

# BALAAM IS LABAN

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Forty years after the Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel renewed their march to the land of Canaan, intent on conquest. In their path were the peoples of Moab and Midian, who were increasingly apprehensive of the march. Balak, King of Moab, after consultation with the elders of Midian, sent for Balaam, the enigmatic prophet/magician, whom they believed to be a master of magic with an ability to curse a people:

*And he sent messengers unto Balaam the son of Beor, to Pethor, which is by the River, to the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying: 'Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt; behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me.*

*'Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me; peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed' (Num. 22:5-6).*

Strangely, there is an anachronistic midrashic identification of Balaam with Laban, a figure from the historical stage a number of generations before, part of a cast of personages far removed from Moab and Midian (Gen. 28, 30). The midrashic identification of Balaam as Laban is seen in the Aramaic commentary of Targum Yonatan: *He sent messengers to Laban the Aramean, he is Balaam who wished to swallow [Hebrew: bala, to swallow] the people of the House of Israel.*<sup>1</sup> A similar tradition is recorded in the *Yalkut Shimoni*.<sup>2</sup> Another tradition, relating Balaam's father with Laban, is found in the Babylonian Talmud:

A Tanna taught: Beor [the father of Balaam], Cushan-rishathaim and Laban the Syrian are identical; Beor [which is related to the Hebrew word meaning cattle] denotes that he committed bestiality; Cushan-rishathaim, that he perpetrated two evils upon Israel [*risha-*

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*thaim* is the plural of *risha* meaning evil]: one in the days of Jacob, and the other in the days of the Judges (see Shoftim 3:8). But what was his real name? Laban the Syrian (Sanhedrin 105a).

Numbers 22:5 describes the place where Balaam originates as the place *by the river*. The designation *by the river* apparently refers to an area near one of the two great rivers: the Tigris or Euphrates. This is supported by Deuteronomy (23:5) *and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse thee*. Aram-naharaim is the ancestral home of Abraham and his family (see Genesis 24:4,10). This area will henceforth be referred to in a non-specific manner as Mesopotamia. This may be the source of the midrashic identification of Balaam with a past resident of Mesopotamia – Laban.

#### OBJECTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

The logical difficulty of accepting the above traditions literally gave birth to strong opposition as well as interpretive possibilities. On the verse *And Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom* (Gen. 36:32), Ibn Ezra states vehemently:

[Beor] is not Balaam. Also, Balaam is not Laban the Aramean. It is plausible, however, that the interpretive mode indicates that they were similar in sorcery, interpreted thus so that the words of our sages should not be found to be wanting.

Thus Ibn Ezra offers a figurative meaning in terms of ideological relationship. This interpretation of Balaam and Laban as similar in sorcery and magic is shared by the *Ktav Vekabalah* (Gen. 22:21). The kabalistic tradition offers a similar approach, describing Laban, Balaam and Amalek as representing the dross and material [*klipah*] in the universe (*Sefat Emet*, Ex., *Va'erah*).

Of more modern vintage is the approach of Rabbi Eliezer Judah Waldenberg, the *Tzitz Eliezer*. Commenting on the Hagaddah of Passover where Laban is described as wanting "to uproot all," followed by the quote from Deuteronomy 26:5, *An Aramean wanted to destroy my father*, he interprets "Aramean" as = Balaam = Laban = Amalek, who wanted to destroy all (*Tzitz Eliezer* 14:24).

Other figurative interpretations of the midrashic statement abound. Rashi (on Job 4:14) and Sforno (Gen. 20:3) see the identification of Laban and Ba-

laam in terms of the similarity of their lower-grade prophecy. Others see the connection in terms of Balaam being a descendant of Laban (Baalei Tosafot on Ex. 1:10). A more complex interpretation sees the midrashic tradition as indicting Balaam for breaking the treaty entered into between Jacob and Laban. The treaty promised that neither party, nor their descendants, would cross the border for the purpose of harming the other party or his descendants. Laban thereby set up a mound of stones (Gen. 31:46) to mark the border. Balaam broke the treaty by crossing the border to harm the children of Israel. This is symbolized by the strange story of Balaam's encounter with an angel, and his recalcitrant ass, while traveling from home to Balak. It is there told: *Then the angel of the Lord stood in [the] way . . . a fence being on this side, and a fence on that side. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord, and she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall* (Num. 22:24, 25). The mound of stones established by Laban as a marker of the treaty is identified as the fence on each side, not to be crossed, as is the wall against which Balaam's foot is crushed as punishment for breaking the agreement (Targum Yonatan and Hizkuni Num. 22:24).

However, there is perhaps much more to this identification than geographic happenstance or figurative insight. The present paper shall attempt to demonstrate that the midrashic identification of Balaam with Laban constitutes a profound sociological analysis of religious movements of the time.

#### THE LABAN – BALAAM CONNECTION, SOCIOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED

First, comes an encounter with some textual surprises. In Genesis, Laban comes to the well to welcome Abraham's servant and says: *'Come in, thou blessed of the Lord; wherefore standest thou without? For I have cleared the house, and made room for the camels'* (Gen. 24:31). Laban's blessing in the name of *the Lord* in the original text uses the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter ineffable Hebrew name of the omniscient single God. Furthermore, the use of the Tetragrammaton by Laban is found at least three more times in the Bible (Gen. 24:51; 30:27; 31:49). This from one who is generally believed to be a pagan.

The same surprise awaits us in our encounter with Balaam. Balak's messengers had arrived to return with Balaam. Balaam responded to them and said: *'Lodge here this night, and I will bring you back word, as the Lord may*

*speak unto me'*; and the princes of Moab abode with Balaam (Num. 22:8). Again, in the phrase *as the Lord*, the Tetragrammaton is used. And it is used again by Balaam at least three more times: Numbers 22:18, 23:12, 24:1. Were Laban and Balaam pagans, or were they not? I would suggest that this common use of the Tetragrammaton is the ideological basis of the midrashic tradition identifying Balaam as Laban.

#### ENTER ABRAHAM

Balaam, as we determined above, originates from a place *by the river*, in Mesopotamia. This also is the home of Laban. More significantly, indeed, it is the place of origin of Abraham his land, his birth – place, the house of his father (Gen. 12:1; 24:4,10). And just as Abraham in Canaan *called there on the name of the Lord* [the Tetragrammaton] (13:4), so initially he had taught his belief system of ethical monotheism in Mesopotamia (see Rashi on Gen. 12:5). It is plausible to assume that when Abraham left to trek to Canaan, there remained many who were influenced by his teachings. Indeed, there may even have been pockets of monotheistic believers antedating Abraham; for example:

*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine; and he was priest of God the Most High. And he blessed him, and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God the Most High, who hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand.' And he gave him a tenth of all* (Gen. 14:18-20).

Melchizedek, however, used a series of names to refer to God, but not the Tetragrammaton used by Abraham, Laban, and Balaam. The commonality of Balaam and Laban in their use of the Tetragrammaton suggests a shared tradition, emanating from the teachings of Abraham.

#### ABRAHAM'S TEACHINGS

A central element of Abraham's system is its strong ethical and moral core: As God Himself testifies, *'For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him'* (Gen. 18:19).

## DEVELOPMENT OF A SCHISM

## ETHICS

Abraham is depicted as a man of kindness, as evidenced in his invitation to the three wanderers to eat (18:2-8). He is further depicted as a man of intense moral integrity in his insistence that God not destroy the innocent with the wicked (18:17-26). Laban, on the other hand, is described by Jacob as being extremely untrustworthy regarding promised compensation for labor (31:7, 41). Balaam also appears ethically challenged, ready to curse (destroy?) an entire nation for monetary reward (Num. 22:5, 17-19). Laban and Balaam appear to have adopted a brand of monotheism devoid of ethical considerations. In the ethical sphere there is a vast chasm between the two groups.

## PARTICULARISM

Another difference between Abraham's teachings and the Laban–Balaam connection involves the issue of particularism versus universalism. The message from God to man until the advent of Abraham was universal in character. A change to a particularism, at least in part, was introduced with the famous command: *Now the Lord said unto Abram: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of you a great nation'* (12:1). I would suggest that this shift in religious approach from generalities of conduct to ethical nationalism was not accepted by many of Abraham's disciples who remained in Mesopotamia. This would explain Laban's opposition to Jacob and his family leaving Haran for Canaan (thereby, in the language of the Hagaddah, wanting to uproot all). Balaam's opposition appears to be even more intense. A few remarks evoke memories of past events. Balak beseeches Balaam to come to his aid saying: *'Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me; peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know **that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed*** (Num. 22:6). This statement is strikingly similar to God's promise to Abraham: *'**And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse***' (Gen. 12:3). And again, when Balaam finally accompanied Balak's emissaries, we hear echoes: *And Balaam **rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab** – Now he was riding upon his ass,*

and **his two servants were with him** (Num. 22:21-22). The same terminology appears when Abraham acquiesced to God's command to sacrifice his son: *And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him* (Gen. 22:3). This use of similar if not identical terminology with Balaam as with Abraham shows that Balak or the biblical narrator recognized that Balaam saw himself as Abraham's competitor. Balaam perhaps originally felt that he was the rightful leader of the Mesopotamian monotheistic movement, supplanting Abraham. Balaam's eventual capitulation to Abraham's reality is seen in the following verses when he addresses Israel: *'Blessed be every one that blesseth thee, and cursed be every one that curseth thee'* (Num. 24:9). And also recognizes the authenticity of Israel's particularism:

*'How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? And how shall I execrate, whom the Lord hath not execrated? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations* (23:8-9).

#### MONOTHEISM OR SYNCRETISM?

As previously noted, the Tetragrammaton is used by all three, Abraham on one side, Balaam /Laban on the other, indicating a shared belief in the existence of a single, unique God. Even in this area, however, commentators perceived a syncretic dimension in their belief. With Laban, we note that *Rachel stole the teraphim that were her father's* (Gen. 31:19, 34-35). Teraphim generally refer to idol figurines. Later, when Jacob and Laban take an oath, Laban speaks not only of *'The God of Abraham'* but also of *'the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us'* (31:53). The consensus of commentaries is that the *god of Nahor* refers to a belief in foreign gods (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak); Joshua 24:2, is quite explicit: *In olden times, your forefathers – Terah, father of Abraham, and father of Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods*, suggesting an orientation towards idol worship on the part of Laban. If one were to identify magic with paganism, Balaam's use of methods of divination pose similar problems: *And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian with divination in their hand set out and they came unto Balaam, and spoke unto him the words of Balak* (Num. 22:7,

comp. trans. JPS 1916 and 1976). Likewise, we read further in the narrative: *And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness* (24:1). In actuality, the Hebrew speaks of Balaam's going to encounter *nehashim* [lit., serpents], but his intention, as the translation has it, probably involves the use of magic. Though pagan worship per se is not mentioned, the data are suggestive of a process of syncretism, whereby different systems of thought or belief tend to fuse. The original monotheistic beliefs of Abraham were beginning to be compromised.

This, however, was not the focus of biblical concern; rather, the abandonment of ethical commitment. An ethically-challenged monotheistic system, as an understanding of the Balaam–Laban identity, is seen elsewhere in the biblical narrative. It explains Abraham's insistence that his servant *'Shalt not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell. But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son, even for Isaac'* (24:3-4). Canaanite paganism, or any semblance of it, is unacceptable in a wife for Isaac. In Abraham's homeland there existed a religious movement of monotheists.

Abraham's servant knew full well that locating a potential wife for Isaac is not restricted to religious belief alone. He therefore set up an elaborate test by the well to see if the girl is ethically committed (24:11-14). It is a test of *hesed*. In response to request for a drink of water, Rebekah offers water not only to the servant but to all the men with him and the camels as well. Rebekah thereby demonstrated that she is committed to Abraham's ethical system to care for visitors and strangers.

The existence of monotheism devoid of ethical commitment receives recognition, but not approval, in a different biblical passage – that of the so-called Philistines and Abimelech their king. A close reading of God's communication with all three (Laban, Balaam and Abimelech) reveals a startling similarity of language. *But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night* (20:3). *And God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night* (31:24). *And God came unto Balaam at night* (Num. 22:20). Seforno (Gen. 20:3) and Yalkut Shimoni (*Vayera, remez* 88) had noticed the similarity in the above three verses and interpreted it to signify an inferior communication to them from the Divine. I would suggest a different interpretation. When Abimelech

angrily confronted Abraham and asked why he lied in saying that his wife Sarah was his sister, Abraham replied: *'Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake* (Gen. 20:11). The phrase *the fear of God* refers not to idol worship but to an absence of ethical and moral constraints. A similar term is used in reference to the two midwives in Egypt who disregarded a royal command to murder and embraced an ethical commitment: *But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men-children alive* (Ex. 1:17). Here too, fearing God is a statement of moral behavior, not paganism. Returning to Abraham and his relationship to Abimelech, after the signing of a treaty, we are informed: *And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines many days* (Gen. 21:34), indicating that Abraham wanted to raise his son in an environment devoid of Canaanite paganism.

#### EXPANSION OF THE BALAAM/LABAN AXIS

In addition to the Balaam/Laban connection, let us look at the Moab/Midian axis.<sup>3</sup> Moab had led Midian into forming an alliance against Israel (Deut. 22:4). After the end of the entire episode, before the Israelites were to enter Canaan, they were commanded:

*An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever; because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse thee* (Deut. 23:4-5).

Ammon was not involved in the Balaam episode. But noteworthy is that both peoples are descendents of Lot (Gen. 19:37-38), a nephew of Abraham. Midian, who was involved in the Balaam episode, was a son of Abraham and Keturah (25:1-2). All had their origins in the traditions of Abraham, and were faulted for not caring for the traveler and stranger. It was by then common knowledge (Num. 21:29) that Moab was openly pagan and worshipping Chemosh, but it was its ethical lapse that was of interest to biblical normative law. It is noteworthy that in the future it was a young lady from Moab named Ruth who showed extraordinary ethical sensitivity. She thereby demonstrated remarkable similarity to two other young ladies, Rebekah and Rachel,

sister and daughter of Laban, also coming from a home lacking in ethical sensitivity, but showing ethical commitment. At any rate, looking at a Balaam/Laban – Moab/Midian axis, we uncover a significant movement of "disciples" of Abraham who abandoned the ethical principals of the master, and thereby earned the enmity of the Bible, as well as instances of progeny from these lands overcoming ancestral disregard of the ethical dimensions of religious practice.

The Bible had entered into a life and death struggle with paganism. It had also promulgated a life of ethics and morality. Ethical and moral commitment was considered necessary even in a non-pagan society. In the rabbinic/aggadic identification of Balaam as Laban, it identifies ancient religious ferment that in some cases led to corruption of Abraham's teachings. The Bible's rejection of a monotheism devoid of ethical commitment is evident in the statement, Balaam is Laban. This message is as meaningful today.

#### NOTES

1. Targum Yonatan on Numbers 22:5, see also Targum Yonatan on I Chronicles 1:23.
2. *Parshat Shemot, remez* 168.
3. This suggestion was made to me by my son R. Ari Kahn.