

Numbers 22:22-38

“Balaam Encounters the Angel of the Lord”

“But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, *with a wall on this side and a wall on that side*. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again. The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ Then Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now.’ The donkey said to Balaam, ‘Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?’ And he said, ‘No.’ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. The angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live.’ Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, ‘I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back.’ But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, ‘Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.’ So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak. When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border. Then Balak said to Balaam, ‘Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?’ So Balaam said to Balak, ‘Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak.’”

The prophet-for-hire Balaam, who was commissioned by King Balak to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:1-21), is a very intriguing figure for any reader of the Holy Scriptures. During his journey to see Balak, riding on his donkey, Balaam encounters the figure of the *malakh* YHWH (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה), the “messenger/angel of the LORD.” This entity is labeled to be *l’satan lo* (לְשָׂטָן לוֹ), “as an adversary against him” (Numbers 22:22), which is described in terms of the *malakh* YHWH “standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand” (Numbers 22:23), blocking the way of Balaam and his donkey as they transversed around vineyards (Numbers 22:24-25). Eventually, “YHWH’s messenger once again crossed over, standing in a narrow place, where there was no pathway to turn, right or left” (Numbers 22:26, Fox). The perplexing scene witnessed, is that as Balaam strikes his donkey—who he seemingly thought was at fault for not moving—the donkey actually speaks back to him (Numbers 22:27-30).

Balaam was no doubt confounded as to what was taking place, and so it is recorded, “Then YHWH uncovered Bil’am’s eyes and he saw YHWH’s messenger stationed in the way, his sword drawn in his hand; he bowed and prostrated himself, to his brow” (Numbers 22:31, Fox). Some sort of reverence or veneration is shown toward the messenger/angel of the LORD, as seen in the clause *v’yiqod v’yishtachu l’apayv* (וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לְאַפַּיָּו), “so-he-bowed and-he-fell to-faces-of-him” (Kohlenberger),⁸³ which notably does include a usage of the verb *chavah* (חָוָה; or *shachah*, שָׁחָה),

⁸³ Kohlenberger, 1:437.

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which can mean “worship.” If worship of some sort was intended, then this figure does not refuse it, unlike the angel in Revelation 22:8-9. Balaam and the messenger/angel of the LORD have an interchange about why Balaam would strike his donkey, when Balaam was actually being supernaturally blocked on his travel (Numbers 22:32-33). Balaam recognizes his error (Numbers 22:34).

As Balaam is readied to go to King Balak, it is narrated *v'yomer malakh YHWH el-Bil'am* (וַיֹּאמֶר מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה אֶל-בִּלְעָם), “YHWH’s messenger said to Bil’am...” (Numbers 22:35a, Fox). This entity tells Balaam, “you must say nothing except what I tell you” (Numbers 22:35c, NJPS). Given how the *malakh YHWH* directed Balaam to only speak certain things as he would be going to Balak, commentators on the Book of Numbers have had to offer a number of thoughts, evaluating who this entity specifically was. Martin Noth, who would broadly represent the JEDP documentary hypothesis and a somewhat liberal perspective regarding the Pentateuch, while conceding that the *malakh YHWH* was an elusive figure, mainly concludes that here it was some kind of supernatural intermediary to be somewhat differentiated from the LORD or YHWH:

“The messenger of Yahweh (‘angel of Yahweh’), here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, not a particular individual figure but a being of unknown origin sent by Yahweh from time to time, represents Yahweh himself and is introduced particularly at those points where too extended a speech by Yahweh was to be avoided; the messenger of Yahweh, then, acts and speaks in place of Yahweh, but always in such manner as if it were an action or speech of Yahweh himself. This is usually clear at the conclusion of such an appearance of a messenger (cf., e.g., Gen. 16 v. 13a with vv. 7-12). So, too, in the present case the concluding command of v. 35a β is a word of Yahweh himself with the ‘Y’ of Yahweh, although strictly it is still Yahweh’s messenger who is speaking.”⁸⁴

Timothy R. Ashley, who would be regarded as being slightly more conservative in his approach to the Pentateuch, concludes that on the basis of Ancient Israelite monotheism, that the figure of the *malakh YHWH* could only be perceived as some kind of supernatural agent or intermediary sent from YHWH:

“Although the characters of Yahweh and his angel are distinct, the latter is the servant of the former and would only speak his word. An Israelite audience, who believed in only one all-powerful God, would see a small difference between the words of Yahweh and the words of his angel just because they believed in one all-powerful God.”⁸⁵

To support his conclusion, Ashley references the Deir ‘Alla plaster inscriptions from Jordan, where the Biblical Balaam is described, but in a different way, obviously affected by Canaanite polytheism. It begins with the statements, “The misfortunes of the Book of Balaam, son of Beor. A divine seer was he. The gods came to him at night, and he beheld a vision in accordance with El’s utterance” (Combination I, lines 1-2).⁸⁶ Ashley notes this as an “oracle of El coming to Balaam through the mediation of the ‘ilahin (‘gods’). Israelite theology would not countenance such ‘gods,’ but would permit ‘messengers’ or ‘angels’ (*m^elā’kîm*) to convey God’s words.”⁸⁷

Questions about the identity and nature of the figure of the *malakh YHWH*, the messenger/angel of the LORD, by necessity need to be raised from the text. This entity tells Balaam, *v’efes et-ha’davar asher-adabbeir eilekha oto tedabbeir* (אֶת-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אָתוֹ תְדַבֵּר)

⁸⁴ Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 179.

⁸⁵ Timothy R. Ashley, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 459.

⁸⁶ William W. Hallo, ed. et. al., *The Context of Scripture, Volume II: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 142.

⁸⁷ Ashley, 459 fn#26.

וַיֹּאמֶר), “but-only *** the-message that I-tell to-you him you-speak” (Numbers 22:35, Kohlenberger).⁸⁸ A Jewish commentator like Jacob Milgrom states, “The angel, here identified with the ‘I’ of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord’s surrogate. This identification is made clear at the end of the narrative.”⁸⁹

Balaam arrives at Moab, where he is asked by King Balak why he did not arrive sooner (Numbers 22:36-37). The narrative closes with the clear indication by Balaam to Balak, *ha’davar asher yasim Elohim b’fi oto addabeir* (הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר יָשִׂים אֱלֹהִים בְּפִי אֹתוֹ אֲדַבֵּיר), “the message that he-puts God in-mouth-of-me him I-must-speak” (Numbers 22:38, Kohlenberger).⁹⁰ Balaam recognizes, “I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth” (Numbers 22:38, NJPS), as it is only *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) who can tell Balaam what to speak. As Balaam will issue his prophecy regarding the Israelites (Numbers 23:1-30)—whom King Balak wanted Balaam to curse—it is stated *v’yasem YHWH davar b’fi Bil’am* (וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה דְּבָר בְּפִי בִלְעָם), “YHWH put words in Bil’am’s mouth” (Numbers 23:5, Fox). And further on, as more prophecies will be issued to Israel (Numbers 24:1-9), *v’tehi ‘alayv Ruach Elohim* (וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים), “The *Ruach Elohim* came over him” (Numbers 24:2, TLV).

In Balaam’s encounter with the *malakh YHWH*, the messenger/angel of the LORD, is this entity just a supernatural intermediary figure, sent by God proper, to communicate something to him? Commentators on Numbers are honest enough to recognize how it is witnessed that this figure does speak in the first person “I” as the LORD or YHWH. At the conclusion of the narrative in Numbers 22:38, it is obvious that it is God proper who tells Balaam what he can and cannot speak. While it can be legitimately recognized how many in Ancient Israel would view Numbers 22:22-38 from the perspective of the *malakh YHWH* being a created, supernatural agent sent from God proper, it can probably also be deduced that there were some others who wondered as to the exact identity of this figure. Confusion as to the identity and nature of the *malakh YHWH* would be easily avoided if Numbers 22:35 communicated something along the lines of, “but you shall speak only the word which *He* tells you” (NASU modified). Instead, with the first person “I” held consistently throughout the context, it is fair to deduce that the *malakh YHWH* or messenger/angel of the LORD, is not an ordinary intermediary, especially given the profound words that Balaam would speak about the people of Ancient Israel.

For future Christological studies, scenes like Numbers 22:22-38 are important for establishing the principle that there can be an entity sent from God, speaking in the first person “I” as God, who takes the identity of God, but can be slightly differentiated from God. What is to be evaluated, requiring the input of other Bible passages, is whether or not a created supernatural entity, can legitimately be regarded as being able to be integrated into the Divine Identity—or not. Given the self-identity and actions of the messenger/angel of the LORD, many conclude that this was most likely a pre-Incarnate manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah, a member of what must be a plural Godhead.

⁸⁸ Kohlenberger, 1:437.

⁸⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 192.

⁹⁰ Kohlenberger, 1:438.