

WHEN GOD'S WILL CAN AND CANNOT BE ALTERED: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BALAAM NARRATIVE AND I KINGS 13

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In recent years, numerous articles have been published analyzing the enigmatic narrative in I Kings 13.¹ Among the perplexing issues are: The Judean Man of God's sudden noncompliance with his own prophecy; God's severe verdict against the Man of God, given that he had been deceived; and the sparing and rewarding of the fraudulent Old Prophet of Bethel (he received true prophecy in I Kings 13:20-22, and his bones were left untouched during Josiah's reforms in II Kings 23:15-18). Justifiably, the problems inherent in this narrative have attracted the attention of many scholars and students.

Rather than survey earlier opinions, I would like to propose a different starting point of analysis: The narrative in I Kings 13 bears many similarities to the story of Balaam, to the point where it appears to have been modeled after the Balaam narrative. In both narratives, a true prophet receives a command from God and initially obeys, subsequently violates his charge, is rebuked by God through the mouthpiece of one who had not previously been a prophet, and ultimately is brought into submission by God. By considering the overlapping structural elements between the two stories, and their significant divergences, we will be in a position to address several of the difficulties in I Kings 13, and to gain insight into the overall purpose of the narrative in its surrounding context.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO NARRATIVES

THE POWER OF THE PROPHETS

By the time he is introduced to the reader in the Book of Numbers, Balaam already had established a wide reputation as a wonder-worker whose execrations were considered effective.

At the beginning of I Kings 13, the Man of God arrived from Judah to denounce Jeroboam and his illegitimate cult. Jeroboam attempted to seize the

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Man of God, but the King's hand miraculously froze. When the Man of God prayed on his behalf, Jeroboam's hand returned to normal. These signs, coupled with the breaking of the Bethel altar, authenticated the anonymous prophet as one whose prophecies were true.

THE PROPHETS' LOYALTY TO GOD, AND EMPHATIC DECLINE OF ROYAL INVITATIONS FROM WICKED KINGS

When the wicked Moabite King Balak's first delegation requested Balaam's services, Balaam righteously consulted God. God ordered the prophet not to go, since Israel is a blessed nation. Initially faithful to the Divine instructions, Balaam declined Balak's offer. Balak then sent senior officials to lure Balaam, to whom Balaam responded: *'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God'* (Num. 22:18). Balaam's self-sacrificing declaration confirmed his unequivocal allegiance to the word of God, or so it appears.

In I Kings, the wicked King Jeroboam I invited the Man of God to a meal, and offered him gifts. But the Man of God refused, given God's explicit prohibition:

But the Man of God replied to the king, 'Even if you give me half your wealth, I will not go in with you, nor will I eat bread or drink water in this place; for so I was commanded by the word of the Lord: You shall eat no bread and drink no water, nor shall you go back by the road by which you came' (I Kg. 13:8-9).

This pronouncement of the Man of God, nearly identical to Balaam's refusal of Balak, demonstrated his absolute commitment to his prophetic message – or so it appears. Like Balaam, the Man of God emphatically declined a royal invitation accompanied by offers of great honor and reward.

BOTH PROPHETS SECOND-GUESS THEIR INITIAL PROPHECIES

Although Balaam had received explicit instructions not to curse Israel, he still returned to God, evidently hoping that God's new message would be different from the original. And, astonishingly, God did acquiesce; on condition that Balaam speaks only that which God would tell him. Without hesitation, Balaam saddled his donkey, and left with Balak's second delegation. Verse

22, though, states that God was outraged at Balaam's decision, despite His own permission only two verses earlier.

That night God came to Balaam and said to him, 'If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.' When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries. But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary (Num. 22:20-22).

It appears that Balaam was culpable for requesting a second prophecy; after all, God's initial refusal and rationale were unambiguous. Clearly, Balaam wanted to curse Israel, perhaps out of hatred for Israel, or possibly to receive royal compensation and honor. Although God conceded Balaam's request, the prophet should have had the good religious sense to remain faithful to his original prophecy. Therefore, God was angry with the prophet, and sent an angel to obstruct his journey.²

In I Kings 13, when the Old Prophet heard of the Man of God's message and miraculous signs, he had his donkey saddled, and found the Man of God resting under a tree. The Old Prophet deceitfully invited the Man of God to return to Bethel for a meal. Although the Man of God initially expressed reservations, he eventually accepted the fateful offer.

To summarize: Both Balaam and the Man of God initially appeared committed to God's original instructions; however, both wrongfully allowed themselves to be swayed by a conflicting prophetic message. Balaam received a genuine prophecy from God, but should have realized that there had been no stimulus to warrant a retraction of the original directive. The Man of God should have recognized the fraudulence of the Old Prophet's claim because it countermanded his own explicit orders (Radak, Ralbag). Both prophets, then, apparently were reluctant to obey their own original prophecies, and were only too happy to receive contradictory messages. Therefore, both were blameworthy and deserved Divine chastisement.

GOD REBUKES BOTH UNFAITHFUL PROPHETS, AND OPENS THE MOUTHS OF THOSE PREVIOUSLY UNFIT FOR PROPHECY

At this point in the Balaam narrative, God sent an angel to hinder Balaam's journey. To denigrate Balaam, God revealed to the donkey what the prophet

himself could not see. God then opened the mouth of the donkey, furthering the rebellious prophet's humiliation.

In I Kings, the Man of God also contravened his original instructions. As a result, God did not reveal Himself to the Man of God; instead, God "opened the mouth of the false prophet" in order to rebuke the sinful Man of God. In this regard, the Old Prophet resembled Balaam's donkey.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISOBEDIENCE

At these points in the narratives, we encounter the first significant divergence between Balaam and the Man of God. The angel, dismayed by Balaam, stated, '*You are the one I should have killed, while sparing her*' (22:33) – that is, true justice called for the death of Balaam and the sparing of the donkey. From the continuation of the narrative, it appears that Balaam was not killed, since he could serve an important purpose: to bless the nation of Israel. Additionally, God ultimately would convince the prophet that fighting against God's Will is futile – a principal message of the Balaam narrative.

Unfortunately for the Man of God, his prophetic mission already had been completed: he had condemned the Bethel cult. Therefore, his punishment was exactly that which Balaam himself should have received; he was killed by a lion, God's agent (or "angel") in the narrative.

In fact, several midrashim deduce from the angel's formulation, '*You are the one I should have killed, while sparing her*,' that since the angel spared Balaam, he must have killed the donkey.³ This midrashic reading would yield a perfect contrast to the narrative in I Kings 13, where the lion killed the Man of God, and spared the donkey.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that these two biblical narratives are the two instances in the Bible where donkeys play the most prominent roles. In both instances, the donkeys teach the protagonists about the inescapability of God's Will.

SWITCHING OF ROLES IN I KINGS

After the Man of God violated his prophetic instructions, the roles of the protagonists change radically in the narrative of I Kings. The Man of God initially opposed Jeroboam, who had been chosen prophetically but subsequently violated God's Will. Ironically, the Man of God "became" Jeroboam

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by the end of the narrative; originally chosen by God, the Man of God also transgressed God's Will, and was deserving of punishment.

The role of the Old Prophet changed considerably as well. Immediately recognizing the fulfillment of God's Will, he repented. Thus, the Old Prophet went on to assume the mantle and role of the Man of God.

REPENTANCE OF THE PROPHETS

Balaam's first two blessings to Israel came as a result of God's dictating them. However, the prophet commenced his third oracle with a new revelation. At this point, Balaam recognized God's Will and blessed Israel spontaneously:

Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him (Num. 24:1-2).

Likewise, the Old Prophet was transformed once he witnessed the fulfillment of the word of God. From this point on, the Old Prophet replaced the Man of God as the true prophet in the narrative. The Old Prophet called the Man of God his "brother," and even buried him in his own grave, affirming the fulfillment of the Man of God's oracle against Bethel. The Old Prophet became like the transformed Balaam, who recognized and internalized the true message of God.⁴ Thus, the role of Balaam is recast in the narrative of I Kings 13. Now, two prophetic figures share his role: The Man of God initially displayed loyalty to God, but then rebelled; God punished and humiliated him. The Old Prophet, assuming the role of the Man of God, completed the development by repenting fully and upholding God's word.

CONCLUSION OF THE NARRATIVES

The Balaam narrative concludes with Balaam's repentance and blessings of Israel. But in I Kings, there is an epilogue, describing Jeroboam's lack of response to what had happened:

Even after this incident, Jeroboam did not turn back from his evil way, but kept on appointing priests for the shrines from the ranks of the people. He ordained as priests of the shrines any who so desired.

Thereby the House of Jeroboam incurred guilt – to their utter annihilation from the face of the earth (vv. 33-34).

SUMMARY CHART: THE BALAAM NARRATIVE AND I KINGS 13

	BALAAM: NUMBERS	THE MAN OF GOD: I KINGS 13
THE POWER OF THE PROPHETS	Balaam is introduced as an effective magician/prophet, able to curse nations effectively (22:5-6).	The Man of God quickly earns a reputation as true prophet, whose prophetic message of doom will be fulfilled (13:1-6).
THE PROPHETS' LOYALTY TO GOD, AND EMPHATIC DECLINE OF ROYAL INVITATIONS FROM WICKED KINGS	<p>Balak's first delegation arrives, God instructs Balaam not to go, since Israel is a blessed nation. Balaam refuses to go (7-14).</p> <p>The second delegation arrives, offering even greater honor and wealth (15-17).</p> <p>Balaam refuses Balak indignantly: <i>Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God</i> (18).</p>	<p>The Man of God has been instructed not to eat or drink in Bethel, nor even to return on the road he had arrived on (7-10).</p> <p>The Man of God refuses Jeroboam indignantly: <i>Even if you give me half your wealth, I will not go in with you, nor will I eat bread or drink water in this place. . . .</i> (8).</p>
BOTH PROPHETS SECOND-GUESS THEIR INITIAL PROPHECIES	Balaam turns to God a second time, hoping for a prophecy that will annul the first. God acquiesces (19-21).	The Old Prophet entices the Man of God back to Bethel. The Man of God mitigates his reluctance to go, and ultimately returns with the Old Prophet (11-20).
GOD REBUKES BOTH UNFAITHFUL	God is angry with Balaam for going, and sends an angel with a	God is angry with the Man of God for returning, and prepares

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PROPHETS, AND OPENS THE MOUTHS OF THOSE PREVIOUSLY UNFIT FOR PROPHECY	sword as an impediment (22). God allows the donkey to see what the prophet cannot (23-34). God opens the mouth of the donkey (28-30).	to punish him with a lion. God allows the Old Prophet to see what the prophet cannot, and opens his mouth with prophecy (20-26).
THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISOBEDIENCE	The angel should have killed Balaam, and spared the donkey (33). But Balaam is spared (22:35-23:30).	A lion kills the Man of God, and spares the donkey (24).
SWITCHING OF ROLES IN I KINGS		Transition: Old Prophet replaces Man of God in narrative
REPENTANCE OF THE PROPHETS	After seeing God's Will prevail, Balaam finally internalizes God's message that God's Will prevails. Subsequently, Balaam blesses Israel of his own free will (24:1-25).	When the Old Prophet arrives and sees that God's Will had been fulfilled, he repents, and replaces the Man of God in the story. He learns the lesson that God's Will prevails. Subsequently, he upholds the Man of God's message against Bethel, respectfully mourns and buries the Man of God in his own grave, and later is buried with him in that grave (27-32).
CONCLUSION OF NARRATIVES	Balaam's repentance and subsequent blessings and prophecies.	Jeroboam's failure to repent, despite all he had seen (33-34).

CONCLUSION

The Balaam narrative traces the developing revelation to the prophet, teaching him that he cannot oppose the word of God. However, the I Kings narrative employs a strikingly different format. Two characters share Balaam's role: the Man of God and the Old Prophet. Each had the opportunity to follow God. The Man of God did at the beginning of his mission, but then failed. The Old Prophet began as a wicked follower of Jeroboam's illegal cult, but by the end repented and replaced the Man of God.

Thus, the I Kings narrative agrees with the Balaam episode, in teaching that God's Will cannot be defeated or manipulated. But the I Kings narrative adds

another dimension absent from the Balaam narrative: the Will of God can be changed if people modify their behavior, for better or for worse.

Fittingly, the narrative in I Kings 13 concludes with an epilogue stating that Jeroboam did not repent despite what he had just witnessed. He, like the reader, was expected to learn from the dramatic episode of the anonymous prophets.⁵

We can return to another divergence between the two narratives. In the Balaam narrative, God confronted the prophet before Balaam journeyed to Balak. In I Kings, the Man of God already had spoken to Jeroboam before his own subsequent demise in listening to the Old Prophet. This deviation now can be explained readily: In the Balaam narrative, the prophet himself is the primary character meant to learn from God's intervention. But in I Kings, Jeroboam (and not either of the prophetic figures) is the primary audience. As a result, the Balaam narrative is framed with Balaam as the central figure, whereas I Kings 13 begins and ends with Jeroboam's actions and lack of repentance at the end.

To conclude on a happier note, II Kings describes the fulfillment of the Man of God's original prophecy. The bones of the penitent Old Prophet, buried alongside the Man of God, were spared when Josiah destroyed what was left of Jeroboam's cult – a contrast that teaches what Jeroboam could have chosen in order to spare himself and his kingdom:

As for the altar in Bethel [and] the shrine made by Jeroboam son of Nebat who caused Israel to sin – that altar, too, and the shrine as well, he tore down. He burned down the shrine and beat it to dust, and he burned the sacred post. Josiah turned and saw the graves that were there on the hill; and he had the bones taken out of the graves and burned on the altar. Thus he defiled it, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord foretold by the man of God who foretold these happenings. He asked, 'What is the marker I see there?' And the men of the town replied, 'That is the grave of the man of God who came from Judah and foretold these things that you have done to the altar of Bethel.' 'Let him be,' he said, 'let no one disturb his bones.' So they left his bones undisturbed together with the bones of the prophet who came from Samaria (II Kg. 23:15-18).

NOTES

1. Two particularly good literary studies are: Uriel Simon, "I Kings 13: A Prophetic Sign-Denial and Persistence," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 47 (1976) pp. 81-117; and Elhanan Samet, "'The Sanctification of God's Name is Greater Than the Desecration of God's Name': I Kings 13 – The Story and its Meaning" (Hebrew), *Megadim* 6 (1988) pp. 55-85. For bibliographies of recent literature, see James K. Mead, "Kings and Prophets, Donkeys and Lions: Dramatic Shape and Deuteronomistic Rhetoric in I Kings XIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999) p. 191, n. 1; Jerome T. Walsh, "The Contexts of I Kings 13", *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989) p. 355, n. 2; D.W. Van Winkle, "I Kings XIII: True and False Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989) p. 43. A synopsis of recent scholarly opinions can be found in Van Winkle, pp. 32-34. For a survey of earlier opinions, see Simon, pp. 81-85.
2. See *Tanhuma Balak* 8; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:12; Onkelos (v. 22), Rashi (v. 22), Ibn Ezra (v. 20), Rashbam (v. 22), and Hizkuni (v. 22).
3. See *Tanhuma Balak* 10; *Tanhuma Buber Balak* 14; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:15. Cf. Ibn Ezra ad loc.
4. Cf. *Yalkut Shimoni* #73 (on Jud. 18): "On that day [the Old Prophet] repented and received prophecy." See also Elhanan Samet (*Megadim* 6 [1988], p. 74).
5. So Radak, Ralbag, and Abarbanel; contra Rashi, Kara, and Malbim, who aver that Jeroboam was expected to learn specifically from the initial signs and prophecy of the Man of God in 13:1-6, and not the ensuing narrative.

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