

Rembrandt, Balaam, and Us

Parashat Balak, Numbers, Chapters 22-25 | July 14, 2022

In the 1620s, a 19-year-old artist by the name of Rembrandt van Rijn journeyed from his hometown of Leiden to Amsterdam, where he apprenticed himself to Pieter Lastman—the premier Dutch painter of his time. Lastman was known as a painter of history, which meant that he painted primarily biblical scenes, and Rembrandt aspired to follow in Lastman’s footsteps. Lastman took on Rembrandt for six months and surely had no idea that he would one day be entirely eclipsed by his student. It was immediately following this apprenticeship that Rembrandt painted a scene from the Book of Numbers, providing us with his version of the donkey of Balaam. Rightly understood, this work of art is not only about an unusually eloquent animal, but also about our encounter with sanctity in this world.

Our Torah portion begins with Balak, king of Moab, wary of Israel’s approach. He seeks to hire Balaam, a Gentile prophet who has a mysterious connection to the God of Israel, asking Balaam to curse Israel and ignite the Almighty’s anger against His people.

Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse this people; for they are too mighty for me, perhaps I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land... (Numbers 22:6)

Originally, the Almighty bans Balaam from journeying with the Moabites to curse Israel, but then God allows him to go on the condition that he only utters the words that the Almighty tells him to pronounce. We then read:

...Now he was riding upon his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand: and the donkey turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the donkey, to turn it into the way...

And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou has smitten me these three times?

And Balaam said unto the donkey, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in my hand, for I would have killed thee...

Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. (Numbers 22:22-31)

It is this scene that Rembrandt gives us. After this encounter, Balaam is ordered again only to say what the Almighty places in his mouth. Ultimately, Balaam joins Balak and bestows blessings, rather than curses, upon Israel.

What is the larger lesson of this story? There is much to say, but one insight can be derived from Rembrandt’s depiction. Rembrandt’s teacher, Pieter Lastman, has also given us just this scene, and Rembrandt did not seek to copy others. If he was creating a version of the very same story that his teacher had painted, it was because Rembrandt thought that he could offer something better, more insightful, and more profound. When we compare the two paintings, they seem similar, but it is in the contrast between the two that a profound insight by Rembrandt can be discovered. This contrast was noted by Simon Schama in his biography of Rembrandt, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*; and appropriately, it is the eyes of Balaam that allow us to see the profound difference between the two paintings.

Lastman’s depiction of Balaam shows him in shock as he is addressed by an animal; his eyes bug out cartoonishly. He is shocked, as we might be. Yet Rembrandt, certain-

ly familiar with his teacher's painting, has done just the opposite. As Schama notes, if you look carefully at the face of Rembrandt's Balaam, you see that the artist gives us darkened crevices where eyes ought to appear on the prophet's face. As Schama further points out, Rembrandt had the ability to create exquisite eyes. There is a reason when he does not, and Rembrandt here is deliberately differentiating his own work from that of Lastman's. The veil of darkness that appears over Balaam's vision reveals that Rembrandt is emphasizing not Balaam's surprise at the donkey's verbal ability, but rather the prophet's inability to see the angel. As Schama puts it, Rembrandt is giving us, "the moment before God opens those eyes to the angel and the light of truth."

Balaam's eyes are shadowy crevices because Rembrandt seeks to signify that at this moment, he cannot see what is right in front of his face. As I argued in my series on Rembrandt and the Torah that I was privileged to write for *Mosaic*, Rembrandt, in approaching the tale of Balaam and the donkey, sees that this story is about sight. A tale most known for a talking animal is not really about speech at all. The striking feature in Balaam's tale, for Rembrandt, is not that his donkey speaks. No prophet accustomed to miracles would be shocked by such a phenomenon. The text indeed tells us that Balaam responds naturally to his steed without any sign of surprise. What is amazing is that a prophet of God cannot see an ethereal angel standing right in front of his face; an angel so spiritually manifest that even his donkey notices him. The greatest wonder, in other words, is that a man known as a seer cannot see. Balaam himself concedes that this is a terrible failing on his part:

And the angel of Lord said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine donkey these three times? Behold, I am come forth for an adversary, because thy way is contrary unto me.

And the donkey saw me, and turned aside before me these three times: unless it had turned aside from me, surely now I had even slain thee, and saved it alive.

And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest

in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back. (Numbers 22:32-34)

Balaam has indeed sinned, and his sin is linked to his failure to take note of God's supernatural servant. His inability to see the angel is linked to something larger for which he apologizes. This seems to indicate that had he really been looking, then Balaam—a mysterious man who boasted of having a unique relationship with God—should have been able to notice what even his animal could see. Perhaps the fact that Balaam ignored the angel indicates that his thoughts were elsewhere. Perhaps he was so eager to engage in the lucrative act of cursing Israel on behalf of Balak, that he could not see the supernatural being that was right in front of his face and needed the Almighty to open his eyes.

Rembrandt allows us to better understand what is one of the most perplexing parts of this tale. When the King of Moab seeks to hire the prophet to curse Israel, God at first enjoins Balaam from proceeding:

...Thou shalt not go with them. Thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed. (Numbers 22:12)

Balaam obediently informs the Moabites in verse 18 that:

...If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do anything small or great. (Numbers 22:18)

Suddenly God seems to explicitly permit Balaam to accept the employment, but then God appears to grow angry with Balaam when he does exactly that:

And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men are come to call thee, rise up, go with them; but only the word which I speak unto thee, that shalt thou do.

And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord placed

*himself in the way for an adversary against
him... (Numbers 22:20-22)*

These verses appear to directly contradict each other. If Balaam was expressly allowed to journey, why is the Almighty upset that he went? Rembrandt's painting perhaps allows us to intuit the answer: Balaam is indeed permitted to proceed, but his sin is internal. He is excited to journey because he is untroubled by the notion that now he's been allowed to serve as Balak's employee. He has ceased to be focused on the fact that Israel is beloved of God and is willing to become a spiritual assassin for hire. Indeed, Deuteronomy later stresses that Balaam was hoping for the opportunity to curse Israel, and that the blessings he would later bestow did not match his internal intent. Thus, we are later told that:

*The Lord thy God would not hearken to
Balaam; but the Lord thy God turned the curse
into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy
God loved thee. (Deuteronomy 23:5)*

How are we able to intuit the prophet's interest in profit? We can learn it from the fact that the prophet plunges pell-mell ahead, failing to take notice of what even an animal is aware: that an angel of God stands right in front of him. Thus, as I argued in *Mosaic*, Rembrandt allows us to look at the Hebrew Bible, if you will, with fresh eyes.

I have been to the museum in Paris where Rembrandt's Balaam hangs, and looking upon it, I was struck by how different the painting that he created early in life seemed from his later masterpieces. Indeed, had I not known about it, I could have walked right past it, never knowing that it was a Rembrandt. But studying this work of art, I understood that Rembrandt is telling us what to look for in life. We may not be blessed with the artistic eyes of Rembrandt, but we have been given the gift of feeling God's presence, of sensing sanctity in this world. We may not be prophets, but we are called to look for what truly matters: to seek moments of holiness. The painting reminds us to look carefully throughout our lives for the spiritual opportunities in the work of art that is known as reality for sources of inspiration made manifest in a masterpiece created by the Almighty artist Who matters most.

Discussion Questions:

1. What might the connection, described in our reading, between a non-Israelite prophet and the God of Israel teach us?
2. What are moments in our own time when sanctity can be sensed and we are liable to miss it?

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