30] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 120.

[31] Charles E. Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 121.

interpretive richness that has been unleashed into the discipline with the deprivileging of historical methods and questions and the fashioning of alternative approaches," states Brueggemann.[32] To that end, this second part of the present project employs Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics to explore the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam, Numbers 22-24.

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

While the term *hermeneutics*—the theory and practice of interpretation—emerged in the seventeenth century, the term *philosophical hermeneutics* is relatively recent. "In the ordinary, narrow sense, this term refers to the philosophical position of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and sometimes that of Paul Ricoeur," notes Jean Grondin.[33] Whereas hermeneutics previously concerned itself with *methods* of interpretation within other disciplines (although, as Grondin notes, the art of interpretation can be traced back to Stoic philosophy and the Greek rhapsodes), Gadamer argued for a more ontological definition—a comprehensive philosophy of understanding.[34] Thus, whereas hermeneutics had begun with the interpretation of canonical texts as far back as Homer, today the discipline of hermeneutics includes "sociology, aesthetics, historiography, law, and the human sciences generally."[35] As Joel Weinsheimer

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[32] Brueggemann, "Twentieth-Century Old Testament Studies," 68.

[33] Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 1-2. See also Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), ix.

[34] Grondin*,* 1-2.

[35] Weinsheimer, 1-2.

acknowledges, "there is good reason to take seriously Gadamer's claim that the scope of hermeneutics is universal."[36]

Jens Zimmermann summarizes hermeneutical development according to the accepted divisions of premodern, modern, and postmodern (from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, from Schleiermacher to Dilthey, from Foucault to Fish). Throughout these periods, as the loci of meaning shifts from author to text to reader, he provocatively concludes the end point is "interpretive nihilism."[37] However, rooted in previously dismissed premodern theological sources, philosophical hermeneutics, he argues, offers a more constructive path foreword:

> Moving further away from the auxiliary conception of hermeneutics as technical rules of exegesis and application, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) posited hermeneutics as the very mode of being of human existence. While Heidegger turned from hermeneutics in his later writings, his student Hans-Georg Gadamer continued to develop philosophical hermeneutics, applying it to the interpretation not only of texts but also of art, history, indeed, of human existence itself. Gadamer's work strives to balance the objective-subjective elements of text and reader. Gadamer's idea of fusing horizons allows the text to speak while recognizing the importance of the reader as an involved and biased agent.[38]

In this, the object of inquiry is not an author, text, or reader, but understanding itself. "Rather than reading texts and other objects as detached entities that are to yield their secrets through the application of scientific method, interpretation takes account of the relationship between text and interpreter," states Zimmermann. "The object to be interpreted, whether it be a text, a work of art, or one's own self, is

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[36] Weinsheimer, 2.

[37] Zimmermann, 19.

[38] Zimmermann, 20.

interpreted in light of its as well as the reader's own ontological embeddedness in history, tradition, and culture."[39]

Nevertheless, with this accepted definition of philosophical hermeneutics, Zimmermann challenges Grondin's underlying presuppositions. While Grondin writes, "What is correct…is the idea that early hermeneutics resembled a technical theory, and as a rule such a theory was of much less universal application than present-day philosophical hermeneutics," Zimmermann responds by citing the underlying theological influences for both Heidegger and Gadamer.[40] Philosophical hermeneutics is more broadly universal, he argues, precisely *because* of its theological roots. According to Zimmermann, Heidegger was "heavily influenced by Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard," while Gadamer "draws heavily on the theological explanation of the *verbum* doctrine of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicolaus Cusanus."[41] Thus, as Zimmermann summarizes, "Heidegger's and Gadamer's indebtedness to theology reminds one…that current Continental philosophy in general and philosophical hermeneutics in particular arose in dialogue with theology and draw important insights from this conversation."[42]

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[39] Zimmermann, 21.

[40] Grondin, 3.

[41] Zimmermann, 25; Zimmermann, 26. Zimmermann bases the latter conclusion on Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1994), 418-38. However, Grondin notes this, himself, in the preface to *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xiv.

[42] Zimmermann, 26.

Ricoeur: Loss, Trauma, and Conflict

Paul Ricoeur's personal biography is pertinent to understanding his philosophical hermeneutics, shaped as it was by loss, trauma, and conflict.

Ricoeur experienced profound loss throughout his life. His mother died seven months after his birth (27 February 1913), while his father, soon off to World War I, was declared missing in action just two years later. Such crucial separation, suffered so young, ensured a lasting impression. "He was perhaps fated to deal throughout his work with the question of personal identity, where he made some of his most significant contributions," surmises Dan Stiver.[43] Ricoeur continued to experience such unexpected loss throughout his life. His sister Alice, with whom he was close, died of tuberculosis in her twenties.[44] His son Oliver, named after the armistice of World War II, died by suicide before turning forty.[45]

Ricoeur, a committed pacifist, served in the French army during the Second World War. Here, two traumatic experiences occurred that shaped his perspective. In the first, his good friend and captain, while standing next to him, was killed by a sniper bullet to the head—near where his own father had been killed during the First World War. "Ever after, he said, he had a strong sense of human mortality and of not taking life for granted—significant existentialist themes," states Stiver.[46] In the second, he was captured and became a Prisoner of War for nearly five years in a

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[43] Dan R. Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 2.

[44] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 2.

[45] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 7.

[46] Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 25.

German POW camp. During this time, he displayed great resiliency. He banded with other professors to offer classes—lectures by memory and exams that later were validated by the French educational system.[47] He gained access to the works of Edmund Husserl, which was influential for Ricoeur's development as a phenomenologist. And finally, he began his first major work, *Freedom and Nature*.[48] Despite such productivity, his five-year internment was troubling, his release from camp, harrowing.[49] "Ricoeur has said that it was important for him to move forward, so he never really reflected on these experiences in his writing, but they surely marked him in deep ways that he would likely have acknowledged, especially for one steeped in the workings of the unconscious through his Freud studies."[50]

Finally, Ricoeur sought to mediate conflict during the student revolts of the late 1960s. Sympathizing with the students, he left the Sorbonne in 1967 to teach at the experimental University of Nanterre, becoming dean of the Faculty of Letters in 1968.[51] At a time when there were "an estimated 120,000 students for a university built for 20,000, with no resident students, no faculty offices, obviously large classes, and little contact between professors and students," he advocated for "a smaller, residential campus with greater communication and reciprocity between faculty and students."[52] Unfortunately, by 1969, Ricoeur was caught up in the

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[47] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 25.

[48] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 25. Stiver is referring to Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohák, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: IL, Northwestern University Press, 1966).

[49] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 3.

[50] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 4.

[51] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 27.

[52] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 6.

violent student protests of the era, personally attacked and humiliated. Facing ill health, he resigned in 1970, requesting a three-year leave of absence from the French university system. Nevertheless, while his influence waned in France over the next two decades, he was granted a chair previously held by Paul Tillich at the University of Chicago, where he taught annually.[53] "As a result," states Stiver, "he is one of the few philosophers who has drunk deeply of both Continental and Anglo-American philosophy, and he manifests the heady mixture of this 'conflict of interpretations,' the title of the collection of his essays that first came out, ironically, in 1969."[54]

Thus, from profound loss to the trauma of war and civil conflict, Ricoeur's personal biography not only reflected the twentieth century, but shaped his philosophical hermeneutics, as well.

Ricoeur, Philosophy, and Theology

With a life's work touching upon such diverse disciplines, it would have been challenging during Ricoeur's lifetime to discern a through line.[55] While he characterized his work as "an intersection of the problem of language and the problem of action," Ricoeur deferred to his readers: "According to my own theory, the author is not the best interpreter of his own work."[56] Nevertheless, in the mid-1980s he offered his own perspective. Giving the 1986 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh under the title, "On Selfhood: The Question of Personal

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[53] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 6.

[54] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 27.

[55] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 2.

[56] Reagan, 122. This is taken from a 1990 interview between Reagan and Ricoeur.

Identity," published later as *Oneself as Another*, that unifying theme was *the self*.[57]

As Stiver states concerning the published version, this work is "the closest to a one-volume presentation of his thought yet available. It returns to his early focus on a philosophy of the self and of action, seen in *Freedom and Nature,* but draws on deepened reflection on narrative and ethics."[58] In this work, three major features of the hermeneutics of the self are uncovered progressively through nine studies (chapters) organized around four questions: (1) Who is speaking? A *philosophy of language* (chapters 1 and 2), (2) Who is acting? A *philosophy of action* (chapters 3 and 4), (3) Who is recounting about himself or herself? The *question of personal identity* (chapters 5 and 6), and (4) Who is the moral subject of imputation? The *ethical and moral determinations of action* (chapters 7, 8, and 9).[59] A final chapter explores the ontological implications of these studies (chapter 10).[60] In this way, *Oneself as Another* reflects Ricoeur's lifelong pursuit—through many detours—to develop a philosophy of the will.

Nevertheless, the published version lacked the final two Gifford lectures concerning biblical hermeneutics.[61] Ricoeur offers his own rationale for doing so:

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[57] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), ix.

[58] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 29.

[59] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 16-18. The three major features of the hermeneutics of the self are: "(1) the detour of reflection by way of analysis, (2) the dialectic of selfhood and sameness, and finally (3) the dialectic of selfhood and otherness." Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 16.

[60] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 297.

[61] These final two lectures have been published separately: Paul Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," in *The Whole and Divided Self,* ed. David E Aune and John McCarthy, 201-20 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997); Paul Ricoeur, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation," in *Figuring the Sacred,* trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace, 262-75 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

"The primary reason for excluding them," he states, "…has to do with my concern to pursue, to the very last line, an autonomous, philosophical discourse."[62] In other words, professionally he was careful to keep separate his philosophical and theological work: "If I defend my philosophical writings against the accusation of cryptotheology, I also refrain, with equal vigilance, from assigning to biblical faith a cryptophilosophical function."[63] Boyd Blundell calls this Ricoeur's "double life," in which Ricoeur's theological work never was published in the same volume as his philosophical work.[64] "The most important advantage of Ricoeur's double life," states Blundell, "is that his *own* attempts at biblical interpretation need not be taken as the paradigm for the appropriation of hermeneutics by theology."[65]

Nevertheless, while not paradigmatic, for the present project it is necessary to explore Ricoeur's own understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology, from the relationship between philosophical and biblical hermeneutics as found in *From Text to Action*, to the manner in which biblical scripture instructs the self as presented in the first of his two omitted Gifford lectures. Ricoeur states that both are part of the same project: "These (omitted) lectures belonged to the biblical hermeneutics whose project I outlined in *From Text to Action*."[66]

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[62] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.

[63] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.

[64] Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 51.

[65] Blundell, 51-52.

[66] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 23. Ricoeur is referring to Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), first published in French as *Du texte a l'action: Essais d'hermeneutique, II* by Editions du Seuil, 1986.

In the earlier work, Ricoeur explores the contribution of philosophical hermeneutics to biblical exegesis. While it would appear that biblical hermeneutics (*regional*) is subordinate to philosophical hermeneutics (*general*), Ricoeur argues that, due to the textual nature of theological hermeneutics, an inverse relationship also is in effect: philosophical hermeneutics is subordinate to theological hermeneutics. In order to work out this relationship, he explores those hermeneutical categories distinct to the text, attempting to "apply" the general categories of hermeneutics to the theological.[67] Ricoeur follows four categories of general hermeneutics: (1) structure, (2) writing, (3) the world of the text, and (4) appropriation.

Ricoeur begins by discussing the relationship between the "forms" of biblical discourse (which will be discussed at greater length under Ricoeur's Biblical Time in Chapter 4, "Time and the Book of Balaam") and theological content:

> The basic point upon which I should like to focus my attention is this: the "confession of faith" that is expressed in biblical documents is inseparable from the *forms* of discourse—by this I mean the narrative structure of, for example, the Pentateuch and the Gospels, the oracular structure of the prophecies, parables, hymns, and so on.[68]

While these forms of biblical discourse share an affinity with *genre*, Ricoeur here is more concerned with their *structure*. In this, he notes three problems to consider: (1) the affinity between a form of discourse and the manner of one's profession of faith, (2) the relationship between a pair of discourses and their corresponding theological

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[67] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 89-90.

[68] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 90.

tension, (3) and the relationship between a comprehensive literary corpus and the interpretive space opened up by the forms of discourse.[69]

In this way, when considered through a structural lens, the biblical hermeneutic is subordinated to the philosophical hermeneutic. However, with the addition of the profession of faith, this relationship begins to invert—even as it remains inseparable from the structure itself.[70] As Ricoeur summarizes, "the completed work we call the Bible is a limited space for interpretation, in which the theological meanings are correlative to *forms of discourse*. Granting this, it is not possible to interpret *meanings* without taking the long detour by way of a structural explanation of *forms*."[71]

Ricoeur's second "application" of general hermeneutics to the theological concerns the relationship between speech and writing. In this, he cautions against biblical hermeneutics constructing a theology of the Word without first considering the movement from speech to writing.[72] While Ricoeur notes "the tendency for theology to raise the Word above Writing," this is antithetical to the scriptural witness itself, in which speech acts are based upon prior acts of writing.[73] "The very originality of the event (i.e., speech)," states Ricoeur, "requires that it be transmitted by means of an interpretation of preexisting significations—already inscribed—

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[69] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 90-91.

[70] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 91-92.

[71] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 93.

[72] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 93.

[73] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 93. In this, Ricoeur cites Jesus' interpretation of the Torah and Paul's interpretation of Hebrew prophetic literature as examples. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 93.

available within the cultural community."[74] These events, in turn, become inscribed themselves, so that the kerygma, the resultant relationship between speech and writing, becomes a pattern of writing-speech-writing (e.g., the word of Jesus between the two testaments), or even speech-writing-speech (e.g., the gospel between the preaching of the early church and contemporary preaching).[75] Tradition makes possible this proclamation; states Ricoeur, "tradition is the historical dimension of the process linking together speech and writing—writing and speech."[76] And so, in this way, the philosophical hermeneutic is subordinated to the biblical hermeneutic.

The third category of general hermeneutics to be considered is the "world of the text," the "central category," states Ricoeur, for both philosophical hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics: "All the other categories (i.e., structure, writing, appropriation) are articulated around it."[77] In this, he is unambiguous: the "world of the text" is the object of hermeneutics.[78] When applied to the Bible, "as to one category of texts among others," the inverse relationship is realized: general hermeneutics is subordinated to the theological.[79] Here, Ricoeur offers a number of theological applications of the category "world of the text."[80]

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[74] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 94.

[75] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 94.

[76] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 94.

[77] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 95.

[78] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 95.

[79] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 95.

[80] NB: In regards to style, in this section only, following Ricoeur's use in *From Text to Action*, the phrase "world of the text" will not be italicized.

In the first, the primary task of hermeneutics is allowing the world of the text to unfold before the reader. A proposed world is placed before the reader (e.g., a new world, a new birth, the kingdom of God), which unfolds before the text.[81] In the second, revelation is a feature of the biblical *world*—which is *revealing* of the world, including the reader's existence and history—not of the author's inspiration.[82] In the third, the biblical world implies a global horizon that excludes an individualist reading. The biblical world is cosmic, communal, historicocultural, and personal, which encompasses all the varied dimensions of being human.[83] Fourth, the projected world of the "literary" text, poetically removed from everyday reality, mirrors that of the new being.[84] "To follow this through and draw some final conclusions," summarizes Ricoeur, "must we not say that what is thereby opened up in everyday reality is another reality, the reality of the *possible*?"[85]

Ricoeur concludes with the fourth category of general hermeneutics applied to the theological: the existential category of *appropriation*. In this, he offers three consequences for biblical hermeneutics regarding the relationship between the world of the text and the understanding of the reader. First, "faith" is an act of hermeneutics; states Ricoeur, "biblical faith cannot be separated from the movement of interpretation that raises it to the level of language."[86] This is the primary theological consequence of the inviolable relationship between the world of the text

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[81] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 96.

[82] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 96.

[83] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 96.

[84] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 96-97.

[85] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 97.

[86] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 99.

and appropriation.[87] Second, employing a "hermeneutics of suspicion"—deconstructing prejudice to discern the world of the text—is an integral part of appropriating meaning.[88] And third, most importantly for Ricoeur, *imagination* is integral to this act of appropriation. Through imagination, the new being is formed: "I am indeed speaking here of imagination and not of will. For the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one's mind and choosing," states Ricoeur.[89] Imagination responds to the text as a *poem*; by this means, "a poetics of existence responds to the poetics of discourse."[90]

In the later work (the first of Ricoeur's final two omitted Gifford lectures), Ricoeur relates biblical hermeneutics to the self. While the two omitted lectures form an "inseparable whole," one of call and response, here, to round out his biblical hermeneutics project, only the first of the two will be discussed.[91]

In the printed version entitled "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," Ricoeur relates how the tradition of the Judaic and Christian biblical scriptures instructs the self.[92] "What I want to discuss is the internal dynamism that makes the book, made up of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, become a

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[87] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 100.

[88] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 100.

[89] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

[90] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

[91] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 201.

[92] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 201. In keeping with the separation between these final two lectures and *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur clarifies that these final two lectures do not imply that theology provides the answers for the questions raised by philosophy. Rather, the faithful believer responds to a call initiated by the Word. Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 201-2.

mirror for a self who responds to the solicitation of this book," states Ricoeur.[93] In

order to do so, he proceeds through four steps. In the first (preliminary) step, Ricoeur

examines the linguistic and scriptural mediation of biblical faith. In the second step,

via literary analysis, he explores the imaginative unity of the Bible. In the third,

Ricoeur considers the polyphonic text of the Bible—how the various literary genres

imply a human response. And finally, in what he terms a "clearly hermeneutical

step," he argues for limit expressions related to the Name.[94]

The first preparatory step concerns "faith," which requires both a linguistic

(general) and a "scriptural" (particular) mediation.[95] In the first, religious experience

is mediated through the phenomenon of language. In the second, biblical faith is

mediated through the Judaic and Christian biblical scriptures.[96] The biblical canon

exerts an authority over—thus forming the identities of—the resultant Jewish and

Christian communities.[97]

The second step concerns the Book, i.e., the configuring aspect of scripture.

Here, Ricoeur employs the literary analysis of Northrop Frye's *The Great Code* to

discern how a text's internal structure can produce meaning.[98] Ricoeur notes a

number of features of this "great code." First, due to the era in which it was

produced, biblical language is metaphorical, conveying not what something is *like*,

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[93] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 205.

[94] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 205. NB: These four steps more or less mirror an inverse relationship to the four categories of general hermeneutics in the previous essay.

[95] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 205.

[96] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 206.

[97] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 207.

[98] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 207. Ricoeur is referring to Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

but what it *is*. This metaphorical language, with complete internal coherence, is kerygmatic.[99] Second, the resultant imaginative unity of the Bible is conveyed through typological signs, "correspondences that produce an interconnection of meaning, for example, between the exodus of the ancient Hebrews and the resurrection of Christ."[100] Third, these typological signs are connected, from Genesis to Revelation, via a sinusoid—its peaks and valleys alternatively representing the paradisiacal/apocalyptic and demonic signs of the great code's overarching metaphor. "The typological correspondence is thereby extended over a temporal sequence, without the close connection broken between Eden, the promised land, Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the kingdom of God, and the apocalypse."[101] Finally, Ricoeur suggests—albeit provisionally—the relationship between this great code and the self: such metaphorical poetic texts do not reference the outside world, but the self. "Precisely because the text aims at nothing outside itself, it only has us as its outside, we who, in receiving the text, assimilate ourselves to it and make the book a mirror. At this moment, the language which *in itself* is poetic becomes kerygmatic *for us*."[102]

The third step adds another vision of the biblical text, one that somewhat corrects the one previous. First, beyond the imaginative unity of the Bible, the biblical text also contains a variety of genres of discourse (such as narrative,

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[99] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 208.

[100] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 208. Such significations occur within the Hebrew Bible, as well, e.g., relations between the covenants. Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 208.

[101] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 209.

[102] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 209-10.

prescriptive, wisdom, prophetic, hymnic, epistles, and parables). "If a unity can be recognized in the Bible, it is that of a polyphonic rather than a typological order," states Ricoeur.[103] Second, these genres of discourse are not opposed to one another. Through the coming together of historical-critical biblical exegesis and biblical theology in the present era, these genres of discourse form *theologoumena*.[104]

Thus, the presumed "unity" of the biblical canon goes beyond its imaginative unity to, at best, a polyphonic unity, which is reflected in an equally polysemic representation of the self.[105] Provisionally, this is demonstrated through the naming of God, which only can be captured via the various literary genres.[106] Similarly, the polyphony of genres can inform a polyphony of figures of the self.[107] Here the *theologoumena* are employed, shifting attention from their literary genres *per se* to their biblical theology-discerned internal structures. "What characterizes these *theologoumena* is that they all imply in their innermost signification a type of *response* on human beings' part."[108] This is the Mirror, i.e., the refiguring consequence on the self: "the effect of discovery and transformation this discourse brings about in its hearer or reader through the process of receiving the text."[109]

These *theologoumena* present a dialogical structure in which God's words and actions demand a human response—whether by an individual, Israel or the

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[103] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 210.

[104] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 210-11.

[105] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 211.

[106] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 211-12.

[107] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 213.

[108] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 213-14.

[109] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 204.

Church, or humanity as a whole.[110] Ricoeur gives a number of examples by genre. In

the narrative genre, God saves and the people praise; God blesses and the soul gives

thanks; God judges and the people repent.[111] In the prescriptive genre, the teaching

of *torah* is inseparable from the response of obedience or disobedience.[112] In the

prophetic genre, a word of judgment or promise given is met with a response of

repentance or hope.[113] In the Psalms, between lament and praise, the responses are

numerous.[114] "In this way," summarizes Ricoeur, "the human response to be found

in the Hebrew Bible is surprisingly varied."[115]

The final step concerns the referent "God," which is both the common aim of

all the discourses and the vanishing point exterior to all of them.[116] In like manner,

the self is called both to "draw itself together and to disappear, in a decisive way."[117]

In this way, the responsive self identifies with God through both the polyphony and

unity of the book. As Ricoeur summarizes:

> What corresponds and conforms to the unity of God in the withdrawal of his
> name on the side of the self is the disappearance of the ego, the letting go of
> self: who seeks to save his life shall lose it and who loses it will keep it. As
> for the quest for a personal center, it can only reflect the always deferred
> "imaginative unity" conveyed by the withdrawal of the Name.[118]

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[110] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 214.

[111] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 214-15.

[112] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 215.

[113] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 215.

[114] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 215-16.

[115] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 215.

[116] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 213.

[117] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 205.

[118] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 219.

Ricoeur's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology—from the relationship between philosophical and biblical hermeneutics to the manner in which biblical scripture instructs the self—will be revisited under Narrative Identity in Chapter 5, "Hope and the Book of Balaam."

Ricoeur and the North American Conflict

Having presented Ricoeur's perspective of the relationship between philosophical and biblical hermeneutics, especially in regards to the self refigured in the mirror of biblical scripture, it should be noted that the relationship between philosophy and theology is a "contested work in progress."[119] One such prominent example is the conflict that occurred at the close of the twentieth century between the Chicago and Yale Schools of narrative theology.[120] The Chicago School, influenced by Paul Tillich, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—mediated via David Tracy—emphasized a more ontological view of narrative, i.e., its central role in human life and its role in human identity.[121] The Yale School, on the other hand, represented by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, advocated for a postliberal theology via the narrative shape of Scripture.[122] For Frei, biblical narrative had been "eclipsed" by historical-critical concerns, while for Lindbeck, the primacy of biblical interpretation shaping experience had been replaced by a liberal "experiential-expressive" theology, i.e., universal experience informing interpretation.[123] Both perhaps unwisely associated

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[119] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 31.

[120] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 31.

[121] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 84.

[122] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 84.

[123] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 84.

Gadamer and Ricoeur with this latter category of theology.[124] As theologians, Frei and Lindbeck were suspicious of philosophers imposing a general hermeneutical approach upon theology.[125]

However, Frei and Lindbeck were responding less to Ricoeur than they were to Tracy's appropriation of Ricoeur, which misrepresented his view on the relationship between philosophy and theology. For Tracy, "fundamental" theology took precedence over "systematic" theology.[126] While a direct link between fundamental theology and philosophical hermeneutics is not evident in his model, philosophical concepts entered Tracy's theology via this fundamental discipline.[127] Thus, states Blundell, "when the claims of philosophy and the claims of theology come into conflict, (Tracy) is forced to come down on the side of philosophy. Far from theology appropriating philosophical insights, theology ends up *being appropriated* by philosophy."[128] For Frei, this suggested that "philosophical hermeneutics would overwhelm theological discourse…leaving theology as a mere 'regional application.'"[129]

However, as discussed above, this was far from Ricoeur's own position, who argued that, due to the textual nature of theological hermeneutics, an inverse relationship also is in effect: philosophical hermeneutics could be subordinate to

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[124] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 31.

[125] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 85.

[126] Blundell, 42. These are Tracy's categories; the primary reference group for each discipline are the academy and the church, respectively. Blundell, 42.

[127] Blundell, 42.

[128] Blundell, 42.

[129] Blundell, 45.

theological hermeneutics. As well, Ricoeur's "double life" assured the separation between his philosophical and theological work. In fact, the positions of Ricoeur and Frei concerning the relation between theology and philosophy were not altogether dissimilar.[130] In addition to acknowledging the independence of theology, both agreed on the necessity of narrative for understanding God's truth. As Fodor summarizes:

> both emphasize the importance of attending to the shape of biblical narrative before speculating about its theological significance—i.e. both affirm the inseparability of form and content; both resist a hermeneutics that converts the text into an abstract philosophical system; both emphasize the strong connections between biblical narratives and the formation of Christian identity; and both refuse to ground Christian faith in any systematic apologetics.[131]

As well, both relied on "ad hoc" outside dialogue partners—literary theorists in the case of Ricoeur and Frei, Wittgenstein in the case of Lindbeck—to help illuminate their work in theology.[132] "In the end," summarizes Stiver, "from the vantage point of some distance, there is more of a family resemblance between these two approaches, both of which are critical of modernity, than conflict."[133]

Nevertheless, due to Frei's rejection of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, postliberals in his wake have sometimes ignored Ricoeur's philosophy altogether.[134] However, as

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[130] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 149.

[131] Fodor, 304.

[132] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 85.

[133] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 33.

[134] Blundell, 53. As Blundell continues, "It is indeed ironic that Frei's followers, who are closely identified with the role of narrative in theology, follow him in rejecting the very philosopher who not only shares their Christian convictions, but will also go on to develop a rigorous philosophy of narrative and its role in constituting human identity." Blundell, 53. Instead, comments Blundell, "postliberals have chosen to operate in the *philosophical* shadow of Ludwig Wittgenstein." Blundell, 52.

Blundell observes, both Ricoeur and the postliberals, unlike Tracy, "operate in the theological shadow of Karl Barth."[135] In *The Second Naivieté*, Wallace argues that the hermeneutical programs of both Barth and Ricoeur "release a thoughtful openness toward the 'world' portrayed in the biblical witness," a hermeneutical approach consistent with the Yale School.[136] Blundell, building upon Wallace's argument, notes a similar *pattern* in the hermeneutic approaches of both Ricoeur and Barth: "Ricoeur's pattern is detour and return (in this case the critical arc), while Barth's pattern can be characterized as 'Chalcedonian.'"[137] Ironically, then, concludes Blundell, the "productive appropriation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics into theology is in the hands of those whose theological sympathies lay with Frei and Lindbeck."[138]

CONCLUSION

Moving from a *world behind the text* to a *world of the text* approach, the present chapter, beginning with Karl Barth and ending with Paul Ricoeur, has suggested that philosophical hermeneutics may offer a productive path forward to help ease the ongoing tension between historical and theological readings of the biblical text. The chapter progressed from the general to the specific in three sections.

In the first, a brief survey of twentieth-century approaches towards the biblical text has been offered. Early on, Barth's more theological approach

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[135] Blundell, 52.

[136] Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 6 (Macon: GA, Mercer University Press, 1990), xiii-xiv.

[137] Blundell, 136. Blundell's entire argument can be found in 131-49.

[138] Blundell, 52.

influenced a new generation of Old Testament scholars, including Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, whose Old Testament theologies attempted to systematize God's interaction with humankind through history. Nevertheless, the ensuing mid-century biblical theology movement largely collapsed, leaving others to work out a Barthian approach towards the text. From the end of the twentieth century to the present, a new pluralism has yielded a multiplicity of diverse approaches to Old Testament criticism, including *existential* (e.g., Ricoeur), *theological* (e.g., Brevard Childs), and *literary* (e.g., Robert Alter) approaches to the text.

In the second, the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics has been introduced. In this, the object of inquiry is understanding itself: "The object to be interpreted, whether it be a text, a work of art, or one's own self, is interpreted in light of its as well as the reader's own ontological embeddedness in history, tradition, and culture," states Zimmermann.[139]

In the final section, three aspects of Paul Ricoeur's life and scholarship have been considered: (1) his personal biography, details of which appear to have influenced his philosophical work, (2) his understanding of the relationship between philosophical and biblical hermeneutics, and (3) his position in the North American conflict between the Chicago and Yale Schools of narrative theology.

Already in this preparatory chapter concerning philosophical hermeneutics, foundational concepts important to the ongoing argument have been introduced. For Ricoeur, the *world of the text* is the object of hermeneutics.[140] In this refigured

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[139] Zimmermann, 21.

[140] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 95.

world, everyday reality is opened up to another reality—the reality of the *possible*.[141]

And through imagination, the new being is formed: "I am indeed speaking here of imagination and not of will. For the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one's mind and choosing," states Ricoeur.[142]

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[141] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 97.

[142] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

CHAPTER 3

IMAGINATION AND THE BOOK OF BALAAM

INTRODUCTION

Having examined the *world behind the text* of the book of Balaam, the project

substantively now turns to that of examining the *world of the text* of the book of

Balaam. However, before proceeding, it will be helpful first to consider a particular

account of what the book of Balaam itself might illustrate concerning sound

interpretation.

In her essay, "Am I Able to Say Just Anything?" Jacqueline Lapsley employs

the Balaam story to illustrate principles of faithful exegesis. While not discounting

the role of historical criticism in biblical interpretation, Lapsley likewise advocates

for the role of theological reflection.[1] In this, concerning faithful exegesis in

practical ministry, she offers two observations. First, citing Balaam's apparent desire

for financial gain while agreeing to speak for God, she cautions against self-serving

exegesis—interpreting Scripture for personal or political gain—especially when such

interpretation appears subtly to serve the needs of others.[2] Second, citing Balaam's

apparent narrow understanding of Israel and her God, she champions the need for

broad contextual frameworks to interpret Scripture. States Lapsley, "Balaam had a

number of disturbing experiences before he fully grasped that his interpretive work

must take place in the context of God's prior relationship with, and future plans for,

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[1] Jacqueline Lapsley, "'Am I Able to Say Just Anything?' Learning Faithful Exegesis from Balaam," *Interpretation* 60, no. 1 (2006): 23-24.

[2] Lapsley, 27.

Israel. God's way for Israel is a way of blessing, blessing that is played out in the larger story of God's love for Israel as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures."[3]

Thus, in exploring the role of *imagination* in forming the *world of the text*, the book of Balaam must be considered within its broader Pentateuchal context. Just as the story of Balaam "helps us see that our exegetical work must always be done in light of God's larger story," so the present chapter explores the book of Balaam in conversation with both the patriarchal and the exodus narratives.[4] For Lapsley, whose aim is practical ministry, the goal of such interpretation is edification: faithful exegesis is a *ministry* that "transforms persons and congregations in conformity to God's will."[5] For our purposes, whose trajectory ends similarly in a narrative identity, such transformation likewise is to be commended. While Lapsley does not "abandon critical tools or reflection," she advocates equally for a "disciplined imagination and something even more important—faith that God's word has power to speak to us and for us."[6]

In the previous chapter, the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics was introduced. In the present chapter and the two following, the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur will be employed in service of the Balaam narrative. Applying his insights into the use of language and the interpretation of texts, a reading strategy will be offered that uncovers the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam, Numbers 22-24.

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[3] Lapsley, 28.

[4] Lapsley, 28.

[5] Lapsley, 29.

[6] Lapsley, 30-31.

In his discussion of "The Bible and the Imagination," Ricoeur posits that the imagination (that comes after reading) is rooted in the imagination that is the very act of reading.[7] For Ricoeur, this act of reading is indicative of the productive imagination, which can be described as "a rule-governed form of invention" and can be considered as "the power of redescribing reality."[8] Both aspects, in the form of semiotics and metaphor, will be discussed and applied in the present chapter.

This first of three chapters investigates the use of *imagination* in forming the *world of the text*. The first part examines Ricoeur's use of structuralism—through semiotic analysis, signs effect meaning. The second part explores Ricoeur's work in metaphor—metaphor "redescribes" reality. Thus, the following uses *imagination* as a hermeneutical lens to explore the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam in its Pentateuchal context.

SIGNS EFFECT MEANING

Important to Ricoeur's use of structural analysis is the dialectic between explanation and understanding, which moves in two directions: from understanding to explaining, and from explanation to comprehension.

First, the text must be reperformed through the act of reading. To understand is to "generate a new event beginning from the text in which the initial event has been objectified."[9] In this way, the act of reading is a two-step process: first, the reader guesses the meaning of the text (understanding); and second, the reader seeks

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[7] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 149.

[8] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 144.

[9] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75.

validation through investigating the specific object of guessing (explaining). This is nothing more than the hermeneutical circle, in which "guess and validation are…related as subjective and objective approaches to the text."[10] In this, (1) the text is interpreted as a whole, (2) the text is interpreted as an individual, and (3) the text's potential horizons of meaning are considered. This is the working out of the dialectic between understanding (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*), "the balance between the genius of guessing and the scientific character of validation."[11] While for Ricoeur this process describes the act of reading, these are, in fact, the same fundamental steps of responsible exegesis of biblical texts.

The second half of this process, from explanation to comprehension, is related to the polarity between sense (what the text says) and reference (what the text talks about).[12] Here, through the act of reading, the referential function of the text is either objective (the text as a "worldless entity") or subjective (one that includes the reader). Ricoeur is interested in the former: "To read, in this way," he states, "means to prolong the suspension of the ostensive reference and to transfer oneself into the 'place' where the text stands, within the 'enclosure' of this worldless place."[13] Here, the referential function of the text refers to its presentation of a possible world through a closed system of signs. In this way, Ricoeur's "explanation" is a function of structuralism defined by units lying in opposition one to another.[14] This structural

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[10] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 79.

[11] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 79.

[12] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87-88.

[13] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 81.

[14] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 81.

model then is applied to texts, themselves, "to sequences of signs longer than the sentence, which is the last kind of unit that linguists take into account."[15]

This reading strategy from explanation to comprehension will be applied to the book of Balaam in its Pentateuchal context. Explanation employs structuralism through defining opposed units, which includes sequences of signs longer than the sentence.

Blessing and Cursing in the Book of Balaam

The primary oppositional signs in the book of Balaam are those of *blessing* and *cursing*, occurring together six times. Separately, the root ברך "to bless" occurs in eight verses (Num 22:6, 12; 23:11, 20, 25; 24:1, 9, 10), while the roots ארר and קבב "to curse" occur in twelve verses—fifty percent more frequently. Of these, ארר occurs in four verses (22:6, 12; 23:7; 24:9), and קבב occurs in eight verses (22:11, 17; 23:8, 11, 13, 25, 27; 24:10)— twice as often.

Of the twenty verses in which these terms are used, the terms for *blessing* and *cursing* occur together in six verses (22:6, 12; 23:11, 25; 24:9, 10). Of these six, half use ארר "to curse" (22:6, 12; 24:9) and half use קבב "to curse" (23:11, 25; 24:10). In order of occurrence, these six verses can be grouped into two mirrored halves, in which Balak utters both *blessing* and *cursing* together in the first and third positions, while a significant figure (God, Balaam) utters both together in the second position. After Balaam's first nighttime inquiry, God (Elohim) replies, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse (ארר) the people, for they are blessed" (22:12).

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[15] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 82.

Then, at the climax of the third oracle, Balaam utters, "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed (ארר) are those who curse you" (24:9).[16]

Blessing and Cursing in the Patriarchal Narrative

Applying structuralism to myths, Lévi-Strauss, argued that narratives of myths are built from constituent units (just as sentences are built from smaller units of language, i.e., phonemes, morphemes, and sememes).[17] These constituent units, *mythemes*, are not individual sentences, but are oppositive values joined to several sentences that form "a bundle of relations."[18] Meaning—i.e., the structure of the myth—is produced as these bundles are "put to use and combined," states Lévi-Strauss.[19]

Due to the significance of *blessing* and *cursing* used together in Numbers 22-24, in order to understand the book of Balaam in its Pentateuchal context, this mytheme first must be delineated in the patriarchal narrative. While the terms for *blessing* and *cursing* occur together only twice in the patriarchal narrative, this oppositive value via its "bundle of relations" is presupposed throughout.

The terms for *blessing* and *cursing* occur together only twice in Genesis: in the initial call of Abram (Gen 12:2-3), and in Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen 27:29). In the first instance, the term for *blessing* is used five times as opposed to the term

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[16] Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references cite the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

[17] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 206-7, quoted in Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 82.

[18] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 82.

[19] Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 207, quoted in Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 82.

for *curse* (ארר), which is used only once; the thrust of YHWH's call of Abram is blessing. In this initial statement of the patriarchal promise, the blessing and cursing formula, in which YHWH is the agent of both, is prominent (Gen 12:3). In the second instance, the context of Isaac's blessing of Jacob, the actual term for *blessing* is far less prominent. Nevertheless, it is punctuated by the blessing and cursing formula (Gen 27:29), this time in reverse order. Spoken by a human agent, the blessing and cursing formula here carries a notion of threat against Jacob's enemies, while still maintaining that aspect of blessing indicative of Abram's initial call. Again, the Hebrew term used for *curse* is ארר.

However, in its narrative context, Isaac's blessing of Jacob immediately precedes that of Isaac's blessing of Esau, which is, in fact, a curse. The bundle of relations that defines Isaac's blessing of Jacob is opposed for Esau. Whereas Jacob will live off the fatness of the earth, Esau is driven away from the fatness of the earth (Gen 27:28, 39). Whereas Jacob will be lord over his brothers, Esau will serve his brother (Gen 27:29, 40). In this context, Esau embodies Jacob's enemy, foreshadowing the Edomites' hostilities toward Israel. While it would be beneficial to trace the fate of the all the patriarchs' enemies throughout Genesis, here, at least, between Jacob and Esau, the oppositive value between *blessing* and *cursing* is demonstrated. Finally, this same term for *curse* ארר is used once more in the patriarchal narrative (by itself) in the blessing of Jacob. Jacob's "blessing" of his second and third sons, Simeon and Levi, likewise serves as a curse for violence they had inflicted (Gen 34:25-26). "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (Gen 49:7).

However, more pertinent to the book of Balaam is the "bundle of relations" that constitute *blessing*, traced through the patriarchal narrative from Abram's initial

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call to Israel's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh. Within the Abrahamic narrative alone (Gen 12-22), a number of key components of the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant constitute *blessing*. First, for both Abraham and his offspring (זרע), the overall theme is one of blessing. Second, Abraham's offspring will be innumerable. Third, possession of the vast land is guaranteed. Fourth, Abraham's offspring, beginning with his and Sarah's very own son, will include nations and kings. Fifth, his offspring will overcome their enemies. Sixth, all the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abraham and his offspring.[20] And finally, because of Abraham's obedience, YHWH guarantees the covenant's fulfillment.

Throughout the remainder of Genesis, the bundle of relations that constitute *blessing* continues to be expanded and clarified via Abraham's descendants—Isaac, Jacob/Israel, and Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh). In these iterations of the patriarchal promise, the term *offspring* זרע is even more prominent, integral to most components of the blessing (Gen 26:2-5; 26:24-25; 27:27b-29; 28:3-4; 28:13-16; 32:12; 35:11-12; 48:3-4; 48:15-16). There continues to be a close connection

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[20] Moberly rightly notes the interpretive conundrum of the Niphal נברכו "be blessed" in Genesis 12:3b, tracing its recent history of interpretation in *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Old Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 141-161. According to Moberly, von Rad, taking Genesis 12:1-3 as key to the Yahwist's theology, translates the unusual Niphal reflexively ("bless oneself") or passively—a translation, especially in the narrative context of the primeval history, suggestive of the universality of salvation. Westermann and Childs are in general agreement, while other interpreters, such as Richard Bauckham and Christopher J. H. Wright, understand the verse in the context of Christian mission. Moberly, however, questions whether or not the thrust of the divine speech concerns the nations' benefit or Abraham's. He asks, "May the nations constitute the backdrop *in spite of whom* Abraham will become a great nation, rather than *for the sake of whom* Abraham will become a great nation?" Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 149. While he goes on to state that the translation of the Niphal "remains probably insoluble on philological grounds," due to the fact that elsewhere in Genesis Niphal and Hithpael verbs appear interchangeable, a reflexive sense probably is indicated: "pronounce blessings upon one another." Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 151. Nevertheless, Moberly seeks "to enter imaginatively into the possible significance of the divine speech for Abraham himself within the text," by which Genesis 12:3b is restricted to Abraham: "that he really will be a great nation, and the measure of that greatness is that he will be invoked on the lips of others as a model of desirability." Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 155.

between offspring and land, whose blessedness is described in vivid detail. Both offspring and land are described, metaphorically, as the blessings of heaven and earth. God commands the patriarchs to be fruitful and to multiply, echoing terms used of humanity in general in the primeval history (Gen 1:28; 9:1). While it was promised that Abraham's offspring would overcome their enemies (Gen 22:17), now a more militaristic tone is invoked; in order for the offspring to possess the land, they will become a company of peoples (Gen 28:3-4; 48:4) or nations (Gen 35:11) occupying the gate of their enemies (Gen 24:60; cf. Gen 14:19-20). Expanding upon the earlier mention of kings, now a ruling figure clearly is pictured (Gen 35:11), one to whom both brothers and nations will pay obeisance (Gen 27:29; cf. Gen 37:8, 10).

The Book of Balaam in its Pentateuchal Context

While the terms for *blessing* and *cursing* occur together only twice in the patriarchal narrative—albeit, at significant points—the blessing in which they are embedded— the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant—is developed throughout. By tracing the expansion and clarification of that blessing, a fuller contextual understanding of the mytheme *blessing* and *cursing* is gained.

It appears significant that these terms do not occur together again in the Pentateuch *until* the book of Balaam, *when they are used together for a total of six times* (22:6, 12; 23:11, 25; 24:9, 10). This suggests a relationship between the two narratives: that the one (the book of Balaam) should be read in light of the other (the patriarchal narrative). The patriarchal narrative implies a close relationship between Abraham's offspring and the promised land; his innumerable offspring will possess the vast land as God enables them to defeat their enemies. Within this narrative, a progression from general blessing to ruling figure is suggested. This same

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progression is evident in Balaam's oracles, as well. Thus, the following traces both the mytheme *blessing* and *cursing* and the progression from general blessing to ruling figure in Numbers 22-24.

As the book of Balaam begins, the manifestation of blessing is evident. Israel, the offspring of the patriarchs, is described as a large, formidable force. Israel's size and presence unwittingly instills fear in a foreign king: "And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel" (Num 22:2-3). Balak's response is to curse "this horde" (22:4) that "cover(s) the face of the earth" (22:5, 11), so that he might vanquish them. Calling prophet-for-hire Balaam, he tells him: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse (ארר) is cursed" (22:6). While this first instance of *blessing* and *cursing* used together in the book of Balaam contextually is quite different from its initial use in the patriarchal promise (Gen 12:3)—God's inviolable blessing versus an enemy king's contractual curse—its use here (the first time since Gen 27:29) suggests an intentional link with Isaac's blessing of Jacob. Balak's intended curse invokes the promised threat against the enemies of Jacob's offspring.

With divination fees in hand, the elders of Moab and Midian travel to meet Balaam; upon arrival, they spend the night while Balaam inquires of YHWH (22:7-8). Responding to God's inquiry, Balaam reiterates Balak's initial complaint (22:9-11). God's response is direct and unequivocal: "You shall not go with them. You

shall not curse (ארר) the people, for they are blessed" (22:12).[21] This second occurrence of *blessing* and *cursing* used together is notable. Not only is it the first response to Balak's intention to curse, but it is the first of two responses uttered by a significant character other than Balak. While Balak's plan to curse is based on present circumstances, God's intention to bless is based on the *irrevocable anteriority* of the promise / covenant.[22] Based upon Abraham's prior obedience, Israel is inviolably blessed. In the morning, Balaam informs the envoy that YHWH has refused to let him go with them; they return to Balak (22:13-14).

The terms for *blessing* and *cursing* do not occur again until the oracular passages of Numbers 23 and 24, after Balaam has arrived in Moab. Balaam's first oracle vividly portrays the contrast between Israel's blessedness and an enemy's intended curse. That enemy is Balak / king of Moab, who has brought Balaam from Aram / the eastern mountains, to curse / denounce Jacob / Israel (23:7). Rhetorically, Balaam questions how he can curse / denounce whom God / YHWH has not cursed / denounced, for Israel is blessed (23:8). With his eyes opened (22:31) and speaking the word of YHWH (23:5)—despite his partial view (22:41; cf. 23:9a)—Balaam describes Israel in her ideal states of blessedness.[23] Israel is a people set apart; dwelling alone, they do not count themselves among the other nations (23:9b).

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[21] Moberly understands this direct and unequivocal response by God, as well as Balaam's apparent refusal to take notice, as the catalyst for the tale of the ass. R. W. L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 138-47.

[22] Milgrom confirms, "That is, they are already blessed from the time of the patriarchs, and the blessing cannot be reversed by a curse. This is based on Genesis 27:33." Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers,* The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 188. See Chapter 4, "Time and the Book of Balaam," for Ricoeur's concept of *irrevocable anteriority*.

[23] Contra Milgrom, who states Balaam, in the first oracle, describes Israel in her present state. Milgrom, 196. Nevertheless, he also concedes, "Ostensibly there is no blessing in Balaam's first oracle, only praise. But the blessing resides in Israel's *potential*, and it will be articulated in the following oracles." Milgrom, 197; emphasis added.

Additionally, they are innumerable, a people giving their enemies pause. Using the same term עפר used to describe Abraham and Isaac's countless offspring (Gen 13:16, 28:14), Jacob / Israel likewise is pictured as innumerable as the dust (23:10a).[24] Balaam ends this first discourse by proclaiming his desire to be included with the blessed: "Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!" (23:10b).[25]

After Balaam's first oracle—a blessing instead of a curse—Balak is angry: "What have you done to me? I took you to curse (קבב) my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them" (23:11)—the third time *blessing* and *cursing* is used together. In response, Balaam repeats his earlier statement, "Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?" (23:12). Thus, the first and third occurrences of *blessing* and *cursing* used together are spoken by Balak—the first stating his intended contract, the second revealing his incensed anger when that contract is violated.

Balaam's second oracle builds upon the first. Whereas the first oracle contrasted Israel's blessedness against an enemy's curse, the second oracle begins to picture *how* Israel's blessedness will result in her enemy's curse. Again, while Balaam's physical sight may be limited, he speaks with the insight of the word of YHWH (22:31; 23:13, 16). Balaam begins the second oracle by calling out to Balak: "Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me," for the following "curse" is upon Balak, not Israel (23:18b). He goes on to describe the irrevocable nature of the promise /

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[24] Wenham notes this is a clear allusion to the patriarchal promise of Genesis 13:16. Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 4 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1981), 195-96. Milgrom concurs, observing both Genesis 13:16 and Numbers 23:10 use the expression "count the dust," the Genesis reference relating "dust" to "seed." Milgrom, 197.

[25] As Milgrom states, "Balaam's wish illustrates the blessing that every nation and person will desire to receive from God—to share the fate of Israel. This is expressed in Genesis 12:3, 22:18, and 28:14." Milgrom, 197.

covenant: unlike humankind, God does not lie / change his mind—that which he says, he will do (23:19). Because God's blessing is irrevocable, Balaam has been commanded to bless Israel (23:20). From God's perspective, there is no misfortune / trouble in Jacob / Israel, because their king YHWH is with / among them (23:21). God has created a people, whom he empowers against her enemies. He brought them out of Egypt and fights for them (23:22). No enchantment / divination will work against Jacob / Israel—God has created this nation (23:23). "Behold, a people!" declares Balaam, describing her as a beast rising up to devour / drink the blood of her prey / slain (23:24). Thus, just as the blessing was expanded and clarified in the patriarchal narrative, so here YHWH guarantees the fulfillment of the covenant. In that, Jacob's offspring will overcome their enemies.

After Balaam's second oracle, when Israel again is blessed instead of cursed, the sequence is repeated. No longer just angry, Balak now is enraged: "Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all" (23:25). Nevertheless, Balaam continues to reiterate his powerlessness against YHWH's word: "Did I not tell you, 'All that the LORD says, that I must do'?" (23:26). While after the first oracle Balak reiterates the contract, here emphatically he urges Balaam neither to curse (קבב) nor to bless, thus beginning the second grouping of three occurrences of *blessing* and *cursing* used together.

Before the third and the unsolicited oracles, Balak takes Balaam to yet a third location (23:27-28). Balaam does not "look for omens" as previously, but "set(s) his face towards the wilderness" where he sees "Israel camping tribe by tribe" (24:1-2). Unlike before, the "Spirit of God" comes upon Balaam to inspire these oracles. Interestingly, here, at the start of the third oracle, Balaam introduces himself (24:3a),

the term for "oracle" נאם indicating the divine origin of his message.[26] Both the third

and the unsolicited oracle begin with an ecstatic preamble, in which every sense is

attuned to God. Described as the man whose eye is opened (cf. 22:31), Balaam hears

the words of God, sees the vision of the Almighty, and falls down with his eyes

uncovered (24:3b-4). In other words, while Balaam's physical view may have

improved, his spiritual perspective now is unparalleled; more clearly than ever, he is

able to describe the ideal Israel from God's perspective.[27]

After the preamble, the third oracle is presented in two halves. The first half

contains imagery unlike the previous two oracles, yet not unfamiliar from the

patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant of Genesis. Settled in the land, ideal Israel

is pictured as a vast garden planted by YHWH. The tents / encampments of Jacob /

Israel are described as "palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like

aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters" (24:5-6).[28]

Within this Edenic description, the imagery quickly transitions—in the span of two

distichs—from flowing water to "his seed" זרע, to a superior king ruling an exalted

kingdom (24:7).[29] The second half of the oracle—using the exact same imagery from

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[26] As Milgrom states, "In contrast to the prior oracles, God does not this time 'put words in his mouth' (see 23:5, 16). Thus, Balaam can say that these are truly his words; God has inspired the message, but it is he, Balaam, who has put it into words. The divine origin of his message is made explicit in the next verse.… Indeed, the choice of *ne'um* for 'word' is probably deliberate; it nearly always indicates a divine utterance." Milgrom, 202.

[27] Olson notes how Balaam's role, as portrayed in the introductory verses of each oracle, progresses through the oracles. "Balaam appears to grow into his role as a true prophet of God over the course of the four oracles." Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 148.

[28] As Milgrom states, "gardens beside a river" is a reminder of "the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis 2:10." Milgrom, 204.

[29] As Wenham notes, God promised the patriarchs three times that "kings would come forth from them" (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11). Wenham, 200. Milgrom notes the same. Milgrom, 204.

the previous oracle used to describe Israel—goes on to describe more fully this king: "God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox" (24:8a). Whereas previously Israel as a people was pictured as a beast devouring / drinking the blood of her prey / slain (23:24), now the king himself is pictured as one ruthlessly defeating his enemies: "he shall *eat up* the nations, his adversaries, and shall *break their bones* in pieces and *pierce them through* with his arrows" (24:8b). Again, using the same imagery from the previous oracle used to describe Israel, the king here is pictured as a lion / lioness lying down, satisfied after the hunt / kill (24:9a).[30] The third oracle ends with the climactic use of *blessing* and *cursing*: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (24:9b).[31] So again, the progression follows the expanded and clarified blessing of the patriarchal narrative: ideal Israel is pictured dwelling in the prototypical land; Jacob's offspring, a constituent ruling figure, will defeat Israel's enemies.

As with the first grouping of three, the middle position of the second grouping is notable. The fifth occurrence of *blessing* and *cursing* used together is spoken, again, by a significant figure—this time by Balaam. As the final exclamation point to the third oracle of blessing, he states: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse (ארר) you" (24:9b). This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, its syntax aligns closely with the final distich of Isaac's blessing

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[30] As Milgrom reminds, "the images in verse 9b are taken from…Jacob's blessing for Judah in Genesis 49:9." Milgrom, 205.

[31] Milgrom understands this as a "distributive singular"—the active participles in the plural, and the passive participles in the singular—and translates it as "Those who bless you, blessed be every one of them," or, "everyone…will desist from cursing you for fear of being cursed"—perhaps foreshadowing Moab's doom (24:17). Note, however, that it remains until the third, unsolicited oracle for this idea to be fully developed. Milgrom, then, rightly understands this verse to be the climax of the oracle: "The promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3; 22:18), to Jacob (Gen 27:29), and to the Israelites (Exod 23:22) is now fulfilled by Balaam." Milgrom, 205. Wenham simply states, "This magnificent prophecy ends with another obvious allusion to the promises made to the patriarchs." Wenham, 200.

of Jacob (Gen 27:29c)—albeit in reverse order. It also, of course, alludes to YHWH's initial promise to Abram—in the same order (Gen 12:3). Both imply YHWH's empowerment to overcome future enemies—an important component of the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant. Second, its use culminates the progression evident through Balaam's three oracles: from general blessing, to a people empowered by YHWH to defeat their enemies, to an individual ruler so empowered by YHWH. In a very real sense, this restatement of Isaac's blessing of Jacob is the climax of Balaam's oracles—the next unsolicited oracle acting merely to delineate further the third. Known as the "messianic" oracle, this unsolicited oracle paints in sharper relief the result of the blessing and cursing formula—both Israel's future ruler and Moab's future doom.

The sixth and final use of *blessing* and *cursing* used together in the book of Balaam conveys Balak's final exasperation. As earlier in the narrative concerning God (22:22) and Balaam (22:27), Balak's anger is kindled (24:10). Striking his hands together, he lashes out against Balaam, "I called you to curse (קבב) my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them these three times" (24:10). He commands Balaam to leave without payment (24:11). Balaam, for his part, repeats his previous statements: "If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will. What the LORD speaks, that will I speak." (24:12).

While the unsolicited oracle begins with the same ecstatic preamble as the third (with the additional description of Balaam as the man who "knows the knowledge of the Most High," 24:16b), it lacks the preparatory ritual described

before each of the previous three oracles.[32] Thus, in effect, Balaam continues where

he left off by describing further Israel's future ruler from the third oracle. As

introduction, playing off the term for "people" העם, he offers a preparatory

statement: "And now, behold, I am going to my people. Come, I will let you know

what this people will do to your people in the latter days" (24:14). Here, the

progression from offspring to king comes to its apex, the unsolicited oracle

describing this future ruler's victory over his enemies—including Moab.

Viewing ideal Israel from God's perspective, Balaam envisions this future

ruler with certainty, but as one distant in both time and space (24:17a). Using royal

language of rule and reign, Balaam sees a star / scepter coming / rising out of Jacob /

Israel (24:17b).[33] This king's first act is to "crush the forehead of Moab and break

down all the sons of Sheth" (24:17c), describing the defeat of the king or "head" of

Moab.[34] Esau's descendants, likewise, will be divested: "Edom shall be

dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed," with Israel described as

"doing valiantly" (24:18).[35] In sum, "one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and

destroy the survivors of cities!" (24:19). And, as if to drive the point home, three

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[32] This same title for God, Most High, is found in Melchizedek's blessing of Abram, along with Abram's response to Melchizedek, in Genesis 14:18-22. Milgrom, 207.

[33] The "star" has been interpreted in four ways: (1) as an image of a king (e.g., Isa 14:12); (2) as the messianic king (Jewish commentators); (3) as shooting stars or comets destroying enemies (ANE mythology), or (4) as *Kokhab* (not meaning "star'), which can mean "host." Milgrom, 207. States Wenham, "That a king is meant here is confirmed by the second line of the couplet…a sceptre being part of the royal insignia (Ps 45:6; Amos 1:5, 8; cf. Gen 49:10)." Wenham, 201.

[34] States Milgrom, the "sons of Sheth" is "a general designation for all the nomadic groups descended from Abraham (see Gen 25) and considered his kinsmen, over whom Israel was promised dominance in the patriarchal blessings, as in Genesis 27:29." Milgrom, 208.

[35] As Milgrom adds, "The function of these oracles is the confirmation and fulfillment of the patriarchal blessings of Genesis 25:23 and 27:29, in which the overthrow of Edom is a prominent theme." Milgrom, 206.

additional slight oracles are appended, each describing further defeat of Israel's enemies, including Amalek (Num 24:20). As Olson summarizes, "Balaam's oracle(s) sets in motion the historical forces that will lead to the rising of Israel's power and king and the fall of Moab and its neighbors in some distant future time."[36]

Conclusion

The mytheme *blessing* and *cursing* developed throughout the patriarchal narrative finds its parallel in the book of Balaam. "The oracles of Balaam reaffirm God's promises first made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:1-3 and repeated throughout the Pentateuch, namely, promises of land, descendants, and blessing."[37] The "bundle of relations" defining *blessing* in Genesis is satisfied in Balaam's oracles: from Jacob's innumerable offspring dwelling in the prototypical land, a company of people empowered by YHWH to defeat their foes, to a constituent ruling figure, a superior king so empowered by YHWH to defeat their enemies. Moab's doom is assured by this future king of Israel. In fulfillment of the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant, Balak's curse comes down upon his own head, instead.

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[36] Olson, 150.

[37] Olson, 151. Olson continues, "Balaam's first oracle affirms Israel's positive relationship with God as well as its innumerable population (Num 23:10; cf. Gen 13:16). The second oracle concentrates on God's faithfulness to the promises of the past and the irreversibility of God's blessing of Israel (23:19-20). The third and fourth vision describe Israel's future victory over its enemies and the peace and prosperity that Israel will enjoy in the land of Canaan (24:3-9, 15-24)." Olson, 151. Wenham concurs: "In Genesis 12:1-3, and subsequent passages, Abraham was promised three things: land, descendants, and a covenant relationship. Balaam's first oracle mentions Israel's special relationship with God and her great population (23:8; cf. Gen 12:3. Num 22:17; cf. Gen 13:16; 12:2-3). The second oracle concentrates on Israel's covenant relationship (cf. Gen 12:2-3). The third vision describes how Israel will shortly enjoy peace and prosperity in the promised land. The fourth vision describes an Israelite king, a much rarer element in the patriarchal promises (cf. Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11)." Wenham, 190.

Returning to Ricoeur, the final step from explanation to comprehension can be completed. Explanation requires understanding, which brings forth comprehension, i.e., "the inner dialectic, which constitutes interpretation as a whole."[38] Through tracing and analyzing the oppositive value of *blessing* and *cursing*, structural analysis contributes to meaning, for such oppositions defining such a structure are meaningful in themselves. Like birth and death, the mytheme *blessing* and *cursing* is an existential conflict that the myth itself attempts to overcome. "The function of structural analysis," states Ricoeur, "is to lead us from a surface semantics, that of the narrated myth, to a depth semantics, that of the boundary situations, which constitute the ultimate 'referent' of the myth (i.e., its existential content)."[39] In this way, structural analysis yields the *world of the text*; the ultimate referent is the anticipated fulfillment of the patriarchal promise that, in effect, defines Israel's narrative identity.

As Ricoeur states, "To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about."[40] Consequently, the depth semantics yields the text's reference, "a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text."[41] In this, "Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation. It seeks to grasp the world-propositions opened up by the reference of the text."[42] Under semiotics, *reference* refers to the text's

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[38] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 86.

[39] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87.

[40] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87-88.

[41] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87-88.

[42] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87-88.

presentation of a possible world through a closed system of signs, which includes "a possible way of orienting oneself within it."[43]

METAPHOR "REDESCRIBES" REALITY

Moving from semiotics to semantics, a significant contribution to Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics is his use of metaphor. His important work, *The Rule of Metaphor*, consists of eight studies in which he moves from classical rhetoric, through semiotics and semantics, ending with hermeneutics.[44] In this, he progresses from the word to the sentence, and finally to discourse. For our purposes, it is the transition from semantics to hermeneutics that is most relevant, especially his seventh study concerning metaphor and reference. This topic likewise is presented in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*.

Against the presuppositions of classic rhetoric, Ricoeur offers a modern semantic treatment of metaphor. In this, two of his propositions are particularly relevant in exploring the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam. In the first, against the traditional view, Ricoeur argues that a live metaphor—the tension between two interpretations, one literal and one metaphoric—"elicits a veritable creation of meaning."[45] In the second, he contends that a metaphor, far from being merely ornamental, offers new information: "A metaphor, in short, tells us something new about reality."[46]

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[43] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 88.

[44] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 3.

[45] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 51-52.

[46] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52-53.

Moving from the theory of metaphor to its *hermeneutic* aspect, Ricoeur transitions from the sentence to the discourse proper, in which *sense* is distinguished from *reference*. Whereas under semiotics *reference* refers to the text's presentation of a possible world through a closed system of signs, here according to semantics the *reference* of the metaphorical statement contains "the power to 'redescribe' reality."[47] Metaphor, according to Ricoeur, is a strategy of discourse that "preserves and develops the *heuristic* power wielded by *fiction*."[48]

The Book of Balaam in Its Pentateuchal Context

Again, in his discussion of the Bible and imagination, Ricoeur posits that the imagination (that comes after reading) is rooted in the imagination that is the very act of reading.[49] In this, one of four presuppositions, "the guiding thread of the whole study," is *intertextuality*.[50] Ricoeur defines intertextuality as "the work of meaning through which one text in referring to another text both displaces this other text and receives from it an extension of meaning."[51] Such intertextuality unlocks the metaphorization of narrative. Thus, in applying this hermeneutical theory of metaphor, two discourses will be placed in tension: the exodus narrative and the book of Balaam.

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[47] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[48] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[49] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 149.

[50] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 147.

[51] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 148.

The book of Balaam opens similar to the exodus narrative: a foreign king is threatened by a large and prosperous Israel (Exod 1:9-10).[52] Whereas Pharaoh is threatened by the mere potential of an outsized Israel fighting against Egypt, Balak's fear is evidential: "And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel" (Num 22:2-3). Because of this threat, Balak enacts a plan first to weaken Israel via curse, then to defeat them militarily.

In summoning prophet-for-hire Balaam, Balak describes Israel as a people that has come out of Egypt: "They cover the face of the earth" (Num 22:5b, 11a), using a phrase ("eye of the land") repeated from Exodus 10:5 that describes the plague of locusts.[53] In other words, in the context of the exodus, the words of Balak literarily describe Israel as a plague. He continues, "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (Num 22:6; cf. 22:11)—ironic words, notes Olson, that would come back to haunt Balak (cf. Num 24:17).[54] So, whereas in the exodus narrative Moses is commissioned by YHWH to act as intermediary, here Balaam is

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[52] As Ackerman notes, an allusion to Pharaoh seems intentional; both Balak and Pharaoh use language from the ancestral blessing (Gen 12:3) to describe Israel's proliferation (cf. Exod 1:8-12, Num 22:3-5), thus ensuring conflict between them and Israel's God. If the narrative portrays Balak as "Pharaoh *redivivus*," then his doom likewise is presupposed. James S. Ackerman, "Numbers," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 86.

[53] Gray, 327; Martin Noth, *Numbers*, The Old Testament Library, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1968), 176. Milgrom states, "Israel is clearly compared with a locust plague, a common simile for an invading army (cf. Judg 6:5; 7:12)." Milgrom, 186.

[54] Olson, 142.

hired by Balak for the sole purpose to curse Israel. Nevertheless, he still functions as an intermediary; like Moses, he speaks on behalf of YHWH. However, unlike Moses, his loyalties are divided between his employer Balak and the source of his oracles, YHWH. Also, whereas Moses is a reluctant intermediary, at one point refusing to go, Balaam appears all too willing to follow Balak's lead—as long as he receives YHWH's permission to go and, perhaps, an appropriate financial reward.

Throughout the exodus narrative, a pattern of three is noted through the three cycles of three plagues each. Likewise, throughout the book of Balaam, a pattern of three is prominent: Balaam encounters YHWH three times (Num 22:9-12 [1], 20 [2], 22-35 [3]), while within the donkey incident, the ass halts three times provoking Balaam's anger (Num 22:23 [1], 25 [2], 27 [3]). Parallel to Balaam's three incidents of anger toward the donkey are Balak's three incidents of anger toward Balaam (Num 23:7-10 [1], 18-24 [2]; 24:3-9, 15-24 [3]).[55]

In the exodus narrative, YHWH's anger is kindled against Moses (Exod 4:13-14). When Moses is sent to Pharaoh to perform "all the miracles that I have put in your power," on the way YHWH inexplicably seeks to put Moses to death (Exod 4:21b, 24). Similarly, during Balaam's second encounter with YHWH, he is given permission to go with Balak's envoy, but when he leaves with the princes of Moab the next morning, just as surprisingly "God's anger was kindled because he went" (Num 22:20-22).

Amongst scholars approaching Numbers 22-24 from a *world of the text* perspective, various suggestions are offered regarding this textual pressure point in the Balaam narrative. Gordon Wenham understands this surprising turn in the

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[55] Ackerman, 86; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 104-7; Olson, 141-42, 147; Wenham, 185-86.

narrative as emblematic of the entire third encounter (the ass incident), one meant to teach obedience. Balaam learns that God "wields a sword and that disobedience means death."[56] James Ackerman, however, attributes this abrupt change in God's directive to redaction: the folktale of Balaam and the talking ass has been inserted here, however awkwardly, to introduce the oracles that follow.[57] Jacob Milgrom cites evidence, too, that this third encounter is discrete, concluding that it is a separate composition inserted into the present narrative.[58] Counter to these redactional solutions, Olson suggests this situation follows other enigmatic divine biblical encounters. The stories of Jacob (Gen 32:22-32), Moses (Exod 4:24), and Joshua (Josh 5:13) offer similar examples of individuals called to be an instrument of God while being tested under unusual circumstances. Just as in those similar inscrutable divine encounters, so here, too, it becomes apparent that "God's favor cannot simply be assumed; God retains the right to fight against even those appointed by God if God so wills."[59] For R. W. L. Moberly, this textual pressure point can be attributed to Balaam's greed. After God's direct and unequivocal response (22:12), Balaam seeks a second nighttime encounter with YHWH (22:19). "Yet all may not be what it appears," states Moberly, "there are reasons for the reader to be wary of Balaam's words."[60] He cites three reasons: (1) Balaam does not

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[56] Wenham, 192.

[57] Ackerman, 86.

[58] As Milgrom notes, Balak and the Moabites have disappeared from the scene, the biome has changed, and, most importantly, Balaam is now openly defiant of God. Its style, as well, suggests a different genre: a folktale. Milgrom, 468. Moberly, however, disagrees; if Balaam cannot see the angel of YHWH, his behavior hardly can be considered defiant; Balaam's focus is on his donkey. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 143-145.

[59] Olson, 144.

[60] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 141.

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simply dismiss the second royal contingent, his response in verse 18 can be read as "a pious smokescreen;" (2) likewise, Balaam's "what more" (22:19) can be read as a desire to evade obedience to God's word; and (3) God's anger at Balaam's going (22:22a) "indicates a more complex and ironic tone to God's words of permission" (22:20).[61] Thus, God's response to Balaam's greed explains the textual pressure point. "The point is that if Balaam wants, for reasons of self-interest, to evade YHWH's affirmation that Israel is blessed, then he must learn the hard way that this is not possible," summarizes Moberly.[62] "In short, God wishes to teach Balaam a lesson."[63]

Nevertheless, in the present context of the exodus narrative as metaphor, other possibilities surface. Whereas YHWH apparently seeks to kill Moses because of his disregard for the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Exod 4:24-26), in the book of Balaam, God's inexplicable anger (after Balaam's seeming obedience) could be attributed to Balaam's disregard for (or ignorance of) that same covenant—his presumed openness to cursing Israel. Balaam's third encounter with YHWH (the tale of the ass) illustrates this blindness, the angel of the LORD prohibiting Balaam from moving forward—just as the angel of God prohibits Pharaoh's army from attacking Israel at the Red Sea (Num 22:22-31; cf. Exod 14:19). Nevertheless, after YHWH opens Balaam's eyes, Balaam repents, the angel of the LORD allowing him to continue: "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you" (Num 22:35b). Balaam says as much to Balak; just as the prophet Moses speaks the word of YHWH

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[61] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 141-42.

[62] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 143.

[63] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 143.

to Pharaoh (Exod 5:1, etc.), so prophet-for-hire Balaam speaks YHWH's word to Balak: "Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak" (Num 22:38; cf. 23:26).

Balaam not only corresponds to Moses in the exodus narrative, but also, through the tale of the ass, stands in contrast to Pharaoh. Through the book of Balaam's clever narrative structure, the folktale allows Balaam and the donkey also to represent Balak and Balaam in the subsequent oracle passages.[64] In the tale of the ass, after Balaam's eyes are opened, YHWH tells Balaam: "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live" (Num 22:32-33). In the subsequent oracle passages, these words also indict Balak; his intent to curse Israel three times similarly is perverse (or reckless). Had Balaam not spoken the word of YHWH (by turning aside from cursing Israel), YHWH's intent to eliminate Balak is implied. Thus, Balaam's repentance, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me" (Num 22:34), stands in stark contrast to Balak's stubborn refusal to turn from cursing Israel. In the exodus narrative, Pharaoh, likewise, refuses to stop pursuing Israel (Exod 14:1-4; cf. 12:31-32). Whereas Balaam's eyes are opened and he repents, Pharaoh's heart is hardened through his continued refusal to acknowledge YHWH. By Pharaoh's reckless pursuit of Israel, the Egyptians and his army are killed. Thus, reading the exodus narrative as metaphor, due to his refusal to repent, Balak's doom likewise is presupposed.

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[64] States Alter, "It seems fairly clear that the ass in this episode plays the role of Balaam—beholding divine vision with eyes unveiled—to Balaam's Balak." Alter, 106.

As a result, the most natural comparison between the two narratives is between Pharaoh and Balak; both are enemies of Israel, their doom increasing as the narratives progress. Just as Pharaoh's heart continues to harden through YHWH's plagues against Egypt, so Balak's anger continues to rise as YHWH, through Balaam, continues to bless Israel. As the plagues encroach ever closer to Pharaoh personally, so, too, do the oracles increasingly indict Balak. At the conclusion of both the plagues and the oracles, both foreign kings are defeated; while Pharaoh's army is drowned, the destruction of Moab's (future) king is foretold.[65]

In Balaam's first oracle, the effect of the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant is presumed: how can Balaam curse / denounce Jacob / Israel when God / the LORD has blessed them, instead (Num 23:7-8)? Just as Israel is set apart in Goshen, immune to YHWH's plagues, so here Balaam sees this blessed people dwelling alone / not counting itself among the nations (23:9).[66] Just as the "dust" recalls the third and sixth plagues, here the term עפר (the same term as used in the third plague) likewise recalls its use in Genesis 13:16, where metaphorically it foretells Israel's blessedness: "Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?" (23:10a).[67] Balaam seeks the same end as Jacob / Israel, whom he calls upright (23:10b). "And Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I

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[65] As Milgrom states, "A fitting and ironic conclusion to the Balaam story: Balak of Moab wished to curse Israel; instead, his hired seer, Balaam, curses Moab—a measure for measure principle." Milgrom, 208.

[66] As Ackerman notes, "The editors (of the present form of Numbers) clearly assumed that life in the Diaspora had its ancient analogue in the Wilderness era." Ackerman, 78. In this context, he comments, "Balaam's vision of Israel dwelling alone, not regarding itself among the nations, also recalls the earlier motif of Israel as a holy nation, set apart from other peoples." Ackerman, 87.

[67] While רבע usually is rendered as "one-fourth" in Hebrew—i.e., "who can number even a small fraction of the Israelites (see Gen 13:16)"—since את does not occur in ancient poetry, Milgrom renders את רבע as "dust-cloud." "The image here is of the dust raised by Israel's marching hosts, an image found in the Bible in Ezekiel 26:10 and Nahum 1:4." Milgrom, 197.

took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them'" (23:11). Whereas Pharaoh continually reneges on his word, intending only to curse Israel (e.g. Exod 10:20; cf. 10:8, 11), so here Balak accuses Balaam of doing the same, but in reverse: blessing instead of cursing Israel. Balaam replies as perhaps Moses would have to Pharaoh: "Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?" (23:12).

The ritual of worship is repeated. Again, YHWH meets Balaam and puts a word in his mouth (23:16). Interestingly, before the second oracle (only), Balak inquires: "What has the LORD spoken?" (23:17c), perhaps recalling Pharaoh's reluctant acknowledgment of YHWH. While at first Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron, "I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" (Exod 5:2), eventually he acquiesces, "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me" (Exod 10:16-17; cf. Exod 12:31-32).

As the second oracle begins, again God's promise to uphold the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant is presumed. God is not a man / son of man that he should lie / change his mind: he will do it / fulfill it (23:19). As Balaam states, God has blessed and he (Balaam) is powerless to do otherwise; God has not beheld / seen misfortune / trouble in Jacob / Israel (23:20-21a). Just as in the exodus narrative, YHWH as king of Israel is among them (23:21b).[68] YHWH their God "brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (23:22).[69] Just as Pharaoh

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[68] As Milgrom comments, "With the Lord [sic] as King, Israel is invincible." Milgrom, 199.

[69] Milgrom notes the participle rendered as "brings them out" represents the Exodus as still in progress, "in contrast to Balak's claim that 'a people *came* out of Egypt' (22:5)." Milgrom also understands the subject of the whole oracle to be the blessedness of Israel, stating, "it (the metaphor 'wild ox') probably refers to Israel's divinely endowed power (see Ps 92:11), in which case the line should be rendered: 'They are like the horns of the wild ox' (so too 24:8)." Milgrom, 200. However,

is powerless against YHWH, Pharaoh's magicians unable to perform most of YHWH's signs and wonders, so "there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel" (23:23a). As witnessed through the exodus, YHWH has created a people empowered to defeat her enemies: "now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!' Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain" (23:23b-24).[70] This second oracle more directly indicts Balak; just as YHWH empowers Israel to defeat her enemies in the exodus, so now, it is implied, they will defeat Moab. "And Balak said to Balaam, 'Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.' But Balaam answered Balak, 'Did I not tell you, "All that the LORD says, that I must do"?'" (23:25-26).

The ritual of worship again is repeated. However, with the third oracle, a fundamental shift takes place. Understanding YHWH's intent to bless Israel, Balaam sets his face toward the wilderness—the very destination, in the exodus, to which Israel had departed (Num 24:1; cf. Exod 13:18). While encamped by the sea, Israel had lifted up her eyes in terror to see the Egyptians approaching; here, Balaam lifts up his eyes to see Israel encamped peacefully tribe by tribe (Num 24:2a; cf. Exod 14:10). Thus, no longer is Balaam's prophetic vision merely recalling the exodus, but now it is envisioning a future, idealized Israel. Unlike the previous two oracles,

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Wenham states, "Balaam likens God's support for his people to *the horns of the wild ox.* This is the interpretation of NEB and TEV, 'He fights for them like a wild ox,' and is preferable to RSV which compares Israel itself to the horns of the wild ox." Wenham, 197.

[70] Milgrom notes, "This simile referring to Israel occurs frequently, as in Genesis 49:9, Deuteronomy 33:20, and Micah 5:7." Milgrom, 200.

here the Spirit of God comes upon Balaam (Num 24:2b).[71] The oracle is distinctly personal: God / the Almighty overpowers him, opening his eyes and ears, causing a physical response (24:3-4).[72]

Balaam's vision begins by picturing idealized Israel, post-exodus, encamped in the wilderness (24:5). Israel is described in Edenic terms: palm groves stretching afar, gardens beside a river, aloes that YHWH has planted, cedar trees besides the waters.[73] Yet in quick transition, water and offspring imagery merge to recall key moments in the exodus narrative (24:6-7a; cf. Exod 1:22, 2:10, 14:21-25). Distinct from Israel as a people, this offspring is an exalted king / kingdom—the two entities, rising above her enemies, seemingly united (24:7b).[74] In parallel with the second oracle, Balaam's third oracle states, "God brings *him* out of Egypt and is for *him* like the horns of the wild ox" (24:8a). Whereas in the second oracle Israel was described as a lion rising to instill terror, here the king, using language even more graphic, is described as ferocious: eating up his adversaries, breaking their bones, and piercing them with arrows (24:8b). Like a lion, once sated, he then will lie down (24:9a).[75]

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[71] Olson notes that the mechanical repetition here ends: "Balaam appears to invest more of himself into the pronouncement of blessing, no longer relying on manipulative omens but speaking as the spirit of the LORD comes upon him." Olson, 147.

[72] Wenham and Milgrom suggest he falls into an ecstatic trance as he sees the vision—a mark of a true prophet. Milgrom suggests the visions are, in effect, auditions. Wenham, 198; Milgrom 202-3.

[73] Milgrom, 204.

[74] Regarding the king, Wenham notes that although Saul, the first king of Israel, defeated Agag, the prophecy of course refers to Israel's defeat of all her enemies. Wenham, 199-200. Milgrom states, "The Septuagint and Samaritan read 'Gog,' the legendary future antagonist of Israel mentioned in Ezekiel 38-39, thereby giving the oracle an eschatological thrust." Milgrom, 204. Rashi understands the king/kingdom to refer to Saul/David, respectively. Michael Carasik, ed., *Numbers*, The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 184.

[75] Milgrom makes this observation, that "in the previous oracle, the lion rises and does not rest until it eats its prey (23:24). Here the sated lion now lies down to rest: Even when it is in a state of repose, who would dare rouse it?" Milgrom, 205.

Thus, Balaam's third oracle completes the transition; whereas in the exodus YHWH as king had fought for and delivered Israel, in the second oracle Israel as a people are empowered to do so, and in the third oracle the king constituent of Jacob's offspring is empowered to fight and deliver Israel from her enemies. Once this transition has been made, the blessing and curse formula is invoked: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (24:9b). While this formula never is invoked in the exodus narrative, its principle is presupposed throughout. As that principle played out locally in the exodus narrative, so here it is universalized in terms both of agent and adversary. YHWH's purposes will be fulfilled through Israel, specifically through her future king, while no enemy nation or king, from Egypt's Pharaoh to Moab's Balak—indeed, to any future adversary—will be able to thwart those purposes (Gen 27:29c).

While the blessing and curse formula appears to complete the description of blessed Israel via Balaam's oracles, Balak's anger is unleashed. Having hired Balaam to curse Israel three times, Balaam, instead, has blessed them three times (24:10). Like Pharaoh, Balak goes back on his word; blaming YHWH, he will not pay Balaam his wages (24:11). Balaam again reiterates what he has said all along: he can only do / say what YHWH puts in his mouth (24:12-13). In response to Balak's autocratic caprice, Balaam gives one final unsolicited oracle that delineates its most threatening element: the kingship. "And now, behold, I am going to my people. Come, I will let you know what this people will do to your people in the latter days" (24:14).[76]

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[76] Milgrom understands the phrase to be "a reference to the near future from the point of view of the speaker." Milgrom, 206.

Here, another pattern of three is noted, this time of three + one, evident in both the exodus and the Balaam narratives.[77] In Exodus, culminating the three cycles of plagues, a tenth plague brings about the death of Pharaoh's firstborn son, which simultaneously enables the deliverance of YHWH's firstborn, Israel. In the book of Balaam, the third oracle is followed by one unsolicited (Num 24:3-9, 15-24), which likewise culminates the three previous oracles of blessing. Just as the tenth plague signals the deliverance of Israel, so this unsolicited oracle proclaims the defeat of Israel's enemies via a ruling figure. As suggested through tracing the patriarchal promise / Abrahamic covenant in Genesis, this representative ruler culminates the blessing of the firstborn.

Balaam's unsolicited oracle begins as did his third: with a personalized preamble attributing his revelation to YHWH's empowerment. Again, Balaam's vision and hearing are overwhelmed, but this time he also receives the knowledge of the Most High (24:15-16). While the third oracle pictures an idealized Israel / king, here the oracle is focused solely on that king: Balaam sees / beholds him, but not now / near (24:17a). This king is described metaphorically as a star / scepter coming / rising out of Israel / Jacob (24:17b). As an expansion of the third oracle, this king's wrath is described not in more vivid detail, but in greater specificity. Calling out specific enemy nations, Balak is first to be indicted. This future king of Israel will crush / break down Moab / the sons of Sheth, while Edom / Seir will be dispossessed (24:17c-18a). Even though Israel is described as doing valiantly, the focus here is on

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[77] Milgrom understands the unsolicited oracle as completing the 3 + 1 pattern "whereby the last of a triad is enhanced by the addition of a fourth member (e.g., Amos 1:3-2:6; Prov 30:18-19, 29-31)." Milgrom, 206.

Israel's future king: "And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!" (24:18-19).[78]

In addition, three slight oracles are appended to the unsolicited oracle, offering additional specificity. The first is against Amalek, the first nation Israel encounters after the exodus (24:20). The second is directed towards the Kenite: "Enduring is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock. Nevertheless, Kain shall be burned when Asshur takes you away captive" (24:21-22). And the third: "Alas, who shall live when God does this? But ships shall come from Kittim and shall afflict Asshur and Eber; and he too shall come to utter destruction" (24:23-24).[79] The book of Balaam ends with Balak and Balaam departing, going their separate ways, perhaps mirroring the terminal separation between Pharaoh and Moses (Num 24:25; cf. Exod 10:28-29).

Beyond the prose account of the exodus, its poetic counterpart, the Song of the Sea, affirms these connections. The subject of the poem is YHWH, Israel's God and king, a man of war who defeats Israel's enemies (Exod 15:1-3). Just as YHWH defeated Pharaoh and his armies, so, too, will he defeat all of Israel's enemies (15:4-10). YHWH is sovereign over his creation, working signs and wonders (15:11-12). YHWH leads his people, instilling fear amongst her enemies: Philistia, Edom, Moab, the inhabitants of Canaan. YHWH will plant his people in the promised land and

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[78] Wenham notes the rising prominence of the monarchy in Balaam's oracles, which climaxes in the unsolicited. Wenham sums, "Whereas the first two oracles are theological statements about God's relationship to Israel and what he has done for them already, the subsequent oracles include visionary predictions of Israel's future settlement in Canaan, the rise of the monarchy and victories over specific foes." Wenham, 199.

[79] Although cryptic, Wenham surmises these final three oracles are included to round out the total number of oracles to seven—securing Israel's future hope through the total destruction of her enemies. Wenham, 203. States Milgrom, not only is Israel not mentioned in these final three, but the obscurity of their terms and references make them "among the most difficult in all Scripture." Milgrom, 209.

reign as their sovereign (15:13-18). So, too, the subject of Balaam's oracles, taken in whole, describes in similar terms Israel's future king. Empowered by YHWH, this future sovereign instills fear amongst Israel's enemies, utterly defeating those who seek to curse Israel—including Moab and Edom. The similarity between the Song of the Sea and Balaam's oracles suggests an affinity between YHWH as king and this idealized sovereign of Israel.

Like the exodus narrative, the book of Balaam is a contest between two kings: Balak king of Moab and YHWH king of Israel. Like Moses, Balaam acts as a prophetic intermediary between YHWH and a foreign king. In both narratives, the story is told from the perspective of Israel's opponents—Egypt / Moab—not Israel herself, who remains passively in the background.[80] Nevertheless, Balaam's oracles, like the Song of the Sea, envision a different dynamic for Israel. Whereas YHWH still fights for Israel, now he will do so *through* Israel. Additionally—and significantly—Israel as firstborn is envisioned not just as a people, but as an individual. YHWH still fights Israel's enemies, but he does so through empowering the people, who are re-envisioned as a ruling figure.

Conclusion

The exodus narrative, Israel's narrative of deliverance *par excellence*, is foundational to her identity as a people. The Balaam narrative, by contrast, while conveying blessings unparalleled in the Pentateuch, is a minor story in a transitional book concerning a foreign king and his prophet for hire. And yet, as the two

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[80] Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36,* Anchor Bible 4A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 137-38; Olson, 141.

discourses are read in metaphorical tension, the "*heuristic* power wielded by *fiction*" reveals new insights.[81] The *reference* of the metaphorical discourse contains "the power to 'redescribe' reality."[82] This is the text's capacity at world-creation. Through the act of reading, the productive imagination synthesizes the heterogeneous revealing the *world of the text*.

In this world, the agent of deliverance no longer is YHWH alone, but is YHWH empowering a people / ruling figure. Israel's adversary no longer is a specific nation or sovereign, but is every enemy of Israel, in every era, in opposition to YHWH. As the blessing and cursing formula is demonstrated throughout the exodus narrative, so it is universalized in the book of Balaam, becoming paradigmatic for all future deliverances.

CONCLUSION

In congruence with Lapsley's interpretational principles drawn from the Balaam narrative, the present chapter has examined the book of Balaam "in the context of God's prior relationship with, and future plans for, Israel."[83] In exploring the role of *imagination* in forming the *world of the text*, the book of Balaam has been considered in conversation with both the patriarchal and the exodus narratives. "God's way for Israel is a way of blessing, blessing that is played out in the larger story of God's love for Israel as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures," reminds Lapsley.[84]

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[81] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[82] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[83] Lapsley, 28.

[84] Lapsley, 28.

For Ricoeur, the act of reading is indicative of the productive imagination, which can be described as "a rule-governed form of invention" and can be considered as "the power of…redescribing reality."[85] Both aspects, in the form of semiotics and metaphor, have been discussed and applied to the book of Balaam.

In the first, the mytheme *blessing* and *cursing* developed throughout the patriarchal narrative finds its parallel in the book of Balaam. The "bundle of relations" defining *blessing* in Genesis is satisfied in Balaam's oracles: from Jacob's innumerable offspring dwelling in the prototypical land, a company of people empowered by YHWH to defeat their foes, to a constituent ruling figure, a superior king so empowered by YHWH to defeat their enemies. In this way, structural analysis yields the *world of the text*; the ultimate referent is the anticipated fulfillment of the patriarchal promise that, in effect, defines Israel's narrative identity. Thus, under semiotics, *reference* refers to the text's presentation of a possible world through a closed system of signs, which includes "a possible way of orienting oneself within it."[86]

In the second, as the exodus narrative is read in metaphorical tension with the Balaam narrative, the "*heuristic* power wielded by *fiction*" reveals new insights.[87] Here, the *reference* of the metaphorical discourse contains "the power to 'redescribe' reality."[88] What emerges through such a metaphorical reading aligns closely with— but goes beyond—that discovered through semiotic analysis. Through the productive

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[85] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 144.

[86] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 88.

[87] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[88] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

imagination, the trajectory of *blessing* traced throughout the patriarchal narrative is demonstrated (initially, locally) in the exodus narrative; its fulfillment is anticipated (universally) through the Balaam narrative. The resultant *world of the text* offers a possible world in which YHWH's promised deliverance—a ruling figure who will defeat Israel's enemies—is assured. Thus, from signs to metaphor, the analysis has moved from a general fulfillment of the patriarchal promise to a more specific suggestion of an empowered ruling figure.

CHAPTER 4

TIME AND THE BOOK OF BALAAM

INTRODUCTION

What Ricoeur begins in *The Rule of Metaphor*, he continues in *Time and Narrative*.

As he states in the preface to volume one of *Time and Narrative*, "published one

after the other, these works were conceived together."[1] Whereas traditionally

metaphor and narrative fall into different categories, theory of "tropes" and theory of

literary "genres," respectively, Ricoeur argues they belong "to the same basic

phenomenon of semantic innovation" via the "meaning-effects" they each produce.[2]

This innovation is produced "entirely on the level of discourse," i.e., levels "equal to

or greater than the sentence."[3]

In both metaphor and narrative, this semantic innovation is found in the work

of synthesis. In metaphor, the semantic innovation is found "in the producing of a

new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution."[4] In other words, as

two incompatible components are joined together, their resistance to a literal

interpretation creates new meaning. In narrative, the semantic innovation is found in

a plot. "By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within

the temporal unity of a whole and complete action," states Ricoeur.[5] Thus, in both

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[1] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[2] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[3] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[4] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[5] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

metaphor and narrative, synthesis of the heterogeneous is at work. "In both cases," states Ricoeur, "the new thing—the as yet unsaid, the unwritten—springs up in language."[6] In the "new pertinence in the predication," the new thing is a living metaphor; in the "new congruence in the organization of the events," it is an invented plot.[7]

Thus, in both metaphor and narrative, the semantic innovation can be attributed to the productive imagination, especially to its capacity to "schematize."[8] In metaphor, terms that at first seem "distant" are suddenly brought "close," the productive imagination schematizing the predicative assimilation.[9] In narrative, the plot is comparable to this predicative assimilation, "grasping together" numerous and diverse incidents into "one whole and complete story."[10] In this way, the productive imagination likewise schematizes the synthetic operation. "In both cases," states Ricoeur, "the intelligibility brought to light by this process of schematization is to be distinguished from the combinatory rationality put into play by structural semantics, in the case of metaphor, and the legislating rationality at work in narratology and scholarly history, in the case of narrative."[11] In other words, this schematization offers a rationality aimed at "simulating, at the higher level of a meta-language" a new comprehension.[12]

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[6] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[7] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[8] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[9] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:ix.

[10] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:x.

[11] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:x.

[12] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:x.

For Ricoeur, the goal of this process is *understanding*:

Whether it be a question of metaphor or of plot, to explain more is to understand better. Understanding, in the first case, is grasping the dynamism in virtue of which a metaphorical utterance, a new semantic pertinence, emerges from the ruins of the semantic pertinence as it appears in a literal reading of the sentence. Understanding, in the second case, is grasping the operation that unifies into one whole and complete action the miscellany constituted by the circumstances, ends and means, initiatives and interactions, the reversals of fortune, and all the unintended consequences issuing from human action.[13]

Transitioning from metaphor to narrative—from *imagination* to *time*—the following investigates the use of *time* in forming the *world of the text*. In the previous chapter, the productive imagination was employed through semiotics and metaphor. In the present chapter, it is manifest through time, through both its refigural interweaving of history and fiction and its intertextual interweaving of biblical acts of discourse. Thus, the first part examines Ricoeur's theory of the relationship between time and narrative. The second part explores Ricoeur's proposal of "biblical time." In this way, the following uses *time* as a hermeneutical lens to explore the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam.

TIME AND NARRATIVE

Ricoeur's basic thesis in *Time and Narrative* is that "between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity."[14] Or, to put it more simply, "*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it*

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[13] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:x.

[14] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:52.

becomes a condition of temporal existence."[15] Nevertheless, this basic hypothesis

does not yet begin to describe the relationship *between* time and narrative, which

Ricoeur argues by using the term *mimesis*—a term borrowed from Aristotle that, for

him, simply meant "imitation or representation of action."[16] However, for Ricoeur,

mimesis is a three-fold action that includes $mimesis_1$, $mimesis_2$, and $mimesis_3$.

Threefold *Mimesis*

Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* is built on the mediating function of *emplotment*,

which, more precisely, is the connection between his three modes or stages of

mimesis. At one pole is $mimesis_1$, the stage of "prefiguration," which refers to one's

pre-understanding of the order of action.[17] At the other pole is $mimesis_3$, the stage of

"refiguration" through one's temporal experience of the work.[18] However, crucial to

Rioceur's thesis is $mimesis_2$, which functions as the pivot between $mimesis_1$ and

$mimesis_3$. "By serving as a turning point it opens up the world of the plot and

institutes…the literariness of the work of literature," he states. If $mimesis_1$ and

$mimesis_3$ are located "upstream" and "downstream," as it were, then $mimesis_2$

functions to mediate between the two, "to conduct us from the one side of the text to

the other, transfiguring the one side into the other through its power of

configuration."[19] Thus, the mediation between time and narrative is more aptly

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[15] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:52.

[16] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:33.

[17] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:53, xi.

[18] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:53-54.

[19] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:53; emphasis added.

characterized as the connection between his proposed three states of mimesis; specifically, his term "emplotment" is the mediating role of $mimesis_2$. "*We are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time*," summarizes Ricoeur.[20] In the end, it is the reader, "that operator par excellence," who serves this mediating function, "the unity of the traversal from $mimesis_1$ to $mimesis_3$, by way of $mimesis_2$."[21]

Time, Narrative, and the Book of Balaam

With the configurational act of the reader ($mimesis_2$), the *as if* of the world of the text is revealed.[22] Thus, in the present discussion of the book of Balaam, the reader is crucial to understanding the relationship between time and narrative.

The configuring role of $mimesis_2$ is found in the mediating function of plot. The book of Balaam contains various events: a king sending his retinue to summon a prophet for hire, a prophet's overnight encounters with God, a prophet's extraordinary encounter en route, a prophet's intelligible conversation with his beast, a meeting between king and prophet, sacrifices offered, heights scaled, oracles of blessing cast, and characters furious. In this, according to Ricoeur, plot mediates in at least three ways. First, it mediates between events and story: the plot transforms these diverse events into a meaningful story.[23] Second, it renders incongruous factors such as agents (Balak), goals (to curse Israel), means (a prophet for hire),

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[20] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:54.

[21] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:53.

[22] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:64.

[23] As he states, "it draws a meaningful story *from* a diversity of events…or…it transforms the events…*into* a story." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:65; emphasis added.

interactions (envoy visitations), circumstances (summit views), and unexpected

results (Israel is blessed, while Moab is cursed; i.e., a reversal of fortune) as

harmonious—this configuring activity described as "concordant discordance."[24]

And third, plot mediates via its temporal characteristics—one chronological,

and the other non-chronological.[25] The first concerns the episodic dimension of the

narrative where time is rendered linearly. Thus, in linear fashion, Balaam receives

one envoy visitation, sending them away the next morning. He receives a second

delegation at some point later, returning with them the next morning. He encounters

YHWH three times (twice at night, once en route). After his arrival to Moab and

meeting with Balak, the next morning he is escorted to the heights to cast curses

upon Israel. The second consists of the configurational dimension of the narrative,

where time is rendered as a meaningful whole.[26] This is the "grasping together" of

the story's events in the act of reading, the work of the productive imagination

connecting understanding and intuition via syntheses.[27]

The refiguring role of mimesis₃—what Gadamer calls "application"—is no

less important.[28] It is here where the *world of the text* intersects with the world of the

reader; "the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the

world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality."[29] Such

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[24] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:65-66.

[25] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:66.

[26] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:67-68.

[27] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:68.

[28] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:70. States Gadamer, "Admittedly, hermeneutical consciousness is involved neither with technical nor moral knowledge, but these two types of knowledge still include *the same task of application* that we have recognized as the central problem of hermeneutics." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., 315.

[29] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:71.

applications will be discussed under Narrative Identity in Chapter 5, "Hope and the Book of Balaam."

Concerning "Games with Time," the configuring act of "grasping together" splits narrative time into two: *utterance*—a time of narrating—and *statement*—a narrated time.[30] Between these two lies the *world of the text*—"a fictive experience of time projected by the conjunction/disjunction between the time it takes to narrate and narrated time."[31] Thus, in the book of Balaam, both utterance and statement must be delineated. On the one hand, the time of narrating consists of three chapters (Num 22-24). Most of the story's action—from Balaam's point of origin to his arrival in Moab—is compressed into the first chapter (forty-one verses). Of these forty-one verses, Balak's two delegations comprise the chapter's first twenty-one verses, while the tale of the ass occupies a further fourteen verses. Balaam's first two days in Moab comprise the chapter's final six verses. The remaining two chapters recount Balaam's oracles with surrounding narrative. Contained within the second chapter (Num 23), the first two oracles consist of thirty verses (first oracle: twelve verses; second oracle: eighteen verses). Contained within the third chapter (Num 24), the remaining oracles consist of twenty-five verses (third oracle: fourteen verses; unsolicited oracle: five verses; three slight oracles: six verses). On the other hand, the narrated time begins when Balak determines to summon Balaam; from that point until Balaam's arrival in Moab, an unspecified amount of time has elapsed (which depends on the distance between Balaam's point of origin and Moab, which

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[30] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:61.

[31] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:77.

is disputed).[32] Once Balaam arrives in Moab, time appears to pass more quickly. Depending on the presumed time required to build altars and offer sacrifices, the blessings are pronounced in quick succession.

Thus, distinguishing between the time of narrating and the narrated time, the final form of the book of Balaam both chooses and excludes those events necessary to convey its particular story. While the time of narrating is measured chronologically by a certain number of chapters and verses, the narrated time is measured "in terms of years, days, and hours."[33] In other words, the narrated time in the book of Balaam is unequally distributed in the time of narrating. Two-thirds of the book of Balaam concerns the oracles of blessing—the portion of the story that spans the least amount of time. Conversely, narrative tempo, in which narration stretches out or speeds up, can be considered slow or rapid.[34] In the first third of the book of Balaam—the period covering the longest span of time—time moves quickly. In the latter two-thirds of the story—the period covering the shortest span of time— time slows considerably. These "games with time" assist the reader in the configuring act of mimesis$_2$, rendering sequences of events into a meaningful whole. In the book of Balaam, occupying the final two-thirds of the story, the oracles of blessing appear to be the narrative thrust of the story. In this way, the *world of the text* is discovered between the time it takes to narrate and narrated time.

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[32] Noth, *Numbers*, 173.

[33] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:79.

[34] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:79.

The Interweaving of History and Fiction in the Book of Balaam

The relation between time and narrative reaches its end in mimesis[3], the refiguration of time through the interweaving of history and fiction.[35] Ricoeur has prepared for this final stage throughout *Time and Narrative*. First, phenomenology has provided a certain equivalency between the time of fiction and historical time; despite their differences, at the level of language they wrestle with the same difficulties.[36] Next, since the act of reading encompasses both history and literary texts, the theory of reading has created a "common space" for exchanges between the two forms of narrative. States Ricoeur, "All forms of writing, including historiography, take their place within an extended theory of reading. As a result, the operation of mutually encompassing one another…is rooted in reading."[37] Thus, the act of reading is considered the phenomenological moment common to both. Through reading, the separate tracks of historical narrative and fictional narrative meet, with the reader again central to this refiguration. The final step, after this meeting, is their interweaving.[38] "By the interweaving of history and fiction," states Ricoeur, "I mean the fundamental structure, ontological as well as epistemological, by virtue of which history and fiction each concretize their respective intentionalities only by borrowing from the intentionality of the other."[39] Corresponding to the reference in metaphor, this concretization in narrative theory is characterized by the phenomenon of "seeing

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[35] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:180.

[36] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:180.

[37] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:180.

[38] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:180-81.

[39] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:181.

as…."[40] This concretization is achieved only to the degree that, "history in some way makes use of fiction to refigure time and…fiction makes use of history for the same ends."[41] In both directions, imagination plays a role.

In the *fictionalization of history*, the reader "sees as…," the mediating role of fiction increasing along each stage of the imaginary process.[42] In this, historical narrative transitions from the specifically dated past to the reconstructed past: "The past is what I would have seen, what I would have witnessed if I had been there."[43] And finally, it moves to the refigured past—the model of which is the historical novel—where metaphor and emplotment help to realize its historiographic aspect.[44] For Ricoeur, the end goal of this process, the fulfillment of this fictionalizing of history, is its function to provide narrative identity. In this, significant "epoch-making" events, i.e., stories of origin—myth—have the capacity to reinforce the community's identity.[45] In the *historization of fiction*, the reader sees "as if past."[46] This is achieved in two ways. First, the historical past and imperfect tenses suggest a "quasi-past" (just as much as history is quasi-fictive, so fiction is quasi-historical).[47] And second, this is achieved through a probable plot, a "verisimilitude to what has

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[40] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:181, referring to his *Rule of Metaphor* (originally published in 1975 as *La métaphore vive*).

[41] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:181.

[42] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:181-87.

[43] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:185.

[44] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:186.

[45] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:187.

[46] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:189.

[47] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:190.

been" or what might have been.[48] Through this probability, the *historization of fiction* surfaces the potential of the *real* past.[49]

From this interweaving of history and fiction is born human time, which, for Ricoeur, is nothing other than narrated time.[50] As he concludes,

> The interweaving of history and fiction in the refiguration of time rests, in the final analysis, upon this reciprocal overlapping, the quasi-historical moment of fiction changing places with the quasi-fictive moment of history. In this interweaving, this reciprocal overlapping, this exchange of places, originates what is commonly called human time, where the standing for the past in history is united with the imaginative variations of fiction, against the background of the aporias of the phenomenology of time.[51]

This refigured time—narrated time, *human time*—could offer one possible solution to the ongoing tension between history and theology in biblical studies, addressing issues relevant both to a historical-critical (*world behind the text*) and a literary-imaginative (*world of the text*) approach to the biblical text.

Such a refiguration of time is modeled in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*. In the *fictionalization of history*, the truth of what happened to Pi in the Pacific Ocean—the specifically dated past—has been reimagined as a significant story of origin—the refigured past. Such an "epoch-making" event is more *real* to Pi than the narrative's historiographic aspect, serving to reinforce his identity. Through faith, Pi overcomes his trauma to survive; in a word, myth effects his salvation. In the *historization of fiction*, Pi's story is told in the historical past using the imperfect tense. Despite its fantastical elements, it is plausible. This verisimilitude allows the

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[48] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:191.

[49] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:191-92.

[50] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:192.

[51] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:192.

story to present the *real* past, a universal story of incredible survival against the odds. In other words, in the *fictionalization of history* the *real* is personally transformative, while in the *historization of fiction* the *real* is universally grasped.

This refiguration of time through the interweaving of history and fiction, likewise, is modeled through the book of Balaam. In the *fictionalization of history*, the truth of what happened in ancient Israel—the specifically dated past—has been reimagined as a significant story of origin—the refigured past. Such an "epoch-making" event anticipating an empowered ruling figure is more *real* to readers of the Balaam narrative (e.g. Second Temple Israel)—reinforcing the community's identity—than its historiographic aspect. Through faith in the promise's fulfillment, Israel can hope beyond the trauma of exile; in a word, myth effects her salvation. In the *historization of fiction*, the Balaam narrative is plausible. Despite its fantastical elements, its verisimilitude allows the story to present the *real* past, a universal story illustrating Israel's own incredible survival against the odds. Here again, in the *fictionalization of history* the *real* is personally transformative, while in the *historization of fiction* the *real* is universally grasped.

This refiguration of time through the interweaving of history and fiction offers a suggested way to help recover the Old Testament scriptures' claim to truth—its authenticity, in the words of von Rad—by understanding Israel's history from Israel's own perspective. Concerning ancient Israel, he reminds, "while perfectly well aware of her historical remove from (the old traditions), she saw them as her own, she found something of importance for herself expressed in them, and therefore they were at the same time contemporary for her."[52] This is an authenticity

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[52] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:424-25.

by which past traditions, with a future orientation, have been incorporated into her present.

RICOEUR'S BIBLICAL TIME

Concerning the concept of time in biblical literature, Ricoeur offers four methodological rules, each building upon the next. First, understanding that the Greek and biblical conceptions of time are incompatible, he attempts to disengage from the aspect of time suggested by the Bible as Scripture. Second, not only does Ricoeur focus on the genres of biblical literature, but, more importantly, on their underlying *acts of discourse*: "narrations, legislations, prophecies, wisdom sayings and literature, hymns and psalms."[53] In this, he attempts to correlate the structure of these acts of discourse with the aspect of time suggested by their corresponding literary genres. Third, in this, Ricoeur is interested in the "interweaving" of these acts of discourse with their corresponding aspects of time; specifically, the interweaving of narrative and nonnarrative texts, believing that the biblical narratives "always stand in a dialectical relation with the other literary elements that…do include a specifically temporal dimension."[54] And fourth, this interweaving leads to an understanding of the biblical text as one massive "intertext." Anticipating protestations, Ricoeur defends this methodological approach:

> This reading must of course take into account the historical-critical method, but it cannot be reduced to it. Where the historical-critical method focuses on the differences between the diverse literary layers brought together in the final redaction, in order to reestablish the *Sitz-im-Leben* of this or that narrative or this or that institution, the reading I am proposing begins from the fact that the meaning of the recounted events and the proclaimed

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[53] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 170.

[54] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 170.

institutions has become detached from its original *Sitz-im-Leben* by becoming part of Scripture, and this Scripture has so to speak substituted what we may call a *Sitz-im-Wort* for the original *Sitz-im-Leben*. My reading shall begin from here, from the *Sitz-im-Wort* of events, actions, and institutions that have lost their initial roots and that, as a consequence, now have a *textual* existence. It is this textual status of the narratives, laws, prophecies, wisdom sayings, and hymns that makes these texts contemporary with one another in the act of reading. This synchronic reading is called for to complete the diachronic approach of the historical-critical method. This synchronic reading is at the same time an intertextual reading, in the sense that, once they are apprehended as a whole, these texts of different origins and intentions work on one another, displacing their respective intentions and points, and they mutually borrow their dynamism from one another. So read, the Bible becomes a great living intertext, which is the place, the space for a labor of the text on itself. My reading, in short, seeks to grasp this labor of the text upon itself through an act of reconstructive imagination.[55]

This lays the methodological foundation for Ricoeur's understanding of *biblical time*. As he summarizes, "In other words, I propose to show how a time of narratives, a time of laws, a time of prophecies, a time of wisdom sayings, and a time of hymns mutually affect one another in such a way as to compose the intertextual 'model' designated as 'biblical time.'"[56]

Biblical Time and the Book of Balaam

Thus, in Ricoeur's "biblical time," the temporal aspects of biblical literature—more importantly, their underlying acts of discourse—interweave. This intertextual model can be applied both to the book of Balaam as an independent unit and within its larger biblical context. In both, the act of reading Scripture substitutes a *Sitz-im-Wort* for the original *Sitz-im-Leben*. In this, argues Ricoeur, the recounted events maintain a primarily textual existence. So, within the book of Balaam, narrative, oracle, and

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[55] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 170-71.

[56] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 171.

folk tale become contemporary one with another. Likewise, within its biblical context, narrations, prophecies, wisdom sayings, and hymns all affect its reading, becoming "a great living intertext…an act of reconstructive imagination."[57] For Ricoeur, this synchronic reading is meant to compliment the diachronic approach of the historical-critical method, not to replace it.

Ricoeur begins with the interdependency between the narrative and legal portions of the Torah, in which the law provides a "dimension of an *irrevocable anteriority*…a past prior to every past."[58] This *irrevocable anteriority* refers not only to the law, *per se*, but also to the covenant of God's faithfulness. So, while the book of Balaam lacks specific reference to legal texts, the covenant of God's faithfulness permeates its three chapters. Within its biblical—specifically Pentateuchal—context, this interdependency between narrative and law exerts an even stronger influence. Citing James Barr's *Old and New in Interpretation*, Ricoeur notes how the extension of the biblical narrative (in this case, from the patriarchal narratives, to the exodus narrative, to the wilderness wandering) augments the meaning of the preceding events.[59] In this, the *irrevocable anteriority* of God's covenant faithfulness, first recounted in the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3), is extended, its meaning augmented in the book of Balaam.[60]

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[57] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 170-71.

[58] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 173.

[59] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 173. Ricoeur adopts this understanding from James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (London: SCM Press, 1966). States Barr, "In general…there is an important cumulative progression, which is essential for the narrative materials and also for much that is not narrative. The literature is meant to be read as a story with a beginning and a progression." Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, 21.

[60] See Chapter 3, "Imagination and the Book of Balaam."

Within its broader biblical context, this extension continues through the narrative portions of the former prophets, a prominent example found in Nathan's word to David (2 Sam 7:4-17). Whereas YHWH's word to David via Nathan resonates with the Abrahamic covenant, so it finds an echo in Balaam's oracles, which themselves, it has been argued, act to clarify the patriarchal blessing / Abrahamic covenant. As Nathan tells David, YHWH has been with him, having cut off his enemies from before him. In addition, YHWH will make David's name great (2 Sam 7:9); YHWH will plant his people Israel in their own place (2 Sam 7:10); and YHWH will give David rest from all his enemies (2 Sam 7:11). Like the promise to Abraham, the promise to David is unconditional.[61] Parallel to Genesis 15:3-4, David's offspring will come from his own body (2 Sam 7:12). "Like Abraham," states Gordon, "David is receiving promises concerning a son as yet unborn (see 12:24)" (NB: the same term *offspring* זרע is used).[62] Concerning this promise made to David, Brueggemann states, "This ideological utterance is the taproot of the messianic idea in ancient Israel. The promise made to David is for time to come. It explicitly concerns David's son Solomon, but there are always sons to come, generations of Davids yet unborn....Out of this oracle there emerges the hope held by Israel in every season that there is a coming David who will right wrong and

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[61] Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 255-59. As Brueggemann notes, the "if" of Mosaic faith has been replaced here with the "but" or, in his rendering "nevertheless" (2 Sam 7:15), of YHWH's promise to the Davidic dynasty. "There are no acts of disobedience in purview which can make Yahweh terminate this profound commitment....This is not to say there will not be sanctions and punishments, but they are not terminal." Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 257. Gordon makes the connection even more explicit, comparing the promise to David to the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 15. Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 236.

[62] Gordon, 238-39. He notes that although *offspring* זרע usually has a collective sense, here the term seems to be individualized. Gordon, 239.

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establish a good governance."[63] For Ricoeur, this *irrevocable anteriority* based upon the interdependency of the narrative and legal portions of the Torah ends in narrative identity—not so much, in the case of the book of Balaam, an ethical identity *per se*, but an identity founded on the anticipated fulfillment of YHWH's promise.[64]

Moving to the prophets, the temporal dialectic of prophecy affects the narrative / legal texts of the Torah. "When set within the gravitational space of prophecy," states Ricoeur, "the Torah itself acquires a new temporal meaning. For a reading that moves backward, prophetic discourse draws from the traditional discourse an unforeseen potential of hope."[65] Here, Ricoeur divides the prophetic writings into two phases: the "prophecy of misfortune" (before the exile), and the "prophecy of redemption (or salvation)" (from the exile to the second temple), which he also calls a "reversal of the reversal."[66] He is most interested in the role of this "dialectic of reversal" in constituting biblical time, which is signified by three aspects: (1) the tragedy of interruption is a necessary negative, (2) the future is anticipated as something new, and (3) the new is a creative repetition of the old, i.e., a recapitulation.[67] So, while the book of Balaam lacks specific Hebrew prophecy matching either of Ricoeur's two prophetic phases, Balaam's oracles do function as a similar act of discourse. These oracles of blessing interweave with the future-oriented and identity-forming tradition (the promised fulfillment of the covenant)

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[63] Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 257.

[64] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 173.

[65] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 176.

[66] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 174-75.

[67] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 175.

engendering two of the three aspects of Ricoeur's biblical time: the future is anticipated as something new—that is, a promised ruler will defeat Israel's enemies—and that new is, in fact, a recapitulation of the old—portrayed metaphorically as a creative repetition of the exodus.[68]

Within the larger biblical context, Hebrew prophecy proper (the latter prophets) confronts the book of Balaam; through the act of reading, these prophetic writings irrupt real history into the tradition.[69] Ezekiel 19, a funeral lament for Judah's kings, is one such text that confronts the previously anticipated future. In Ezekiel's dirge, the demise of the Judean kings metaphorically is pictured as the capture of lions and the destruction of a ruling vine. Many scholars (although not all) cite Genesis 49:9, Jacob's blessing of Judah, as a point of reference for the lions, but no such reference exists for the ruling vine. While a frequent collective symbol of Israel, the use of a vine here for a royal individual is distinct. Many cite Ezekiel 15, and especially Ezekiel 17, as the nearest referent.[70] However, a plausible intertextual referent could be Balaam's oracles, which likewise use both the lion and the vine as royal imagery.[71]

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[68] See Chapter 3, "Imagination and the Book of Balaam."

[69] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 174.

[70] Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19* Word Biblical Commentary 28 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 282-91; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 84-86; Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 591-611; Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 249-258; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20,* Anchor Bible 22 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 348-59; Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 19 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 127-31; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, trans. Ronald E. Clements, ed. Frank Moore Cross and Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 388-98. For discussion on the metaphors of the lion and the vine in the book of Balaam, see Chapter 5, "Hope and the Book of Balaam."

[71] See, for example, Mary Douglas's literary analysis in Chapter 1 of the present project: "Numbers 22-24 in Historical-critical Scholarship: A Representative Sample."

While scholarly consensus identifies the first lion as Jehoahaz, the identification of the other metaphorical figures is less certain.[72] States Hals, "Something much stronger (than a warning) is present here, the pronouncement of judgment on Judah's royal house and the cancellation of 2 Samuel 7's divine undergirding of the Davidic dynasty."[73] Nevertheless, other prophetic messianic texts (e.g., Jer 23:1-8; Ezek 34:23 ff.; 37:20 ff.; and especially Isa 9:1-6) unlock dormant potential in the tradition. As Ricoeur summarizes, "narrative when touched by prophetic eschatology liberates a potential of hope, beyond the closure of the established tradition.…The past is not simply exhausted, as the prophets of misfortune say; rather, it leaves behind a storehouse of inexhaustible potentialities. But it requires prophecy and its eschatology to open this initial surplus of meaning that, so to speak, lies dreaming in the traditional narrative."[74]

Finally, both the wisdom literature and the hymn exert influence upon the book of Balaam within its biblical context. Through a synchronic and intertextual reading, wisdom's *ageless* time rejoins with the *irrevocable anteriority* of the tradition's promise.[75] "In this way," states Ricoeur, "the immemorial time reinforces the tendency of the traditional narratives to become archetypal, (such as) the exodus, which the parenesis of Deuteronomy sets up as the paradigm of all deliverances."[76] Thus, by metaphorically recapitulating the exodus, the book of Balaam, through

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[72] Eichrodt, 252-54.

[73] Hals, 130.

[74] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 176.

[75] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 175, 178.

[76] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 178.

wisdom's influence, becomes paradigmatic. The fulfillment of Israel's promised deliverer will not be limited to a historical individual (e.g., David), but will represent all of Israel's future hopes of deliverance. Likewise, the hymn or psalm adds a participatory dimension to the tradition through its cultic and liturgical function. Its temporal dimension of "today and every day" invites the community to worship through the sweep of salvation history in the present.[77] In this way, through the book of Balaam, the community not only remembers the exodus, but also anticipates in their present its promised future deliverer, which finds its echo in the messianic psalms of Psalm 2 and 110.[78]

Ricoeur's biblical time affects the book of Balaam both as an independent unit and within its larger biblical context. Through the interweaving of literary genres, the book of Balaam contains intertextual ties to each of the biblical acts of discourse. Thus, between narrative and hymn—between telling and praising—the book of Balaam mediates the temporal anteriority of tradition, the eschatological time of prophecy, and the ageless time of wisdom.[79]

CONCLUSION

Whereas in the previous chapter the productive imagination was employed through semiotics and metaphor, here, in the present chapter, it has been manifested through *time*—through both its refigural interweaving of history and fiction and its

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[77] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 179.

[78] States Wenham, "the great royal Psalm 110 contains enough verbal parallels with Numbers 24:15-19 to make it probable that the psalmist knew Balaam's oracle and was consciously alluding to it." Wenham, 205.

[79] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 179-80.

intertextual interweaving of biblical acts of discourse. The goal of this synthetic operation is *understanding*.

The relationship *between* time and narrative is best described via Ricoeur's threefold *mimesis*; by means of "emplotment," the configuring power of the reader (mimesis$_2$) mediates between mimesis$_1$ and mimesis$_3$ (prefiguration and refiguration, respectively).[80] The configuring act of "grasping together" splits narrative time into two: (1) a time of narrating and (2) a narrated time—the *world of the text* lying between the two.[81] In the book of Balaam, the narrated time is unequally distributed in the time of narrating; occupying the final two-thirds of the story, the oracles of blessing appear to be the narrative thrust of the story. Ricoeur's threefold *mimesis* ends with the refiguration of time through the interweaving of history and fiction; again, the reader is central to this process.[82] In the *fictionalization of history*, the reader "sees as…."[83] The truth of what happened in ancient Israel—the specifically dated past—has been reimagined as a significant story of origin—the refigured past. In the *historization of fiction*, the reader sees "as if past."[84] Despite its fantastical elements, the Balaam narrative is plausible. In the former the *real* is personally transformative, while in the latter the *real* is universally grasped.

In Ricoeur's "biblical time," the temporal aspects of biblical literature—more importantly, their underlying acts of discourse—interweave. This intertextual model

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[80] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:53.

[81] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:61; 2:77.

[82] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:180.

[83] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:181-87.

[84] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:189.

can be applied both to the book of Balaam as an independent unit and within its larger biblical context. In both, the act of reading Scripture substitutes a *Sitz-im-Wort* for the original *Sitz-im-Leben*. Concerning the interdependency between the narrative and legal portions of the Torah, the *irrevocable anteriority* of God's covenant faithfulness, first recounted in the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3), is extended, its meaning augmented in the book of Balaam. Within its broader biblical context, YHWH's word to David via Nathan (2 Sam 7:4-17) finds its echo in Balaam's oracles. Concerning prophecy, Balaam's oracles function as a similar act of discourse, engendering two of the three aspects of Ricoeur's biblical time: the future is anticipated as something new—that is, a promised ruler will defeat Israel's enemies—and that new is, in fact, a recapitulation of the old—portrayed metaphorically as a creative repetition of the exodus. Within its larger biblical context, Ezekiel 19 fruitfully can be read in light of Balaam's oracles. And finally, the "ageless" time of wisdom renders the book of Balaam's metaphorical recapitulation of the exodus as paradigmatic, while the "today and every day" aspect of the hymn adds a liturgical function, the messianic psalms of Psalm 2 and 110 finding their echo in Balaam's oracles.

CHAPTER 5

HOPE AND THE BOOK OF BALAAM

INTRODUCTION

This second part of the present project has employed Ricoeur's philosophical

hermeneutics to explore the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam, Numbers 22-24.

In so doing, it has sought to follow the broad contours of Ricoeur's philosophical

work throughout the twentieth century.

Initially, Ricoeur had proposed a trilogy on the philosophy of the will, a plan

he later called foolish for, in time (1) the audience changes and (2) the philosopher's

own understanding—along with the discipline—develops.[1] These factors led to

Ricoeur's many detours, the first of which concerned the problem of evil as a

fundamental structure of the will—specifically bad will as opposed to the

experiences that come from language itself. "These experiences," he states, "have

been structured around history and culture in general, or around the stories and

myths based on symbolic language."[2] In this way, *The Symbolism of Evil* signaled

the hermeneutical shift in Ricoeur's work.

In *From Text to Action*, he maintained that the resultant hermeneutic

phenomenology is both continuous and discontinuous with the philosophy of the

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[1] Reagan, 122. This is taken from a 1990 interview between Reagan and Ricoeur.

[2] Reagan, 124. This is taken from a 1991 interview between Reagan and Ricoeur.

will.[3] Such a hermeneutic phenomenology—in which the future takes precedence over the present, thus engendering hope—uncovers the *possible*.[4] States Ricoeur:

> First of all, with Kierkegaard, we could call freedom in the light of hope the "passion for the *possible*"; this formula, in contrast to all wisdom of the present, to all submission to necessity, underscores the imprint of the promise on freedom. Freedom, entrusted to the "God who comes," is open to the radically new; it is the creative imagination of the possible.[5]

Finally, his philosophy of the will was realized through other modalities: the creativity of language both on the semantic level—in *The Rule of Metaphor*—and through the construction of plots—in *Time and Narrative*.[6] "Nevertheless," summarizes Ricoeur, "I would say that I have kept something of this early project, for example, the move from, let us say, a phenomenology of the will to a poetics of action. If I called it a 'poetics' in the bold sense, it makes action creative, and in that sense the book on metaphor and the book on narrative belong to this exploration of the creative aspects of imagination and language."[7] In this way, Ricoeur's philosophy of the will is realized through the hermeneutics of the self. As Stiver summarizes:

> As his work developed, Ricoeur increased his emphasis on the significance of the imagination in self-understanding and understanding of the world. Such imagination underlies his creative work on metaphor…He argued that metaphor allows us to create new meaning, and he thus praised the "ontological vehemence" of metaphor. Along with metaphors and symbols,

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[3] Reagan, 124. As Ricoeur states in his 1991 interview with Reagan, on the one hand, "hermeneutics remains fundamentally an understanding of the self;" however, on the other, "the means of understanding…require…a mode of intelligibility other than that of the immediate…grasping…of mental phenomena." Reagan, 124.

[4] Don Ihde, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), xxii.

[5] Paul Ricoeur, "Guilt, Ethics, and Religion," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 437.

[6] Reagan, 124-25. This is taken from a 1991 interview between Reagan and Ricoeur.

[7] Reagan, 122. This is taken from a 1990 interview between Reagan and Ricoeur.

he added that human identity is formed by narratives and myths, which likewise are irreducible to theoretical prose.

The hermeneutics of the self hence becomes more and more complex, moving from the diagnostics of *Freedom and Nature* to the hermeneutics of symbol and story. Self-identity is inherently an open-ended story that is interwoven with all of the stories that we encounter.[8]

The present project, more or less, has sought to follow this trajectory. Under the heading of *imagination*, it has moved from signs to metaphor, reading the book of Balaam in light of both the patriarchal and the exodus narratives. Through the tracing and analyzing of the oppositive value of *blessing* and *cursing*, structural analysis has contributed to meaning. Through the examining of the exodus narrative in tension with the book of Balaam, the *reference* of the metaphorical statement has "redescribed" reality. From signs to metaphor—from a general fulfillment of the patriarchal promise to a more specific suggestion of an empowered ruling figure—both have offered a possible world that offers the potential to shape ancient Israel's narrative identity. Under the heading of *time,* the role of narrative has been considered. Time, through both its refigural interweaving of history and fiction and its intertextual interweaving of biblical acts of discourse, is an integral component of the productive imagination. And now, under the heading of *hope,* the symbolic function of myths adds new resonance both to the historical and theological elements of the Balaam narrative, ending with Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity.

Thus, after employing the rubrics of *imagination* and *time,* this final chapter exploring the *world of the text* investigates the category of *hope*. Ricoeur acknowledges that hope is not a philosophical construct, but it is a theological virtue,

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[8] Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology*, 12.

one grounded in eschatology.[9] While it is not a specific object, its value in terms of philosophical and theological discourse lies in its *telos* or horizon.[10]

As in the previous two chapters, this topic will be explored in two parts. The first part investigates two of Ricoeur's four categories of myth—the *Myth of Chaos* and the *Myth of the Fall*—which will be applied to a *messianic* and an *eschatological* reading of the book of Balaam, respectively. The second part examines Ricoeur's concept of "narrative identity," which is the end goal of the present study. Thus, the following uses *hope* as a hermeneutical lens to explore the *world of the text* of the book of Balaam.

THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF MYTHS

Ricoeur notes two characteristics of myth: (1) it is expressed through language, and (2) its underlying symbols take the form of narration.[11] Concerning the first, the phenomenology of religion describes myth-narration as a form of life, behavior sourced in the rite rather than in the narration. In this, the language of myth is merely the rite's verbal aspect.[12] "Still more fundamentally," continues Ricoeur, "ritual action and mythical language, taken together, point beyond themselves to a model, an archetype, which they imitate or repeat; imitation in gestures and verbal repetition are only the broken expressions of a living participation in an original Act which is

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[9] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 204.

[10] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 215.

[11] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 166.

[12] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 166.

the common exemplar of the rite and of the myth."[13] Thus, language and ritual are inexorably intertwined in the presentation of myth.

Concerning the second characteristic of myth, here, in like manner, Ricoeur moves from narration to drama. The mythical consciousness, comprised of component narrations "woven of happenings and personages," indicates the symbolic abundance "at the beginning or the end of a fundamental *History*."[14] States Ricoeur, "The plastic character of the myth, with its images and events, results, then, both from the necessity of providing contingent signs for a purely symbolic Sacred and from the dramatic character of the primordial time. Thus the time of the myth is diversified from the beginning by the primordial drama."[15]

Ricoeur offers three fundamental characteristics of symbolic myths: (1) the "concrete universality conferred upon human experience by means of archetypal personages," (2) the "tension of an ideal history oriented from a Beginning toward an End," and (3) the "transition from an essential nature to an alienated history."[16] As Ricoeur notes, these three functions of symbolic myths are, in fact, "three aspects of one and the same dramatic structure," indicating that the narrative form is "primitive and essential."[17] As he summarizes, "The myth performs its symbolic function by the specific means of narration because what it wants to express is already a drama. It is this primordial drama that opens up and discloses the hidden

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[13] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 166-67.

[14] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 169.

[15] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 170.

[16] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 170.

[17] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 170.

meaning of human experience; and so the myth that recounts it assumes the irreplaceable function of narration."[18]

In the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation), "the origin of evil is coextensive with the origin of things; it is the *'chaos' with which the creative act of the god struggles*."[19] Correspondingly, "*salvation is identical with creation itself.*"[20] Thus, the two fundamental characteristics of this type are (1) identifying evil with "chaos," and (2) identifying salvation with "creation."[21]

The *myth of the fall* (of the primeval man) is incompatible with (i.e., mutually exclusive towards) the myth of chaos (of a *creation already completed*).[22] Consequently, salvation is a sudden reversal of fortune to the original creation; "salvation unrolls a new and open history on the basis of a creation already completed and, in that sense, closed."[23] Ricoeur explains the crucial relationship between these two types of myth:

> Thus the cleavage effected, with the second type, between the irrational event of the fall and the ancient drama of creation provokes a parallel cleavage between the theme of salvation, which becomes eminently historical, and the theme of creation, which recedes to the position of "cosmological" background for the *temporal* drama played in the foreground of the world. Salvation, understood as the sum of the initiatives of the divinity and of the believer tending toward the elimination of evil, aims henceforth at a specific end distinct from the end of creation. That specific end, around which gravitate the "eschatological" representations, can no longer be identified with the end of creation, and we arrive at a strange tension between two representations: that of a creation brought to a close with the "rest on the seventh day," and that of a work of salvation still pending, until the "Last

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[18] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 170.

[19] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172.

[20] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172.

[21] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172.

[22] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172-73.

[23] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172.

Day." The separation of the problematics of evil from the problematics of creation is carried out along the whole line, beginning with the idea of a fall that supervened upon a perfect creation. It is, then, the event of the fall that carries the whole weight of this mythology, like the point of an inverted pyramid.[24]

Thus outlined, Ricoeur attempts to move beyond inert classification towards dynamic discovery, recapturing the myth through philosophic inquiry.[25]

A Messianic Reading of the Book of Balaam

The *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation) is reflected in the book of Balaam, both through trace elements of the dominant Babylonian form and, more specifically, through aspects of the recessive Hebrew form of the myth. Especially in the latter, this culminates in a messianic reading of the book of Balaam.

Ricoeur states that "images"—not "significations"—of the Babylonian form of the myth survive in the Hebrew form (in his words, like "cut flowers").[26] In the Babylonian form of the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation), both the origin of evil and salvation are coextensive with creation itself.[27] In this, the figure of the king effects the transition from cosmic drama to history. "Thus, Babylonian thought effects the passage from the cosmic drama to the history of men through a theology of sovereignty and through the figure of the King," states Ricoeur.[28] In like manner, the book of Balaam culminates in a ruling figure; placed in contrast to the king of

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[24] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 173.

[25] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 174.

[26] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 203.

[27] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 172.

[28] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 194.

Moab, this figure metaphorically is described in royal terms: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num 24:17ab). Like Israel as a people, this figure is both empowered by and represents YHWH.

In the Babylonian form of the myth—in which the "god, in fact, is King"—this theology of sovereignty and the figure of the king gives rise to a theology of the Holy War.[29] In this form of the myth, the sovereignty of the god "is fully manifested only in the person of the king who, without being personally a god, holds his sovereignty by divine favor;" i.e., the king is not divine, but is chosen, adopted, and installed by the gods.[30] "If the King represents the god who overcomes chaos, the Enemy should represent the forces of evil in our history and his insolence should represent a resurgence of the ancient chaos," states Ricoeur.[31] Thus, according to this form of the myth, the king installed by the gods must keep the wicked under control. "In other words," states Ricoeur, "the mythological type of the drama of creation is marked by the *King-Enemy* relation, which becomes the political relation *par excellence*."[32]

Consequently, in the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation), as exemplified in the Babylonian king, the cosmological drama effects the historical drama. The king as sovereign by divine favor acts to restore order, which necessarily includes evil—represented by the Enemy—as foundational to that order. In the book of

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[29] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 194-95.

[30] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 194-95.

[31] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 196.

[32] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 197-98.

Balaam, the oracular passages culminate in a ruling figure, whose chief purpose is the elimination of Israel's enemies. In its narrative context that enemy is Moab, but the unsolicited oracle includes also Edom / Seir as Israel's enemy (Num 24:18). The enumeration of enemies is extended in the three slight oracles that follow (Num 24:20-24). Thus, according to trace elements of the Babylonian form of the myth, as the promised ruling figure eliminates Israel's enemies, creation order is restored.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur offers a Hebrew form of the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation), one in which the creation-drama is pushed back, surviving only in a recessive form. As in the Babylonian form of the myth, the Hebrew form consists of two parts: (1) the kingship of YHWH, and (2) the warrior-king, his anointed. In the first, as evident in certain Psalms, YHWH founded the world and overcame primordial enmity.[33] In the Psalms of God's reign, YHWH's enthronement is related to the drama of creation; "his kingdom embrac(ing) the peoples of history as well as the physical universe."[34] In the second, the theme of the warrior-king, his anointed, and his chosen people is of greater significance, in which the "cosmic drama becomes a Messianic drama."[35] In the book of Balaam, both aspects of the Hebrew form of the myth are present. As read in its Pentateuchal context, the sovereignty of YHWH's kingship is presupposed.[36] Just as the exodus narrative can be read as a contest between two kings, Pharaoh and YHWH, so the Balaam narrative can be read as one between Balak and YHWH. However, unlike in the

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[33] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 199.

[34] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 199.

[35] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 200.

[36] As Wenham states, "The notion of the LORD as king is fundamental in the Pentateuch." Wenham, 197.

exodus narrative, in the book of Balaam the theme of the warrior-king, his anointed, and his chosen people is prominent. This is the culmination of the promised blessing of the patriarchal narrative.[37] YHWH empowers his chosen people and his anointed, the messianic warrior-king, to overcome their enemies.[38]

Ricoeur further delineates this Hebrew form of the myth, in which the theme of ritual combat can be viewed from three different perspectives. In the first, a direct link exists between the original King and primordial man, evident through the hymns of enthronement (Ps 8).[39] In the second, the King passes from ritual combat to historical combat, a perspective evident through the royal laments.[40] And in the third, the eschatological perspective is prominent.[41] Ultimately, this third perspective circles back to join with the first: "The Man of the end-time and primeval Man ultimately coincide; is this not because both are derived from the figure of the King, established *from* everlasting *to* everlasting?"[42] Within the book of Balaam, as YHWH empowers the ruling figure via his chosen people, all three perspectives are present. In the first, YHWH's anointed is the fulfillment of the primeval man; made in God's image, he "reigns" over the earth. This begins with the blessing and cursing formula so prominent in the book of Balaam. Most closely associated with Abraham

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[37] Wenham, 190. As Wenham states: "The fourth vision describes an Israelite king, a much rarer element in the patriarchal promises (cf. Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11)." Wenham, 190.

[38] Concerning the "oracles against the nations" (Num 24:20-24), Milgrom states this is the "first example of a genre that is fully developed by the classical prophets: Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 46-51, Amos 1:3-2:3)." Milgrom, 209.

[39] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 201.

[40] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 201.

[41] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 201-2.

[42] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 202.

(Gen 12:3a), it culminates Balaam's third oracle (Num 24:9b), only to be clarified in the unsolicited oracle (Num 24:17-19). If Abraham can be considered an initial fulfillment of the primeval man (see below), how much more this future envisaged ruling figure based upon the Abrahamic archetype? Just as Abraham "reigned" over the land promised to him (Gen 13:14-15), empowered to defeat his enemies (Gen 14:19-20), so YHWH's anointed will reign over a future kingdom, likewise empowered to defeat his enemies (Num 24:17-19). In the second, YHWH's anointed battles Israel's historical enemies (e.g., against Moab, Edom, the Amalekites). In the third, YHWH's anointed is the one to come in "the latter days": "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near" (Num 24:17a).[43]

However, as this occurs, the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation) crumbles. While "images" from the old system survive as remnants, their "significations" fundamentally change.[44] These new "significations" engender a new "type" of myth, especially in regards to creation, evil, history, and salvation. As Ricoeur describes: (1) Creation, proceeding from a Word and not a Drama, is good from the start; (2) History is no longer a "re-enactment" of the drama of creation, it is that Drama; (3) Evil and History are contemporaneous—Evil becomes scandalous at the same time it becomes historical.[45]

Thus, as the old myth slowly transmutes into the new myth, three components emerge that previously were incompatible with the old myth (in reverse

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[43] Wenham states, "Though this phrase may simply mean 'in future' (e.g. Jer 23:20), it can also mean 'the final days', whatever the period that constitutes the particular prophet's time horizon (Isa 2:2; Dan 8:19)." Wenham, 200.

[44] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 203.

[45] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 203.

order from the above three perspectives): "the 'eschatological' component of salvation, the 'historical' component of the human drama, and the 'anthropological' component of human evil."[46] In the first, although not pertinent to the book of Balaam, "the Messiah immanent in history (transitions) to the transcendent and heavenly Son of Man."[47] In the second, as history replaces the drama of creation, the exodus and Israel's enemies take on new significance. "It is History, and no longer the drama of creation, that becomes the active center of symbolism. At the same time, the Enemy ceases to represent primeval chaos; he undergoes a sort of reduction to the purely historical, as a function of the action of Yahweh."[48] This helps to explain the significance of the exodus narrative to the book of Balaam; like Egypt in relation to the Exodus, Moab in relation to the wilderness is a function of YHWH's action, a component of the history of Israel. In the third, states Ricoeur, "A new myth, purely anthropological, will be needed to take the place of the old cosmic myth. The figure of the *Urmensch* will then have to be detached from the figure of the King; his fault will have to constitute a radical novelty in the good creation. It is this need which will be fulfilled by the Adamic myth."[49]

An Eschatological Reading of the Book of Balaam

Ricoeur begins with the figure of the primeval man, who already had played a role in the previous type of myth. Here, however, in the *myth of the fall* (of the primeval man), he is central, effecting the myth's form. This is the Adamic symbol adopted by

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[46] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 206.

[47] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 204.

[48] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 204.

[49] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 205.

the Yahwist, a symbol of the beginning that is both *retrospective* and *future*.[50] Tracing the "the dominant symbols of eschatology" developed in later Judaism and early Christianity, Ricoeur notes "the mutual agreement between the symbols of the fall that happened at the Beginning and the symbols of the salvation that will come at the End of time."[51] Tracing its literary trajectory, he begins with the calling of Abraham.

In this way, an eschatological reading of the book of Balaam begins with the patriarchal narrative, in which the figure of Abraham, whose calling (Gen 12:1-3) spans primeval history and salvation history, is the first answer to the figure of Adam.[52] "Thus, in his past, when he thinks back on it," states Ricoeur, "the Israelite finds a sign of hope; even before any eschatology he represents the history of his 'fathers' to himself as a history directed by a 'promise' and moving toward a 'fulfillment.'"[53] That movement from promise to fulfillment provides more than the connecting thread between the patriarchs; it provides also the foundation for a series of transpositions that lead, "step by step…to the eschatological figures and images."[54] Tracing the narrative logic through Genesis, the trajectory from promise to fulfillment passes from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to both Ephraim and Manasseh. Israel's future hope appears connected to the tribe of Joseph, which finds warrant in the elevated status of Joshua (beginning in Exodus 17). However, through the

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[50] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 260.

[51] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 261.

[52] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 262.

[53] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 262-63.

[54] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 263.

similarly elevated status of Caleb (beginning in Numbers 13), along with the episode of Judah and Tamar in the Joseph narrative (Gen 38), as well as the blessings of both Jacob (Gen 49) and Moses (Deut 33), the tribe of Judah likewise is positioned to fulfill the promise. Comparing the portrayal of both Joseph and Judah through the Joseph narrative (Gen 37-50), Josef Sykora summarizes:

> When Gen 37–50 is read without chs. 38 and 49, Joseph is portrayed as favored by his father and the deity, and remains a chosen son throughout. Furthermore, the hints of kingship present in the narrative seem to suggest that the future king will come from his seed, specifically from his younger and more favored son Ephraim. But when the recounting of Joseph's adventures in Egypt is preceded by that of Judah's sojourn in Canaan (where the latter gained two sons through a similarly peculiar twist of chosenness), and when Judah is portrayed in ch. 49 as the subject of his brothers' obeisance, one may conclude in line with many later Old Testament narratives—that the future monarch will come through the tribe of Judah and the house of Perez.[55]

If Abraham is the first answer to the figure of Adam, then so, too, does each successive generation anticipate the promise's fulfillment. Within the wilderness wandering of the Pentateuchal narrative, that anticipation comes into sharp relief through Balaam's oracles. The envisioned ruling figure appears to be the fulfillment of that promise, a vision that dissipates as quickly as it comes into focus. As within the Pentateuch as a whole, the identity of this ruling figure (if it can be argued the book of Balaam is concerned with such a matter) remains elusive. Here the blessings of both Jacob (Gen 49) and Moses (Deut 33) are helpful, for both contain imagery that meaningfully resonate within Balaam's oracles.

Reading the final form of the text, the crescendo of themes evident in Balaam's oracles has been traced. While the unsolicited oracle traditionally is

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[55] Josef Sykora, *The Unfavored: Judah and Saul in the Narratives of Genesis and 1 Samuel* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 207.

considered the "messianic" oracle, it has been argued that the oracles *in toto* point in this same direction. In this, the second and third oracles are crucial, for it is here where the transition from Israel as a people to Israel as an individual occurs. In the context of the exodus, both oracles use the repeated phrase, "God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (23:22), and "God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox" (24:8a), the only difference being the change of pronouns from collective to singular. This imagery of the ox likewise is found in Moses' blessing of Joseph: "A firstborn bull—he has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox; with them he shall gore the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth; they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh" (Deut 33:17)—a further description that likewise resonates with Balaam's oracles (Num 24:8b). As well, both Jacob's and Moses' blessing of Joseph (Gen 49:22-26 and Deut 33:13-17, respectively) are steeped in verdant imagery of the land, a feature of Balaam's third oracle.

On the other hand, both the second and third oracles employ lion imagery, which many commentators connect with Jacob's blessing of Judah: "Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?" (Gen 49:9). In the second oracle, this imagery forms its climax: "Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain." (Num 23:24). In the third oracle, after describing the ruling figure in ferocious language: "he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows" (Num 24:8b), the lion imagery returns as one sated: "He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?" (Num 24:9a). Employing the blessing and cursing

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formula, the oracle's climax follows: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (Num 24:9b).

Thus, between the second and the third oracles, intertextual connections portray this ruling figure in metaphorical imagery reminiscent of both Joseph and Judah (an ambiguity likewise present in the Pentateuch, as a whole). Nevertheless, after these competing images, the unsolicited oracle appears to favor Judah. Using imagery of the scepter (שׁבט) found in Jacob's blessing of Judah: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen 49:10), the climax to the "messianic" oracle uses the same imagery: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth" (Num 24:17). Likewise, historical referents appear to point to David.[56] Thus, while Balaam's oracles in their final form appear to consider a ruling figure coming from either the tribe of Joseph or the tribe of Judah, the final unsolicited oracle appears to favor one from Judah. Regardless, like Abraham, the recipient of the blessing from either tribe still would function as the answer to the figure of Adam, "a *retrospective* symbol closely bound up with a whole historical experience turned toward the *future*."[57]

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[56] Gray, 370; Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 201; Noth, *Numbers*, 192-93.States Olson, "Many scholars see the future royal figure as pointing to King David and his victories over Moab and Edom (2 Sam 8:2, 11-14). The blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49 uses the image of the crouching lion and lioness waiting to be roused for Judah (King David's tribe). The blessing promises that 'the scepter shall not depart from Judah' (Gen 49:9-10); this blessing clearly points to the line of King David and uses imagery similar to Balaam's blessing." Olson, 150.

[57] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 260.

Nevertheless, the Promise continually is postponed—through the patriarchal narrative, the wilderness, the conquest, and eventually the exile. Throughout this postponement, as Israel's political fortunes rise and fall, the Promise continues to transpose; new dimensions of meaning come into view.[58] By the exile, Israel's historical stasis decisively "eschatologizes" the Promise.[59] From this point forward, states Ricoeur, "the 'Promise' will express its tension through the mythical images of the end; those images and the figures in which they will be crystalized will supply the true answer to the images and figures of the beginning."[60] Within the book of Balaam, these visions of the mythic end are based upon images and figures of the mythic past: Eden, the Flood, Abraham, his offspring, and the Exodus. In this way, the Balaam narrative (especially the oracles) "eschatologizes" the Promise. "In the history of Israel," states Olson, "the promise of a new king or messiah was extended beyond King David to a future hope for a messiah who would usher in God's kingdom in a new apocalyptic age (e.g., Dan 7)."[61]

As noted previously, the old *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation) slowly transmutes into the new *myth of the fall* (of the primeval man), eventually creating a split between the two. Ricoeur illustrates this division through the figure of the King: "the kingship founded 'in those times' becomes little by little 'the Kingdom to come,' as the eschatological type possesses itself more completely of the images deposited by the ritual-cultural type."[62] Just as descriptions of the King, the Anointed

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[58] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 263.

[59] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 263.

[60] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 263.

[61] Olson, 150.

[62] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 264.

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One, from the former Prophets—"with earthly and political hopes…the permanence of David's line"—begin to be "eschatologized" in the latter Prophets, so too does the envisioned representative ruler in the book of Balaam, a royal figure suggestive of David, defeat Israel's enemies in the latter days.[63] In this, reminds Ricoeur, "eschatological does not mean transcendent, heavenly, but final."[64] Thus, from promise to fulfillment, hope is grounded in eschatology.[65]

In its Pentateuchal context, then, the symbolic function of myths affirms both a messianic and an eschatological reading of the book of Balaam. This suggests a more deep-rooted messianism present in the Pentateuch than traditionally considered.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The exploration of Paul Ricoeur and the *world of the text* ends with his central interest in the *self*, the natural endpoint of his argument in both *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*.

Narrative Identity and the Book of Balaam

In *Time and Narrative*, Citing Heidegger, Ricoeur notes an aporia of temporality caused by "the mutual occultation" of phenomenological time and cosmological time. To this, his poetics of narrative offers a "third-time"—the mimetic activity of narrative—that seeks to bridge this divide.[66] This third-time is, in fact, the

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[63] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 264.

[64] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 265.

[65] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 204.

[66] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:244-45.

interweaving of history and fictional narrative, "an interpenetration of history and fiction, stemming from the criss-crossing processes of a fictionalization of history and a historization of fiction."[67]

From this interweaving of history and fiction is born, states Ricoeur, an "offshoot." Bringing together various aspects of meaning common to narrative, this offshoot is "the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity."[68] From here, Ricoeur distinguishes between identity as sameness (*idem*) and identity as selfhood (*ipse*)—or permanence versus temporal—the latter of which contributes to a narrative identity based upon the refigured self. As Ricoeur clarifies, "the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told."[69]

For Ricoeur, narrative identity leads to two corollaries: (1) its role in forming ethics, and (2) its application to a community as well as to an individual. "Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history," states Ricoeur.[70] He applies this second corollary to biblical Israel. On the one hand, as the incomprehensible chapters of Israel's history are refigured into a coherent whole, the community realizes its selfhood (*ipse*). However, on the other hand, as both reader and writer of its own existence—"the historical community called the Jewish people has drawn its identity from the

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[67] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:246.

[68] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:246.

[69] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:246.

[70] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:247.

reception of those texts that it had produced."[71] The relation is circular: "In a word," summarizes Ricoeur, "narrative identity is the poetic resolution of the hermeneutic circle"[72]

As recalled, the relation between time and narrative reaches its end in mimesis$_3$, the refiguration of time through the interweaving of history and fiction. Through the act of reading, time is refigured as both history and fiction borrow from the intentionality of the other. It is here where the world of the text intersects with the world of the reader; "the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality."[73] In the Gadamerian sense, this is *application*, "the central problem of hermeneutics."[74] Or, as Ricoeur describes, moving from the structure of the text to its application by the interpreting community, this interpretive dynamism is the operation of appropriating the text in the "thought, action, and life" of individuals and communities.[75] Thus, the *world of the text* refers not merely to the narrative world of the text, but also to the *existential world* of the reader, one that provides narrative identity for the community and the individual.

Of course, this concept of narrative identity was further developed in *Oneself as Another*—"the closest to a magnum opus of all his works" under the unifying theme of *the self*.[76] Nevertheless, since the specific object of linguistic study here is a

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[71] Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3:248.

[72] Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3:248.

[73] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:71.

[74] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., 315.

[75] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 161.

[76] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 23.

biblical text, rather than focusing on *Oneself as Another* proper, the present project returns to Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics project: from the relationship between philosophical and biblical hermeneutics as found in *From Text to Action*, to the manner in which biblical scripture instructs the self as presented in the first of his two omitted Gifford lectures.

To review (from Chapter 2: "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur"), in "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics," Ricoeur explores the contribution of philosophical hermeneutics to biblical exegesis by applying four categories of general hermeneutics to the theological: (1) *structure*: concerns the relationship between forms of biblical discourse and the profession of faith, (2) *writing*: the resultant relationship between speech and writing, via tradition, is the kerygma, (3) *the world of the text*: this central category—the object of hermeneutics—opens up another reality, the reality of the *possible*, and (4) existential *appropriation*: involves faith, suspicion, and most importantly *imagination*, where "a poetics of existence responds to the poetics of discourse."[77] In "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," Ricoeur relates biblical hermeneutics to the self in four steps: (1) preliminarily, "faith" is mediated both linguistically and scripturally, while the canon forms the identities of the resultant Jewish and Christian communities, (2) the configuring aspect of scripture via the imaginative unity of the Bible—its metaphorical, kerygmatic language references the self, (3) the polyphonic unity of scripture via various genres of discourse implies a human response—the refiguring consequence on the polysemic self, and (4) like the referent "God," the self simultaneously draws itself together and disappears.

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[77] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

If it can be argued the relationship between these two essays forms an inverse relationship, then at the center of the resultant structure is "faith"—forming both the final act of appropriation and the preliminary step of identity formation. Both involve language: faith is an act of hermeneutics raising it to the level of language and one that requires a linguistic, especially scriptural, mediation. And most importantly for Ricoeur, *imagination* is central to this process: through imagination, the new being is formed. This is the existential moment, where "the language (of scripture) which *in itself* is poetic becomes kerygmatic *for us*."[78] In this, the *world of the text* opens up another reality, the reality of the *possible*, which implies a human *response*. This is the refiguring consequence on the self; concerning biblical literature, God's words and actions demand a human response—whether by an individual, Israel or the Church, or humanity as a whole.[79] Ricoeur's development of this idea ends with the conscience, which is the organ of reception of the kerygma.[80] For our purposes, the term *kerygma* retrospectively can be adopted to a Second Temple Jewish setting, in which national salvation rests on a *messianic* and an *eschatological* hope.

Thus, based upon a *world of the text* reading of the final form of Numbers 22-24, incorporating these aspects, a narrative identity of Second Temple Israel can be suggested. While the sources and fragments forming the book of Balaam are no doubt historically diverse, the collection forming the book of Numbers appears to

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[78] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 209-10.

[79] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 214.

[80] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 271-72. States Ricoeur, "Conscience is thus the anthropological presupposition without which 'justification by faith' would remain an event marked by a radical extrinsicness [sic]. In this sense, conscience becomes the organ of the reception of the kerygma, in a perspective that remains profoundly Pauline." Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 272.

have come together post-exile. "The definitive shaping of the book of Numbers in roughly its present form," states Olson, "likely occurred sometime after the Babylonian exile (587-538 B.C.)."[81] Describing, in effect, this refiguring process embodying the hermeneutic circle, Olson continues: "The book of Numbers was the product of the Jewish community's struggle to understand the pain and punishment of exile and its implications for Israel's relationship to God, Israel's definition as a people, and Israel's posture toward the promised land, which had been lost but was now about to be regained."[82] Thus, in light of these existential questions, the Jewish community post-exile not only shapes its narratives of origins, but is shaped by them.

From the Persian period onward, the Torah was authoritative—not just concerning legal matters, but also as a literary canon.[83] States Collins, "This looser sense of authority (i.e., as a canon forming a community), which treats the received texts as resources for a literary imagination, is very widely attested in ancient Judaism, including the Scrolls."[84] Collins briefly recounts this historical trajectory from the Persian through the Hellenistic periods. "The Torah achieved its normative status in the Persian period," he states, citing Ezra's initiatives that, nevertheless, required Persian approval.[85] While Ezra's attempts at reform were mixed, "the most enduring part of his legacy was the new status accorded to the Torah of Moses."[86]

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[81] Olson, 3.

[82] Olson, 3.

[83] John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 82.

[84] Collins, 83.

[85] Collins, 183.

[86] Collins, 184.

Following this, in the early Hellenistic period, "the Torah seems to have been valued largely for its narratives and as a source of wisdom," with less emphasis on its legal requirements.[87] "The centrality of the Torah for most of Judaism in the Hellenistic period is not in dispute," states Collins, even as he concedes some exceptions in the pre-Maccabean period (e.g., the Enoch tradition).[88] Nevertheless, by the second century B.C., "the Torah had acquired iconic status, in the sense that it was acknowledged with respect and deference, even when it was not examined in detail."[89]

With regard to the narrative texts of the Torah, Collins comments on the influential role both of the patriarchal and the exodus narratives. "The narratives preserved in the books of Genesis and Exodus shape Jewish identity at the most basic level," he states.[90] These two narratives form competing myths of origin, both of which take on new significance in light of the exile. Whereas a new exodus is envisioned post-exile, in which the land will be repossessed, so too is the wandering of the patriarchs exemplary. "Indeed the precedent of the patriarchs was a better model for the returning exiles," states Collins, since it did not involve the displacement of native peoples.[91] "Both stories, in any case, would be mined as models of Jewish identity throughout the Second Temple period."[92] This follows the argument of the present study, in which these significant stories of origin—from the

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[87] Collins, 184.

[88] Collins, 65.

[89] Collins, 184.

[90] Collins, 80.

[91] Collins, 81.

[92] Collins, 81.

developed *blessing* of the patriarchal narrative to the divine deliverance of the

exodus narrative—find an anticipatory fulfillment in the book of Balaam in its

Pentateuchal context.

Beginning in the Persian period, with the return to Jerusalem and the

rebuilding of the Temple, conflicts gave rise to messianic expectations.[93] Smith cites

the sudden collapse of successive empires as the catalyst for such eschatological

excitement: Assyria (620-609 B.C.), Media (550), Lydia (546), Babylonia (539), and

Egypt (525), "then the usurpation of the Persian throne and attendant revolts in 522-

520."[94] While the failure of these revolts cooled speculation for some time,

messianic expectation never was extinguished. With the "successful revolt of Egypt,

beginning about 410, and disintegration of Persian control of the western provinces

during the fourth century, with the satraps' revolt, beginning in 366, and the

Egyptian invasion of Palestine in 361 to 360," messianic hope was revived.[95] Smith

clarifies this expectation:

> The hopes most often reiterated (i.e., through the prophetic reaction) are for
> the rebuilding or glorification of Jerusalem and the Temple, the regathering
> of Israelite—especially Judean—exiles to form a strong military power,
> agricultural produce to support them, and conquest of their neighbors, most
> often of Edom, Moab, Ammon and the Philistine plain, but sometimes also of
> Phoenicia and Damascus. As leader of this imperialistic revival the prophets
> usually hope for a king from the Davidic dynasty, who will institute a reign
> of justice (for Israelites) and (once the neighbors are subjected) of perpetual
> peace.[96]

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[93] Morton Smith, "Jewish Religious Life in the Persian Period," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism,* ed. W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 246.

[94] Smith, 275.

[95] Smith, 275.

[96] Smith, 275.

Based upon this description, it is striking how many of these aspects are reflected in Balaam's oracles. Reflecting the hopes of the Second Temple community, the book of Balaam shapes narrative identity through its envisioning of a strong military, supportive agriculture, and conquest of her neighbors—especially Moab and Edom. The leader of this revival is envisioned as a Davidic king, whose kingdom will be characterized by peace and justice. As long as Israel considers herself in exile, so "the wish for an heir of David who would lead the people back to its land remains a persistent leitmotif."[97] Thus, grounded in the experience of exile— via faith and imagination—such a messianic deliverer reflects eschatological hope.

Reading the Old Testament as Christian scripture today, the book of Balaam likewise contributes to a narrative identity. In this *world of the text* reading, the Pentateuch offers a more deep-rooted messianic and eschatological perspective than traditionally considered. This Christian reading of the Old Testament attests to the scriptural pattern of *promise* and *fulfillment*, one to which the New Testament writers bore witness. Additionally, for a Christian of the present era, such a *world of the text* reading opens up the new reality of the *possible*, implying a human *response*. In this, the *kerygma* likewise is founded upon a *messianic* and an *eschatological* hope. Christians still place their hope in this messianic figure, living in light of the "eschatological now" of the kingdom of God. The resultant narrative identity informs Christian thought, action, and life; eschatology informs ethics.[98]

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[97] William Scott Green and Jed Silverstein, "The Doctrine of the Messiah," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 252.

[98] Ihde, xxii. Summarizing Ricoeur's central theology of hope, Ihde states, "Eschatology takes precedence over ethics in the 'new ethics.'" Ihde, xxi-xxii.

In these ways, the book of Balaam's capacity to instill hope is plenteous. Just as "the four oracles build into a rising crescendo of hope and promise for a new generation poised on the brink of entering Canaan," so this same hope extends to every generation of faith, in which past traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present.[99] For Ricoeur, the *irrevocable anteriority* of the promise ends in a narrative identity—an identity founded on hope.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the role of *hope* in forming the *world of the text*, the book of Balaam has been considered in dialogue with Ricoeur's categories of myth and narrative identity.

Both the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation) and the *myth of the fall* (of the primeval man) are reflected in the book of Balaam, offering both a *messianic* and an *eschatological* reading of the Balaam narrative, respectively. In the Hebrew form of the *myth of chaos* (of the drama of creation), the sovereignty of YHWH's kingship is presupposed. Likewise, the theme of the warrior-king, his anointed, and his chosen people is prominent. As envisioned in the oracles, YHWH empowers his chosen people and his anointed, the messianic warrior-king, to overcome their enemies. In the *myth of the fall* (of the primeval man), the anticipated ruling figure is the answer to the figure of Adam. Whether from the tribe of Joseph or the tribe of Judah, he is "a *retrospective* symbol closely bound up with a whole historical experience turned toward the *future*."[100] As Ricoeur states regarding the figure of the

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[99] Olson, 150-51.

[100] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 260.

King, "the kingship founded 'in those times' becomes little by little 'the Kingdom to come,' as the eschatological type possesses itself more completely of the images deposited by the ritual-cultural type."[101] In this way, from promise to fulfillment, hope is grounded in eschatology.[102]

The exploration of Paul Ricoeur and the *world of the text* ends with his central interest in the *self*. For Ricoeur, narrative identity applies to a community as well as to an individual. "Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history," he states.[103] The relation is circular: "In a word," summarizes Ricoeur, "narrative identity is the poetic resolution of the hermeneutic circle."[104] This interpretive dynamism is the operation of appropriating the text in the "thought, action, and life" of individuals and communities.[105] Thus, the *world of the text* refers not merely to the narrative world of the text, but also to the *existential world* of the reader, one that provides narrative identity for the community and the individual. Specific to the biblical text, both faith and imagination are central to this process. In this, the *world of the text* opens up another reality, the reality of the *possible*, which implies a human *response*.

Thus, based upon a *world of the text* reading of the final form of Numbers 22-24, a narrative identity of Second Temple Israel has been suggested. Reflecting the hopes of the Second Temple community, the book of Balaam shapes narrative

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[101] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 264.

[102] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 204.

[103] Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3:247.

[104] Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3:248.

[105] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 161, 166.

identity through its envisioning of a strong military, supportive agriculture, and conquest of her neighbors—especially Moab and Edom. The leader of this revival is envisioned as a Davidic king, whose kingdom will be characterized by peace and justice. Such a messianic deliverer reflects eschatological hope. This same hope extends to every generation of faith, in which past traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present.[106]

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[106] Olson, 150-51.

EXCURSUS II

"I've told you two stories about what happened out on the ocean. Neither explains what caused the sinking of the ship, and no one can prove which story is true and which is not. In both stories, the ship sinks, my family dies, and I suffer." "True," the writer replies. "So which story do you prefer?" asks Pi. "The story with the tiger," replies the writer. "That's the better story." "Thank you," answers Pi. "And so it goes with God."[1]

Life of Pi consists of two narrated stories: one "literary-imaginative" and the other "historical-critical." Just as Pi Patel asks the writer in the novel/film which he prefers, so Yann Martel asks the reader of the novel the same question. Beyond personal preference, the question implies resolution of an internal struggle. "The reader's conflict thus comes down to a struggle between belief and reason—and hence to a choice which is central to the novel and to Pi's ordeal."[2] No matter how one frames it—reason vs. imagination, fact vs. fiction, science vs. religion—the resolution of this central conflict is key to understanding *Life of Pi*.

Gregory Stephens understands this conflict as one between science and religion. He notes how *Life of Pi* goes out of its way to balance the two: "Pi begins his narrative by noting that he received a double bachelor's in religious studies and zoology from the University of Toronto. This doubling of science and religion is a leitmotif in the novel, as with the two Mr. Kumars who point Pi down parallel paths:

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[1] *Life of Pi*, directed by Ang Lee (20th Century Fox, 2012).

[2] Joanna Rostek, *Seaing through the Past: Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, Postmodern Studies 47 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 149.

'Mr. and Mr. Kumar taught me biology and Islam.'"[3] This balancing continues

through Pi's daily practice and rituals: "His prayer practice clearly plays a role in

helping Pi achieve a sort of Zen-like attention to being in the moment that enables

him to go on with the science-informed rituals (cleaning, fishing, etc.) that are

necessary for survival."[4]

Nevertheless, as Florence Stratton argues, "*Life of Pi* is organized around a

philosophical debate about the modern world's privileging of reason over

imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or

story."[5] In this, the objective truth of positivism is challenged by the imaginative

creativity of Romanticism. "To deconstruct this reason/imagination binary hierarchy

is the project of Martel's narrative," states Stratton.[6] However, she questions its

efficacy: "The deconstructive project of *Life of Pi* is to replace the Enlightenment

belief in the power of reason to liberate humanity with a belief in the transforming

power of story. That Pi shows little or nothing in the way of personal growth or

development over the course of the narrative seriously compromises this project."[7]

Michael Thorn, however, understands Pi's lack of personal growth less as a

failure of Martel's project than as a result of the very real trauma he endured at sea.

Embracing the dichotomy of philosophy and psychology, Thorn argues that between

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[3] Gregory Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and 'the Better Story' in *Life of Pi*," *Intertexts* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 48; Martel, 61.

[4] Stephens, 49.

[5] Florence Stratton, "'Hollow at the Core': Deconstructing Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 6.

[6] Stratton, 7.

[7] Stratton, 18-19.

the better story of allegory and the factual story of horror lies Pi's trapped trauma.[8]

By breaking down the dichotomy between faith and reason, "a primary theme of *Life of Pi*," Pi is able to overcome his trauma.[9] Thus, instead of reversing the privileging of reason over faith à la Stratton, Thorn argues that the novel eliminates the dichotomy altogether: "it is through both reason *and* faith that Pi survives his ordeal."[10]

Françoise and Jeff Storey build upon this understanding, incorporating the idea of myth in the shaping of Pi's identity. While they define myth in connection to "questions of displacement, stasis, and movement, self and other, colonization and identity," they cite Northrop Frye in its relation to identity.[11] Myth, states Frye, "the framework of all literature," is the "story of the loss and regaining of identity."[12] Storey and Storey remind that "myths are the sacred stories that tell a society what it is important for us to know. Their teachings are larger than just a single man's experience; they are symbolically experienced by a whole group of people."[13] Thus, they argue that, for Martel, myth is just as crucial for Pi's survival as reason:

> Yann Martel, through his character, clearly rejects the idea, inspired by the early Platonic school, that 'mythos,' as opposed to 'logos,' is merely an illusion that keeps us away from rational thought and truth, a binary opposition that has had a tremendous influence on Western thought, in particular during the Enlightenment. Martel goes back to a pre-Platonic

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[8] Michael Thorn, "Cannibalism, Communion, and Multifaith Sacrifice in the Novel and Film *Life of Pi*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 4.

[9] Thorn, 4.

[10] Thorn, 8.

[11] Françoise Storey and Jeff Storey, "Transcending Postcolonial Identity Through Myth: Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*," in *Literary Location and Dislocation of Myth in the Post/Colonial Anglophone World*, ed. André Dodeman and Élodie Raimbault, Cross/Cultures 202 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 209.

[12] Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1997), 21.

[13] Storey and Storey, 210.

conception of 'mythos' that rehabilitates the imaginary and the poetic in our attempt to grasp truth. Here, like many twentieth-century mythographers, Martel rejects the idea that we should look at myths as the naive, archaic stories of primitive people….For Martel, not accepting myth as truth equates to saying that Pi is a mythomane who has attempted to deceive us, whereas the whole novel demonstrates precisely that he has survived, not only thanks to his inventiveness, the survival manual that is on the lifeboat, and a fair amount of luck, but also because he relied on his imagination and faith. Taming Richard Parker, taming the tiger, we are to understand, is a metaphor for taming one's psyche, one's despair, one's madness.[14]

This, precisely, is the "better story." States Stephens, using slightly different categories, "Pi's 'better story' is not just about believing in God, but reconciling the prophets of science and religion."[15] He continues, "Religion in this text is not presented as inherently superior, but religious stories provide a framework that makes experience comprehensible for many, or provides moral guidelines.…Their spiritual components can coexist alongside of, and indeed complement, the stories of science, which also have their narrative appeal, but which are insufficient food for the human imagination, especially in conditions of extreme duress."[16]

This "better story," incorporating reason *and* myth (i.e., imagination, faith), is crucial in the shaping of Pi's identity, the key to his survival. In the context of his trauma, Richard Parker becomes "the embodiment of Pi's hope."[17] As Storey and Storey state, "If we understand the tiger as being an ambulant metaphor of Pi's own psyche, unleashed it can devour him, but, properly tamed, it can help him keep

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[14] Storey and Storey, 219-20.

[15] Stephens, 50.

[16] Stephens, 44.

[17] Stephens, 45.

together a self-sustaining narrative of himself."[18] For Pi, "swearing to return Richard

Parker safely to land becomes his way of keeping hope alive."[19]

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[18] Storey and Storey, 213.

[19] Stephens, 55.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Held in metaphorical tension with Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, the present study has compared two readings of Numbers 22-24, the book of Balaam: one historical-critical (the *world behind the text*), and the other literary-imaginative (the *world of the text*). In *Life of Pi*, two different stories describe one event. On the one hand, Pi's "historical-critical" description purports to tell the shipping officials "what really happened" at sea, even as none who hear his story (including the reader/viewer of the novel/film) can be sure of its veracity. On the other hand, Pi's "literary-imaginative" description of the event—the main of the novel/film—offers a version that, for him, provides existential meaning.

In like manner, the present study has offered two different readings of the book of Balaam. On the one hand, the *world behind the text* (historical-critical) reading purports to describe the truth of history—what *really* happened behind the text's production—even as the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel remains, as has been discovered, unknown. On the other hand, the *world of the text* (literary-imaginative) reading offers an unverifiable mythopoetic world that, through describing a possible world, informs the existential world of the reader—be it historical or modern.

One could argue that these two readings are incompatible. Founded during distinct historical eras, each approach employs different methodological tools for differing ends. Rooted in nineteenth-century historicism, the *world behind the text* approach employs the tools of empirical science to investigate not only the text, but also the ancient society that produced it. Conversely, drawing upon diverse twentieth-century movements, the *world of the text* approach employs literary, theological, and philosophical theory and criticism to discover potential meaning in

the text. Nevertheless, as in *Life of Pi*, both readings concern the same textual event. The value of the comparison lies in the fact that, since biblical literature is multivalent, no one investigative method need take precedence. Employing different methodological tools for differing ends, both approaches equally are valid.

Nevertheless, in the present study, the purpose or value of the comparison lies in the "kind of crisis" von Rad had described nearly sixty years ago, one precipitated by the confrontation between ancient and modern notions of history. In response, he proposed adopting ancient Israel's own notion of history as offered through the traditions, an "authenticity" by which past traditions, with a future orientation, were incorporated into the present.[1] With this in mind, the *world of the text* approach suggested here employs the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics; instead of examining the text via an unobtainable objectivity, the text is interpreted "in light of its as well as the reader's own ontological embeddedness in history, tradition, and culture."[2] It has sought, according to the observation of Sandra Schneiders, to develop a hermeneutical theory raising the "ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions whose answers are integral to any such theory."[3] *As such, the present study has been concerned more with hermeneutics than with biblical studies, strictly speaking.* Concerning methodology, the thesis has sought to answer: How might the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur help to mitigate the ongoing tension between history and theology, thus revealing the *world of the text* (or, in the words of von Rad, recover its authenticity)

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[1] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:424. See "Introduction" of the present project.

[2] Zimmermann, 21.

[3] Schneiders, 23.

of Numbers 22-24? Concerning content, it has sought to answer: How might a *world of the text* reading of Numbers 22-24 uncover a possible meaning for ancient Israel? This is an existential meaning, in which past traditions, with a future orientation, are incorporated into the present—i.e., myth shaping identity.

Part One: The *World Behind the Text*

In the first part of the study, seven positions offering a *world behind the text* reading of Numbers 22-24 have been examined. Exemplifying the contours of twentieth-century historical-critical interpretation, three of these positions—those of George Buchanan Gray, Martin Noth, and Baruch Levine—have explored the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel. Four additional studies reading the book of Balaam as a whole— that of John Greene, along with the literary analyses of David Marcus, Mary Douglas, and Carolyn Sharp—have offered further insights into a proposed *Sitz im Leben*. Each of these seven scholars has offered his or her own perspective of what *really* happened in the life and religion of ancient Israel.

Nevertheless, while each of these perspectives offers fascinating insights into a possible *Sitz im Leben* of Numbers 22-24, it should be acknowledged that each of these perspectives *is* different. While these distinctions are perfectly acceptable (owing to each scholar's individual interests and period of study), if one wishes to understand the *truth* of history, it becomes difficult if not impossible to reconcile these differences. As in the narrative of *Life of Pi*, when the Japanese shipping officials had wished to know what *really* happened at sea, Martel, through Pi, replies, "Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?…Isn't telling

about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention?"[4]

Thus, even for historical-critical scholars, as well as those approaching the text from differing perspectives (yet operating within a historical framework), determining the world *behind the text* is, in the end, an imaginative reconstruction. While the use of imagination is to be applauded in any discipline, especially in biblical scholarship, one must acknowledge that the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel (as derived from Numbers 22-24)—the ultimate goal of such scholarship, at least according to Levine—remains unknown. If such historical-critical inquiry is a search for the truth of what *really* happened, then, at least in regards to the book of Balaam, the search hardly has been productive.

Part Two: The *World of the Text*

In the second part of the study, the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur has been employed to offer a *world of the text* reading of Numbers 22-24. Under the broad categories of *imagination*, *time*, and *hope*, Ricoeurian philosophy has been used to help mitigate the ongoing tension between history and theology. Such an approach has sought to uncover an existential meaning from the text.

Other *World of the Text* Readings

Nevertheless, before proceeding, other *world of the text* readings of Numbers 22-24 briefly should be considered. Five such positions have been consulted in the course of the present project: Gordon Wenham's TOTC commentary on Numbers (1981),

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[4] Martel, 302.

James Ackerman's contribution (Numbers) to the *Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987),

Jacob Milgrom's JPS Torah Commentary on Numbers (1989), Dennis Olson's

Numbers Interpretation commentary (1996), and R. W. L. Moberly's examination of

the Balaam narrative in *Prophecy and Discernment* (2006). It will be helpful first to

review these positions, then to offer a summary comparision with the Ricoeurian

approach put forward here.

As the earliest of the five positions consulted, Wenham's TOTC commentary

on Numbers considers critical scholarship while addressing the presumed needs of

his Christian audience. While committed to historical-critical exegesis to uncover the

text's "original meaning," Wenham is more concerned with the text's "abiding

significance" for his target audience, i.e., Christian readers in the modern church.[5] In

practice, Wenham's theological reading adopts a canonical approach. For example,

while considering critical theories regarding the date and authorship of the text,

arguing for an early date (Mosaic period) of its underlying tradition, he states, "But

precise dating of the material is largely irrelevant to exegesis, for it is the final form

of the text that has canonical authority for the church."[6] For Wenham, then, the

text's abiding significance is its Christian interpretation: "Our guide in relating the

teaching of Numbers to the new covenant situation must be the New Testament."[7] In

this, Wenham relies on typology.[8] Nevertheless, he also is concerned with the

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[5] Wenham, 9-10.

[6] Wenham, 29. Confusingly, Wenham states his historical-critical exegesis will uncover the text's "plain historical meaning…what it meant to the original author and his readers," while at the same time labeling critical discussions subjective, "of minor importance in recovering the original meaning of the text." Wenham, 9.

[7] Wenham, 55.

[8] Wenham, 57-59.

theology of Numbers which, in concert with Exodus and Leviticus, includes: (1) the character of God, (2) the land, and (3) the people of God.[9]

Concerning Numbers 22-24 in particular, Wenham is interested both in its structure and its theology: "The charming naïvety of these stories disguises a brilliance of literary composition and a profundity of theological reflection."[10] Wenham highlights the book of Balaam's threefold repetition, which he further delineates into six main acts in two sets of three (22:7-14, 15-20, 21-35, 41-23:12, 13-26, 27-24:25): "in every one there is the insistence that Balaam say only what the LORD permits him to say."[11] Interpreting Numbers in light of the New Testament, Wenham offers a negative assessment of Balaam's character while upholding the divine inspiration of the oracles—his true interest.[12] The theological significance of the oracles reaffirms the patriarchal promises of blessing, land, and king.[13] The Christian significance of Numbers 22-24 lies in the latter, the messianic interpretation of the unsolicited oracle: "If the primary fulfilment of Balaam's prophecies was in the rise of David and the defeat of his foes, a further fulfilment may surely be seen in Jesus, the son of David, who has conquered sin and death, and now reigns 'until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Cor 15:25)."[14]

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[9] Wenham, 44-55.

[10] Wenham, 185.

[11] Wenham, 185.

[12] Wenham, 187-189.

[13] Wenham, 190.

[14] Wenham, 206.

Following Robert Alter's 1981 landmark study *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the composite 1987 work *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode) seeks to understand the biblical text via the tools of literary criticism.[15] The list of contributors to this volume includes both "literary critics interested in the Bible and…biblical scholars interested in literary criticism."[16] James Ackerman, writing the entry for the book of Numbers, falls into the latter category; offering more of a synchronic reading than literary analysis strictly speaking (save, perhaps, for intertextuality), he likewise is interested in the structure and theology of both Numbers in general and chapters 22-24 in particular. Within three major sections of the book of Numbers, (Num 1:1-10:10; 10:11-25:18; 26:1-36:13), literary unity is achieved thematically.

Concerning the book of Balaam, Ackerman notes intertextual allusions both to the patriarchal promise (Gen 12:3) and to the exodus narrative (Balak as Pharaoh *redivivus*). Indicative of the divine blessing, the numerically superior Israel invokes dread upon Balak and the Moabites—like that upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians previously (Num 22:3-5; cf. Exod 1:8-12).[17] Noting the shift in genre, the folktale of Balaam and his ass (22:21-35) functions structurally to introduce Balaam's oracles via a pattern of three, both of which culminate in the opening of Balaam's eyes (22:31 and 24:4). The oracles build upon these intertextual references. In the first oracle's general blessing (23:7-10), the "dust of Jacob" (23:10) alludes to the

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[15] Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, "General Introduction," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 4-6.

[16] Alter and Kermode, 6.

[17] Ackerman, 86.

offspring of the patriarchal promise (Gen 13:16 and 28:14).[18] In the second oracle

(23:18-24), the inviolable divine blessing demonstrated by the exodus is moving

toward fulfillment.[19] In the third oracle (24:3-9), as Balaam's eyes are opened (24:4),

these allusions become even more specific: from a lush paradise to Jacob's offspring

in "many waters," an emergent king will defeat Israel's enemies—in fulfillment of

the patriarchal promise (24:9; cf. 12:3). And in the unsolicited oracle (24:15-19), as

the literary pattern of three is broken, these intertextual allusions coalesce around a

singular figure who will defeat Israel's enemies. States Ackerman, "an extraordinary

twist in the plot assigns the most far-reaching and positive visions of Israel's future

found in the entire Pentateuch to a Near Eastern diviner rather than to Moses."[20]

    Jacob Milgrom's contribution to the JPS Torah Commentary, *Numbers*

(1989), is the most historical-critical of the five *world of the text* approaches

examined here. Nevertheless, eschewing diachronic form and tradition criticism,

Milgrom treats Numbers synchronically via redaction criticism, examining the text

as a literary and artistic whole. "Indeed," states Milgrom, "just as the established

theories reflect the previous *Zeitgeist* of their time—historicism, evolution, linear

development—so does this present trend echo the 'new criticism' of today, which

concentrates on the text as it is."[21] Additionally, Milgrom relies upon the medieval

Jewish exegetes and rabbinic literature. And while holding to divine revelation, he

nevertheless seeks to be "critical, unapologetic, and objective."[22] Finally, while

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[18] Ackerman, 87.

[19] Ackerman, 87.

[20] Ackerman, 87.

[21] Milgrom, xii.

[22] Milgrom, xiii.

noting the number of ways the book of Numbers can be structured (e.g., by genre, topography, chronology, temporal and spatial criteria), Milgrom argues the thematic and verbal links binding the material together are more important.[23] Theologically, The Presence of God and Intercession are central.[24]

Regarding the book of Balaam—the largest independent unit in Numbers—Milgrom reiterates the rabbis' belief that it was composed separately, placed later within the Pentateuchal corpus.[25] "With the exception of the ass episode (22:22-35), itself an interpolation, these chapters, comprising both prose and poetry, are an integrated, interlocking, artfully structured unity."[26] In this way, Milgrom reads Numbers 22-24 synchronically as a fast-paced narrative of reversal: "Balak's curse, intended for Israel, will instead be inflicted by Israel on Moab."[27] The narrative's function, he suggests, is to reassure Israel that she is blessed; despite her sin, through her progeny, she will dwell in the promised land.[28]

Within the ass episode, Milgrom notes its inner cohesion: three scenes interlocked via stylistic and thematic links.[29] Regarding the unity of Numbers 22-24, he states unequivocally: "The poetry was composed for the sake of the prose."[30] Thus, examining the oracles more closely, the first oracle (23:7-10) describes

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[23] Milgrom, xiii-xiv.

[24] Milgrom, xxxvii-xlii.

[25] Milgrom, xv, 185.

[26] Milgrom, xv.

[27] Milgrom, 185.

[28] Milgrom, xv.

[29] Milgrom, 190.

[30] Milgrom, 467.

Israel's present state and future potential.[31] This theme is expanded in the second

oracle (23:18-24), which invokes God's inalterable purpose to bless Israel; with

YHWH as king, Israel is invincible.[32] The oracles culminate with the third (24:3-9),

in which Israel's king will defeat Israel's enemies: "those who bless or curse Israel

will themselves be blessed or cursed."[33] The unsolicited oracle (24:15-19),

completing the 3 + 1 pattern, delineates the doom of both Moab and Edom, the

"star" (24:17) referring to the rise of King David who conquered both (2 Sam 8:2,

13-14; 1 Kings 11:15-16; Ps 60:2, 10).[34] The final three "oracles against nations"

(24:20-24) round out the book of Balaam's oracles to seven (counting the unsolicited

oracle as oracle number four).

Dennis Olson's *Numbers* Interpretation commentary (1996), an outgrowth of

his Yale University doctoral dissertation (under the advisement of Brevard Childs),

is primarily a theological study of the book of Numbers. Eschewing historical-

critical details, he seeks instead "to interpret the literary and theological structures

and movements of Numbers in the hope that they may inform and excite the

theological imagination of preachers, teachers, and students of Scripture in the

context of the contemporary church."[35] His distinct contribution to the study of

Numbers involves its structure, which he states many have found lacking. His

solution is found in the book's two census lists of the twelve tribes of Israel (Num 1

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[31] Milgrom, 196.

[32] Milgrom, 199.

[33] Milgrom, 202.

[34] Milgrom, 206.

[35] Olson, vii.

and 26), which, he argues, divides the book into two halves. Via these two halves, the book of Numbers recounts the transition from the old generation of rebellion and death in the wilderness to the new generation of life and hope on the edge of the promised land.[36] A number of parallels between the two halves strengthen his argument for an intentional redaction strategy.[37] Despite the rebellions, plagues, and death in the first half of the book, a few "glimmers of hope" recur, including regulations for entering the promised land (Num 15), military victories (Num 21) and "a final crescendo of hope and promise" through the Balaam oracles (Num 22-24).[38]

Olson, likewise, is concerned with structure in the book of Balaam, dividing Numbers 22-24 into three large sections: (1) Balaam's three encounters with God (22:1-40); (2) Balaam's three blessings over Israel (22:41-24:13); and (3) Balaam's climatic oracle of blessing (24:14-25).[39] In this way, he reads the Balaam narrative synchronically as "a carefully crafted story with recurring cycles of three scenes or episodes built into its narrative structure."[40] Throughout, the theme of "seeing" and "not seeing" binds the narrative into "an artfully constructed unity."[41] In the first section, Balaam receives mixed directives from God: first, not to go with the messengers (22:12); then, to go with the messengers "but only do what I tell you" (22:20); and finally, God is angry because Balaam went (22:22). Reading the

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[36] Olson, 4-5.

[37] Olson, 5-6.

[38] Olson, 6.

[39] Olson, 141-42.

[40] Olson, 142.

[41] Olson, 142.

narrative in its Old Testament context, Olson explains this final discrepancy via similar enigmatic encounters with God (Jacob [Gen 32:22-32], Moses [Exod 4:24], and Joshua [Josh 5:13]) that demonstrate God's sovereignty.[42] The irony of Balaam the "seer" unable to see what his donkey sees (the angel of the LORD) is highlighted in the folktale (22:23, 25). In the second section, Olson is more concerned with the structure surrounding Balaam's first three oracles than he is with their content. Delineating six repeated elements in three scenes, the oracle cycles mirror the three episodes of Balaam and his ass in the previous section. In both, Olson again highlights God's sovereignty: "God demonstrates God's ability to accomplish what God desires through the actions and the words of the prophet."[43] In the final section, the meaning of Balaam's climatic oracle (the unsolicited, or fourth oracle, which for Olson includes the three slight oracles) within the Balaam narrative is discovered in concert with the previous three oracles. As Balaam grows into his role as a true prophet of God, themes of "seeing," "rising," and "falling" interplay with images of kingship (both human and divine) and metaphors for both Israel and God "drawn from the natural and animal world."[44] Olson reads the "star out of Jacob" in its Pentateuchal (Gen 49:9-10), Old Testament (Dan 7), and New Testament (Matt 2:1-10; Rev 2:26-28) contexts as referring to King David, a messiah, and Christ, respectively. However, in its present context in Numbers, "the fourth oracle is a final vision of Israel's future exaltation over its enemies as it becomes established as a nation in the promised land of Canaan," states Olson.[45]

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[42] Olson, 143-44.

[43] Olson, 147.

[44] Olson, 147-148.

[45] Olson, 150.

And finally, reading the Old Testament as Christian scripture, R. W. L. Moberly looks to the book of Balaam to examine the character and motivation of the hired prophet in *Prophecy and Discernment* (2006). Conversant with critical issues, Moberly's "theological, hermeneutical, and spiritual" reading, attentive both to the Hebrew text and to the nuances of its rhetorical strategy, probes those conditions or qualities of Balaam that either enable or disable discernment.[46] As in his earlier, more involved study on the same text, Moberly's interest remains focused on the first part of the story: Balaam's interactions with Balak and his servants, God and the angel of YHWH, and his donkey.[47] Moberly's careful reading of the text understands these interactions as evidence of Balaam's greed.[48] This, he suggests, offers practical insight for those of contemporary faith:

> Moral failure induces spiritual blindness. Avaricious self-seeking obscures the reality of the Other. The impure in heart fail to see God….No understanding of the dynamics of discernment can afford to neglect the fact that seeing what is before one's eyes can depend as much upon the condition of the person seeing as upon the nature of that which is seen.[49]

As in his earlier study, Moberly declines to investigate the substance of Balaam's oracles, which, one could argue, is the *raison d'être* of the book of Balaam. While he affirms that the narrative's overall concern is "to display YHWH's

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[46] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, xi.

[47] Moberly's earlier exposition on the book of Balaam can be found in: R. W. L. Moberly, "On Learning to be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and His Ass," in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 77, ed. P. J. Harland and C. T. R. Hayward, 1-17 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[48] Moberly's assessment of Balaam's character, he clarifies, is based upon the text itself, not upon subsequent scriptural citations (so pre-modern interpreters). "When Numbers 22-4 is read on its own terms," he states, "Balaam is a positive figure, who only temporarily succumbs to greed and who, after rebuke and repentance, speaks powerfully for YHWH." Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 143n35.

[49] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 147.

irrevocable commitment to Israel as His people," this theme is not developed in his study.[50] Nevertheless, Moberly's careful analysis of the first part of the story, so often passed over for the oracles that follow, serves to emphasize not only Balaam's greed, but also his genuine repentance, thus guaranteeing the divine source of his prophecy.

Thus, the five *world of the text* readings cited in the present project have much in common. Nevertheless, they emphasize different aspects of the approach, in various proportions, to reach dissimilar ends. While all could be classified as theological, a few explicitly are canonical (Wenham, Olson). All read the text synchronically in its final form. While some are interested in its structure (Wenham, Ackerman, Olson), two specifically view it as an artistic whole (Milgrom, Olson). A few readings draw upon literary study (Ackerman, Moberly). And while all readings consider the text's Old Testament context, some applications explicitly are Christian (Wenham, Olson). While some readings draw upon critical scholarship toward theological ends (Wenham, Milgrom, Moberly), the historical and theological remain separate. While some aim toward contemporary relevance, it is difficult to classify any as existential (i.e., concerning questions of identity and purpose).

<p style="text-align:center">A Ricoeurian World of the Text Reading</p>

How, then, does the *world of the text* approach suggested here, based upon the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, differ from these readings? In truth, it relies upon much of the same aspects: it is theological, canonical, and synchronic. Viewing the text as an artistic whole, its approach is literary (via intertextuality).

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[50] Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 138. The oracles do receive a one paragraph summary in his earlier treatment: Moberly, "On Learning to Be a True Prophet," 14-15.

While Christian in outlook, it seeks to read the text solely within its Old Testament context. While less reliant on critical scholarship, it seeks nevertheless to interweave both the historical and the theological. Its ultimate aim is existential. A brief review of the second part of the present project will reconsider the building blocks of this approach.

For Ricoeur, the *world of the text* is the object of hermeneutics.[51] In this refigured world, everyday reality is opened up to another reality—the reality of the *possible*.[52] And through imagination, the new being is formed: "I am indeed speaking here of imagination and not of will. For the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one's mind and choosing," states Ricoeur.[53]

Under the heading of *imagination*, two aspects of Ricoeur's work in language have been applied to the biblical text. Beginning with his work in structuralism, the *blessing* developed throughout the patriarchal narrative of Genesis, it was argued, finds an anticipated fulfillment in the book of Balaam. Continuing with his work on metaphor, the localized events of the exodus narrative, it was asserted, find an international reimagining in the book of Balaam. By examining the final form of the Pentateuch, intertextuality suggests the book of Balaam acts as an anticipatory denouement of a historical and theological narrative, one that awaits a later, more certain fulfillment.

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[51] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 95.

[52] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 97.

[53] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

Under the heading of *time*, two aspects of Ricoeur's work in narrative have been applied to the biblical text. First, the interweaving of time and narrative, it was suggested, helps to dissolve the traditional barriers dividing history and theology, thus inviting the reader existentially to participate in the *world of the text*. Second, the interweaving of biblical acts of discourse, it was put forward, offers warrant for a synchronic investigation of the biblical text, substituting a *Sitz-im-Wort* for a *Sitz-im-Leben*. Applied to the book of Balaam, these two aspects invite the reader to participate in an alternative reality, a possible world anticipating an era of future blessing under an empowered ruling figure.

Under the heading of *hope*, two final aspects of Ricoeur's work—one from early in his career and the other late—have been brought together. Firstly, based upon his work on symbol and myth, the book of Balaam, it was asserted, can be considered both a messianic and an eschatological text. And finally, from his work concerning the self, the many strands of the present project, it was argued, are brought together via the book of Balaam to help form the reader's narrative identity, the operation of appropriating the text in the "thought, action, and life" of individuals and communities.[54]

Thus, the flow of the present project, investigating the *world of the text* of Numbers 22-24, has begun with the patriarchal and exodus traditions, passed through a discussion of time and its relationship to the biblical text, and ended with both a messianic and an eschatological identity. Jean-Louis Ska discusses how the two traditions of the first component (i.e., Chapter 3: *Imagination*) are related to identity: "The Pentateuch contains two elements that are absolutely indispensable for

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[54] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 161.

defining the identity of Israel: the patriarchs and Moses," he states. "Israel is the people that descends from the patriarchs and that has lived through the experience of the Exodus under Moses' guidance."[55] Demonstrating that Balaam's oracles draw upon both elements—the patriarchal promise and YHWH's acts of deliverance—the present project has suggested that the coming together of these traditions (in the non-priestly material of the book of Balaam) occurs earlier than perhaps presupposed.[56]

How, then, are the second and the third components (i.e., Chapter 4: *Time* and Chapter 5: *Hope*) related to the first? Discussing the relationship between the promise narratives (of Genesis) and the poetic texts (e.g., Num 23-24) of the Pentateuch, John H. Sailhamer notes how the intertextual relationship between these texts, read in isolation, often is missed. "For most commentators," he states, "the clear focus on an 'individual' king in the poems of the Pentateuch has little effect on their understanding of the meaning of the promise narratives."[57] For example, as noted above, Gray ignores the allusion to the Abrahamic blessing in Balaam's third oracle (24:9b; cf. Gen 12:2-3), merely stating, "Perhaps [it is] a current saying in Israel."[58] However, states Sailhamer, "In our day, with its increasing awareness of composition and textual strategies, the learned quotations and literary

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[55] Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*, trans. Sr. Pascale Dominique (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 15.

[56] States Ska, "The first text that creates a clear narrative and theological link between the patriarchs and the Exodus is a Priestly text, Exod 6:2-8." Ska, 202.

[57] John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 478. States Sailhamer, "It is hard to avoid the implication that in the quotation of Genesis 27:29 in Numbers 24:9b, the author identifies the individual 'king' of Balaam's oracle (Num 24:7-9) with the 'seed' of Abraham in the Genesis promise narratives." Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 478.

[58] Gray, 366

connections…cannot be ignored."[59] Likewise, commenting on the exodus allusions in Balaam's second and third oracles (Nu 23:22 and 24:8a), noting their change in pronouns, he states:

> The writer's purpose appears to be to view the reign of the future king in terms taken from God's great acts of salvation in the past. The future is going to be like the past. What God did for Israel in the past is seen as a type of what he will do for them in the future when he sends his promised king.[60]

Thomas W. Mann, as well, arguing for the narrative integrity of the Pentateuch, adopts such a *retrospect* as *prospect* position, viewing the *torah* as prophetic:

> As a prophetic document, the Torah does not simply recount ancient history; it opens up a path for each new generation. On the other hand, as prophecy the Torah is not merely a crystal ball; rather, it performs a *critical* function within the ongoing life of the people. It provides the criterion by which their present is informed and judged in terms of their past, and the way their future is determined by that critical evaluation. The end of the Torah thus points us toward the *way* of *torah*.[61]

These three components—*imagination*, *time*, and *hope*—thusly embody past, present and future aspects of the biblical text.

The Book of Balaam and *Life of Pi*

Corresponding to the two levels of the novel/film *Life of Pi*—(1) the bystander *outside* the *world of the text* (the fictional writer, the reader/viewer of the novel/film), and (2) the protagonist *within* the *world of the text* (Pi)—the metaphorical tension between the book of Balaam and *Life of Pi* likewise can be understood on two levels. On the first level, the perspective *outside* the *world of the*

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[59] Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 479.

[60] John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 408.

[61] Thomas W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 157-58.

text, the final redaction of the Balaam narrative challenges the contemporary reader to resolve the tension between historical and theological readings of the text. Adopting Barth's notion of a "second naïveté"—in which, in a "post-critical" era, a pre-critical naïveté is impossible—Ricoeur understands biblical criticism as the necessary precondition one must move *through*.[62] "In Ricoeur," states Barton, "we have, not opposition to historical criticism, but a desire to move on from it to engage with what he calls 'the world in front of the text'—that is, to make the text come alive for the modern reader."[63] While this is demonstrated in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, Ricoeur's collaborative work with Hebrew exegete André LaCocque, it should be remembered that Ricoeur's *second naïveté* is not an interpretive method.[64] In the present project, the outworking of Ricoeur's *second naïveté* has been demonstrated in two ways.

First, it has adopted critical consensus regarding the era of the text's final redaction. This historical underpinning allows one to consider those issues affecting both the text's final form during the Persian era and its reception throughout the Second Temple era (obviously, the two eras overlapping). In this way, it has not been opposed to historical issues, *per se*, but has sought to mitigate their undue influence. Second, Ricoeur's interweaving of history and fiction—through the refigural *fictionalization of history* and *historization of fiction*—serves to break down

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[62] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 119-20.

[63] Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-Critical School," 120. Again, Barton's "the world in front of the text" is equivalent to the present project's *world of the text*.

[64] André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). In this joint project, passages of Hebrew scripture are commented upon by each, then reappraised in light of the other's perspective.

the dichotomy between history and theology, thus making possible an existential reading of the text.

On the second level, the perspective *within* the *world of the text*, the final redaction of the Balaam narrative offers ancient Israel a "literary imaginative" account re-envisioning the historical trauma of exile. In other words, if myth—the sacred stories a society tells about itself—is the "story of the loss and regaining of identity," then, seeking to overcome the trauma of exile, such myth will be reflected in the narrative identity of Second Temple Israel.[65] "The book of Numbers," reminds Olson, "was the product of the Jewish community's struggle to understand the pain and punishment of exile and its implications for Israel's relationship to God, Israel's definition as a people, and Israel's posture toward the promised land, which had been lost but was now about to be regained."[66] These are existential questions, in which Second Temple Israel sought not only to shape its narratives of origins, but to be shaped by them.

As Storey and Storey have argued regarding *Life of Pi*, "Martel goes back to a pre-Platonic conception of 'mythos' that rehabilitates the imaginary and the poetic in (the) attempt to grasp truth."[67] The resultant "better story," crucial in the shaping of Pi's identity and key to his survival, incorporates both reason *and* myth (i.e., imagination, faith). Likewise, employing Balaam's oracles as a source for myth shaping identity, the "complex character" of myth in the ancient Near East—in which the dichotomy between poetry and reason dissipates—must be drawn upon:

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[65] Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 21.

[66] Olson, 3.

[67] Storey and Storey, 220.

> Myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth; a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning in that it wants to bring about the truth it proclaims; a form of action, of ritual behavior, which does not find its fulfillment in the act but must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of truth.[68]

By this understanding, ancient Israel survived the trauma of exile by relying upon the *truth* of myth. Analogous to Pi's taming of the tiger, the resultant narrative identity—the taming of Israel's collective psyche post-exile—allowed Israel to maintain a self-sustaining narrative of herself.[69] In the context of trauma, a messianic figure becomes the embodiment of Israel's hope—a means to keep hope alive.

Thus, based upon a *world of the text* reading of the final form of Numbers 22-24, a narrative identity of Second Temple Israel has been suggested. "Within the historical, cultural context of trauma and loss faced by the ancient colonized audience of Numbers, the message must have been powerfully hopeful," states Carolyn Pressler. "Nothing—neither exile, nor colonization, neither Babylon, nor Persia—can stop Israel's God from blessing this people."[70] In this, the centrality of the Torah, in which the patriarchal and the exodus narratives shaped Jewish identity, is presupposed. In this refigured world, the book of Balaam offers an international reimagining of the exodus narrative, an anticipatory denouement of a historical and theological narrative. As these past traditions anticipate Israel's future, the Balaam narrative invites the reader to participate in a possible world awaiting an era of future blessing under an empowered ruling figure, appropriating the text in the "thought,

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[68] Henri Frankfort and H. A. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), 8.

[69] Storey and Storey, 213.

[70] Carolyn Pressler, *Numbers*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 199.

action, and life" of both individuals and communities. Thus, reflecting the hopes of the Second Temple community, the book of Balaam shapes narrative identity through its envisioning of a strong military, supportive agriculture, and conquest of her neighbors—especially Moab and Edom. "The kingless, colonized people hear of a ruler that will arise to crush Israel's enemies. More, they are assured that YHWH is their king and was *with* their ancestors even in the midst of seemingly endless wilderness wanderings, despite their repeated rebellions and subsequent punishments."[71] The leader of this revival is envisioned as a Davidic king, whose kingdom will be characterized by peace and justice. Such a messianic deliverer in the Second Temple community reflects eschatological hope.

While the present project has been concerned with discerning an existential meaning for ancient Israel from a *world of the text* reading of the book of Balaam, a specifically Christian reading has been beyond its original scope. Nevertheless, the same principles would apply. If it can be argued that myth shaped identity in the Second Temple era—in which past traditions, with a future orientation, were incorporated into the present—then it can be suggested that the same hermeneutical approach could be adopted by contemporary readers. The general principles would remain the same.

Like Ricoeur, others have drawn upon Augustine's reflections on time (in Book XI of the *Confessions*) to draw similar conclusions on the relationship between time, narrative, and identity. Stephen Crites describes the mythopoeic stories of ancient civilizations as symbolic worlds in which people *dwelt*. Reservedly he calls them *sacred stories,* "not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them,

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[71] Pressler, 220.

but because men's sense of self and world is created through them."[72] In this, personal identity is founded in the present tension between dueling modalities—both unifying and distinguishing—of a remembered past and an anticipated future.[73] This tension is mitigated through narrative: "Narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form."[74] Thus, via the narrative form of a conscious present, personal identity is located in the nexus between "the chronicle of memory and the scenario of anticipation."[75] Similarly, the materialist Carlo Rovelli draws together the concepts of time, narrative, and identity: "We are stories, contained within the twenty complicated centimeters behind our eyes," he states.[76] "This space—memory—combined with our continuous process of anticipation, is the source of our sensing time as time, and ourselves as ourselves."[77] As he summarizes: "Time, then, is the form in which we beings, whose brains are made up essentially of memory and foresight, interact with the world: it is the source of our identity."[78] These insights can be applied to a community as well as to an individual.

Ska considers the significance of the Jordan for the early Christians, who looked to past traditions to understand their present. Just as the Pentateuch ends with the people on the banks of the Jordan, Moses' death prohibiting him from crossing, so the Gospels begin with Jesus on the banks of the Jordan to begin his public life.

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[72] Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *JAAR* 39 (1971): 295.

[73] Crites, 302-3.

[74] Crites, 303.

[75] Crites, 303.

[76] Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 189.

[77] Rovelli, 189.

[78] Rovelli, 189-90.

"When Jesus appears in the Gospels," states Ska, "his mission is similar: he proclaims the coming of the 'kingdom,' that is, the moment when Israel may finally take possession of its land. The beginning of the New Testament presents itself as the achievement of Moses' unfinished work."[79] And while the messianic figure of Balaam's oracles may not necessarily resemble the Jesus of the Gospels, the figure shares a close affinity with that of Psalm 110, which Jesus applies to himself in the Synoptics (Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43). Christians place their trust in this messiah, the one who announces the arrival of the kingdom of God—a proposed world, placed before the reader, which unfolds before the text.[80] In this way, contemporary believers continue to look to past traditions to anticipate an uncertain future. The very inconclusiveness of the Pentateuch—mirroring that of the human experience—gives warrant to such an approach. "All future generations who also stand 'beyond the Jordan' can identify with the Torah," states Mann. "Because of the way the story of the Pentateuch ends (or does not end), the story is *about them*, not just about ancient Israel."[81]

For contemporary communities of faith, existential *appropriation* still involves the adoption of these ancient mythopoeic stories—symbolic worlds in which people *dwell*. Between a remembered past and an anticipated future lies the existential present of scripture. This appropriation, in which "a poetics of existence responds to the poetics of discourse (i.e. scripture)," involves both *faith* and *imagination*.[82] Faith forms both the final act of appropriation and the preliminary

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[79] Ska, 15.

[80] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 96.

[81] Mann, 158.

[82] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.

step of identity formation, while imagination is central to this process: through imagination, the new being is formed. In this, the *world of the text* opens up another reality, the reality of the *possible*, which implies a human *response*. This is the existential moment, where "the language (of scripture) which *in itself* is poetic becomes kerygmatic *for us*."[83]

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[83] Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," 209-10.

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