

ABRAHAM AND BALAAM: A BIBLICAL CONTRAST

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While at first glance Abraham and Balaam appear to be two biblical characters that bear no resemblance to one another, a closer study of the textual and conceptual similarities between Abraham and Balaam reveals a complex relationship. A key instance in which there is a link between Abraham and Balaam occurs in *Pirke Avot*:

Anyone in whom are these three traits is one of the disciples of Abraham, our Father; but [if he bears] three other traits, he is one of the disciples of Balaam the wicked: A generous spirit, a modest mien, and a humble soul – he is one of the disciple of Abraham, our father.

A grudging spirit, an arrogant mien, and a proud soul – he is one of the disciples of Balaam the wicked (5:19).

In this passage the sages compare two seemingly distinct individuals and their disciples. Of course the sages could have compared Abraham to many of the other evil characters in the Torah. What then is unique about the relationship between Abraham and Balaam?

CONCEPTUAL EQUIVALENCES

Conceptually, there are many similarities and corresponding disparities between the two. While God selected Abraham as the first prophet of the nation of Israel, He chose Balaam as the first prophet outside of the nation of Israel. Leibtag points out that both Abraham and Balaam are from the homeland of Aram Naharaim, the center of ancient civilization (Gen. 24:4,10, Num. 23:7, Deut. 23:5).¹ Additionally, in Genesis 22 and Numbers 24 both Abraham and Balaam embark on missions. Neither Abraham nor Balaam accomplishes his respective undertaking, but their actions have in common that both produce the reverse of the anticipated outcomes. Abraham intends to offer his son as a sacrifice. Instead of sacrificing his son and forfeiting his prospect of an heir, he is blessed with offspring who are to become *as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore* (Gen.

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22:17). In a parallel vein, Balaam sets out to curse the nation of Israel but instead blesses them multiple times.

Abraham and Balaam are undeniably disparate figures, even though there are common features in their stories. Abraham, a humble and spiritual man, focuses his energy on fulfilling the Divine will, whereas Balaam, a power-hungry and money-driven man, directs his energy toward thwarting the Divine will. Safren² has noted how the word "donkey" – a common feature in both stories – is used to underscore Abraham's enhanced spirituality and Balaam's inferior heartlessness and cruelty. Whereas Abraham's donkey is merely a prop in the story of the heroism and valor of his rider, Balaam's is a main character, whose intelligence and insight overshadows Balaam.

TEXTUAL PARALLELS

Aside from the conceptual equivalences, there are numerous textual parallels within the narratives of the Akedah and Balaam's mission. The most striking congruence is found in the description of preparations by Abraham and by Balaam for their respective tasks. *Abraham rose early in the morning* [vayashkem] *and he saddled his ass* [hamoro] (Gen. 22:3). In parallel form *Balaam rose early in the morning* [vayakom] *and he saddled his ass* [atono] (Num. 22:21). Significantly, these are the only two instances in the Torah in which the expressions of both rising in the morning and saddling an ass coincide. The sages comment on this juxtaposition of similar acts:

R. Simeon b. Yohai said: Love upsets the natural order, and hate upsets the natural order. Love upsets the natural order: *And Abraham rose early in the morning*, etc: surely he had plenty of slaves? But the reason was that love upset the natural order. Hate upsets the natural order: *And Baalam* [sic] *rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass* (Num. 22:21): surely he had plenty of slaves? Hate, however, upsets the natural order (Bereshit Rabbah 55:8).

R. Simeon b. Yohai indicates the reason for this parallelism in the language describing Abraham's and Balaam's preparations. Abraham and Balaam were similar, as they both were motivated by extreme emotions that upset the natural order. Whereas Abraham was inspired by his love of God, Balaam was aroused by hatred towards the nation of Israel. Regardless of their different

motivations, the Torah identifies their intense emotions to awake early and to saddle their asses themselves instead of requesting help from their servants.

In the continuation of the midrash, R. Simeon b. Yohai is once again quoted in relation to Abraham and Balaam. He states: "Let the saddling done by our father Abraham in order to go and fulfill the will of Him at whose word the world came into existence counteract the saddling done by Baalam in order to go and curse Israel" (Bereshit Rabbah 55:8). Thus, not only do the Torah's words indicate a correlation between Abraham's and Balaam's actions, but also R. Simeon b. Yohai suggests that Abraham's preparation is specifically important as it counteracts Balaam's corresponding preparation.

The similarity between the language in Abraham's binding of Isaac and Balaam's cursing of the nation of Israel resumes at the conclusion of both narratives. After Abraham descends from Mount Moriah, the verse states: *Abraham returned [vayashov] to his servants. They rose [vayakom] and they departed [vayelkhu] together for Beer Sheba* (Gen. 22:19). These three verbs are repeated in a different order when describing Balaam after he unwillingly blesses the nation of Israel: *Balaam rose [vayakom] departed [vayelekh] and returned [vayashov] to his place and Balak also went his way* (Num. 24:25). It is significant to note that these two verses are the only verses in the Torah in which these three verbs appear together. However, the implication of these verses is radically different. As Abraham's narrative consists of love, devotion and unity, at the conclusion, Abraham walks in peace together with his servants. On the other hand, whereas Balaam's storyline boasts hatred, animosity, and magnified egos, in the end, Balaam and Balak separate from one another in anger and resentment.

Abraham's departure in harmony with his servants and the Torah's lack of reference to Balaam's servants in his departure is highlighted through the Torah's mention of two lads accompanying Abraham and Balaam when they commence their respective missions. *Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass and took with him two lads and his son Isaac* (Gen. 22:3). Likewise, *He [Balaam] was riding with his she-ass with his two lads with him* (Num. 22:21,22). As maintained earlier, though Abraham reunited with his servants, the Torah does not record Balaam returning to his servants. This omission further underlines the contrast between the animosity and ego of Balaam and the devotion and love of Abraham.

A further contrast between Abraham's and Balaam's actions is stressed through the use of the word "*meumah* [anything]" in both the Akedah and the attempted curse of the nation of Israel. As the word *meumah* is stated only nine times throughout the entirety of the Torah, its employment for both the Akedah and the cursing of Israel is noteworthy. The Akedah reaches its climax when Abraham reaches for his knife to sacrifice Isaac and an angel stops him and declares: '*Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything [meumah] to him*' (Gen. 22:12). Abraham obeys the Lord's command and sacrifices a ram instead of his son, thus fulfilling the order not to do anything [*meumah*] to his son. In a corresponding incident, when Balak finally meets with Balaam and expects Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam responds: '*And now that I come to you, have I the power to say anything [meumah]? I can utter only the word[s] that God puts into my mouth*' (Num. 22:38).

On the surface, Balaam, like Abraham, seems to be obedient and faithful to God. However, his subsequent actions prove the hollowness of his assertion that he cannot say anything [*meumah*] except what God puts in his mouth. For the Torah later relates that the Moabite women *at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor* (Num. 31:16). Balaam's advice to the Moabite women and the Israelites' consequent sins result in a plague that kills 24,000 men of Israel. Thus, despite Balaam's deceptively humble words to Balak that he could not say anything [*meumah*] without God's help, he succeeded in counseling the Moabite women in the destruction of Israelites. Hence, the word *meumah* emphasizes the vast difference between Abraham and Balaam; in Abraham's case, the word is taken seriously and obediently, whereas Balaam uses the word in a sarcastic and paradoxical manner.

In an interesting twist of poetic justice, the Torah notes that when the nation of Israel attacks Midian in retribution for their immoral exploitation of the Israelites, the kings of Midian were killed and *They* [the nation of Israel] *also put Balaam to the sword* (Num. 31:8). The Torah does not identify with which weapons the Israelites killed the kings of Midian, rather the only cited specification is that the Balaam was killed by the sword. Balaam unjustly wished to kill his ass with the sword and in retribution for his dissolute behavior, the sword killed him.

There are also textual parallels in the use of the root "*ra'ah* [see]" between the narratives of Abraham and Balaam. Balaam's ass sees the angel four times (Num. 22:23, 25, 27, 33) and once Balaam did not see (22:31). The root *ra'ah* occurs five times in the Akedah (Gen. 22:4, 8, 13, 14). Safran³ points out that "the renowned seer, who supposedly *sees the vision of the Almighty* (Num. 24:4), cannot even "see" an angel which is perfectly visible to his ass. In Genesis, the key word points to the sublime; in Numbers it underlines the ridiculous.

The textual parallels between Abraham and Balaam persist through the blessings of the nation of Israel. These blessings are founded with Abraham and prophesied by Balaam. There are three instances where Balaam's prophecies correspond to the Lord's blessing of Abraham. The first occurs when God commands Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to the land of Canaan. He additionally states: *'I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you'* (Gen. 12:3). Balaam mirrors this language: *'Blessed are those who bless you; accursed those that curse you'* (Num. 24:9). After Abraham separates from his nephew Lot, the Lord tells him: *'I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring can be counted'* (Gen. 13:16). This language is echoed in Balaam's prophesy: *'Who can count the dust of Jacob, number the dust cloud of Israel?'* (Num. 23:10). The third and final occasion in which the Lord's blessings are endorsed and reaffirmed by Balaam concerns the nation of Israel's military power. The angel of the Lord blesses Abraham following the Akedah: *'Your descendants shall seize the gate of their foe'* (Gen. 22:17). Balaam illustrates Israel's destruction of its enemy through language such as: *'[Israel shall] smash the brow of Moab'* (Num. 24:17); *'Wipe out all that is left of Ir'* (24:19); and *'A leading nation is Amalek, but its fate shall perish forever'* (24:20).

As described earlier, the expressions surrounding Abraham's narrative are peaceful and tranquil. On two separate occasions, *the two* [Abraham and Isaac] *walked together* (Gen. 22:6,8). Following the sacrifice of the ram: *Abraham then returned to his servants and they departed for Beer Sheva* (Gen. 22:19). As Abraham's mission was motivated by devotion to the Lord and self-sacrifice, the language of these verses is replete with togetherness and harmony. In contrast, the verses framing Balaam's tale signify anger, hostility

and resentment. All of the principal characters in the story are becoming "incensed": *The Lord became incensed* (Num. 22:22); *Balaam became incensed* (22:27); *Balak became incensed* (24:10). Unlike Abraham's, Balaam's narrative ends with anger and antagonism.

A study of the conceptual and textual parallels and contrasts between Abraham and Balaam reveals the sages' basis for comparing the two in *Pirke Avot*. Through an examination of Abraham and Balaam, the sages teach the importance of character traits. Despite the fact that Balaam was a prophet who received the Divine word, he did not possess the appropriate character traits to create Abraham's world of peace and tranquility. Regardless, through their actions, both Abraham and Balaam leave legacies for future generations. As the sages teach us, Balaam imparts a legacy of a grudging spirit, an arrogant mien, and a proud soul, while Abraham confers a legacy of a generous spirit, a modest mien, and a humble soul. Whereas Balaam leaves a legacy of animosity and rancor, Abraham leaves a legacy of serenity and harmony. Students learn not only from their teachers' knowledge and wisdom, but more importantly from their character traits. Thus, the sages did not simply contrast Abraham and Balaam but compared their students as well.

NOTES

1. Menachem Leibtag, "Balaam: The prophet and the consultant" www.vbm-torah.org (2001)
2. Jonathan Safren, "Balaam and Abraham," *Vetus Testamentum*, 38:1 (1988) pp.:105-113.
3. Safren. *ibid*.

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