

# Ancient Hebrew History: Balaam

**BALAAM** (Heb. בַּלְעָם, בִּלְעָם), son of Beor, a non-Israelite diviner famous for his effectiveness, enlisted by Balak, king of Moab, to pronounce curses over the Israelites. The pronunciation Balaam reflects the Greek rendering of the name in the Septuagint. Balaam's exploits are related in Numbers 22:2–24:25, known in modern research as "The Balaam Pericope," and traditionally recognized as a distinct literary unit within the book of Numbers. There we read that the numerous Israelites, encamped in the Steppes of Moab on their way to the land of Canaan, were feeding off the land, causing great apprehension in Moab. Balak despaired of driving them away by force, and he hoped to achieve victory by means of Balaam's execrations. To Balak's chagrin, however, Balaam refused to succumb to his offers of reward, and surprisingly, pronounced blessings over Israel instead of curses, predicting Israelite victories. His orations represent some of the most beautiful examples of early Hebrew poetry. Balaam's firm obedience to Yahoveh's will is viewed with great favor. Similar praise is expressed in Micah 6:5, where Balaam's role in thwarting the design of one of Israel's enemies is evoked as a sign of Yahoveh's providence over his people.

In contrast, Balaam is seen in a hostile light in several other biblical sources where he is mentioned. In a certain sense, the derogation of Balaam begins in the Tale of the Ass (Num 22:22–35), which mocks his reputed gifts as a seer. And yet, as the tale unfolds, Balaam falls into line, and ends up obeying Yahoveh's instructions. The attitude toward Balaam is decidedly unfavorable, however, in Numbers 31:8, 16, which report that Balaam's counsel had led to Israelite worship of Baal Peor, and that he was slain by the Israelites together with the kings of Midian in the course of the war against the Midianites. A resonance of the same episode is found in Joshua 13:22, where, in addition, Balaam is referred to as *ha-qôsem* ("the diviner"), as if to discredit him. In Joshua 24:9–10, within a narration of Israel's history, we read that Yahoveh protected Israel, refusing to allow Balaam to curse the people. The underlying assumption is that Balaam had intended to do just that. Finally, according to Deuteronomy 23:5–6, the mere fact that Balaam had been retained by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel is adduced as a basis for prohibiting marriage with Ammonites and Midianites (cf. Neh. 13:2). Rather than following traditional explanations that Balaam's allegiances changed, it is more likely that subsequent Israelite misfortunes at the hands of neighboring nations, with whom Balaam was identified, brought him into disrepute.

Recent archaeological discoveries have added significant information about Balaam. In 1967, a Dutch expedition under H. Franken discovered fragments of inscriptions written on plaster at a Transjordanian site named Tell Deir 'Alla, located about 5 mi. (8 km.) east of the Jordan, not far from the northern bank of the Jabbok (Zerqa) river that flows into the Jordan. In the Hebrew Bible this area is known as *cēmeq Sukkôt*, "the valley of Sukkoth" (Ps. 60:8, 108:8, cf. Gen. 33:17, Judg. 8, I Kings 7:46). Many of the plaster fragments were restored in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle, and the resulting "combinations" were published by J.A. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij in 1976. Composed in a language similar to biblical Hebrew, and dated in the late ninth to early 8th centuries B.C.E., the inscriptions attest the name of a seer, *bl'm brb'r* – "Balaam, son of Beor" – for the first time in an extra-biblical source of the biblical period. Previously, Balaam had been known outside the Hebrew Bible solely from post-biblical sources (Baskin 1983).

The Deir 'Alla inscriptions relate how a certain *bl'm brb'r*, referred to as "a divine seer" ('zh < lhn), was visited at night in a dream by gods who revealed to him that an impending misfortune would devastate the land. The seer, greatly distressed at this news, assembles his people to disclose to them what he has learned. In these inscriptions Balaam is depicted as an heroic figure, who strove to save his people and the land. In content and style, the inscriptions noticeably resemble the Balaam of Numbers, and other biblical sources as well, so that any discussion of the role of Balaam in biblical literature must henceforth take the Deir 'Alla inscriptions into account.