THE MEANING OF AND HE WENT SHEFI (NUM. 23:3)

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The following verse appears in the story of Balaam: And Balaam said to Balak: 'Place yourself by the burnt-offering, and I will go; maybe by happenstance the Lord will come to meet me; and whatever he may show me I will tell you.' And he went shefi (Num. 23:3). I have purposely not translated the word shefi, as its meaning is in question.

Shefi does not appear in this particular construct anywhere else in the Bible. The Biblical Encyclopedia concludes its explanation of the term by pointing out that some interpreters liken it to the word nishpeh in Isaiah 13:2, meaning a "barren hilltop." In the context of the Balaam story it would thus denote where he went. This word appears numerous times in its plural form (shefayim) in the later Prophets (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21; 4:11, 12:12, 14:6). The encyclopedia treats this interpretation as mere speculation. Jotion takes the word to mean "a path which was smoothed by the feet of those who walked upon it." He justifies this interpretation by pointing out that shefi always appears in the context of roads (Isa. 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21, 14:11). Driver notes the similarity between shefi and an Arabic word meaning a sand hill. The Ben Yehudah dictionary gave up looking for a standard root and defined it as a small creek bed, also pointing out that shefi always appears in the context of water and grazing fields (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 12:12). This is most evident in I will open up streams on the bare hills [shefayim] and springs amid the valleys [beka'ot] (Isa. 41:18), which draws a parallel between shefayim and beka'ot. The Biblical Encyclopedia could not reach a conclusion as to the meaning of this word.

Targum Onkelos translates the phrase as "and he went alone (va-azal yehidi)." Rashi's interpretation follows that of the Targum, explaining that the word means "alone." Rashi derives it from "the expression shufi va-shaket, 'ease and tranquility,' which means silence." According to this translation Balaam needed to be in a secluded place so as to receive prophecy.

In contrast to this interpretation, Targum Yerushalmi or Pseudo-Jonathan translates shefi as "bent down like a snake" (connected to the word shafuf).

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Rashbam gives "lame" (higger) as his interpretation, and we will return to this later. Moskowitz, in the Da'at Mikra series, concludes his lengthy interpretation of shēfi by saying "and others explain 'on foot'."\(^2\)

Avraham Even Shoshan, in his Hebrew dictionary, declares that the common explanation for (he went) shēfi is "in tranquility, slowly." He nevertheless states: "This text is unclear, and my explanation is an educated guess." In his Bible concordance he gives two explanations – the first: "a tall barren hill"; the second: "slowly, methodically."\(^4\)

The Septuagint translates the phrase as "walking straight," while the Vulgate has "walking fast."\(^5\) English and German translations also disagree about the meaning. Isaac Leeser translates: "and he went thoughtfully alone." The Interpreter's Bible (1953) writes "and he went to a bare height" and then states: "It may be better to adopt Binn's second suggestion that the word derives from the Assyrian šēpu, 'with hindered step,' which may indicate that Balaam was lame." The JPS (1917) translation is "and he went to a bare height" while the NJPS (1985) gives "and he went off alone," but notes that the "exact meaning of Heb. shephi uncertain." Similarly, the Revised King James Version has "and he went to a high place," whereas a modern German version ("nach der deutschen Übersetzung Martin Luthers," 1966) provides: "Und er ging hin auf einen kahlen Hügel [= barren hill]." J.H. Hertz in his commentary translates it as "to a bare height", and adds "the Hebrew shefi has also been taken as an abbreviation of the three words sheol pi YHVH, 'to inquire of the mouth of the Lord'".\(^6\)

The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch, a manuscript discovered in 1956, leaves the word shēfi mysteriously untranslated while adding that Balaam "went alone." This additional explanation imitates those of Targum Onkelos and Rashi mentioned previously.

In conclusion, there are many interpretations of this phrase, basically having to do with walking or terrain, with no clear agreement as to its exact meaning.

It is my contention that shēfi derives from the Akkadian word šēpu ("foot"). The phrase va-yelekh shēfi would then simply mean: "and he walked on foot."

The rabbis of the Talmud were familiar with this basic understanding of the word, but they thought that it referred to an injured foot: "Balaam was lame.
in one foot, as it is said, va-yelekh shefi. Samson was lame in both feet, as it is said (Gen. 49:17), shefifon alei orah" (TB Sotah 10a; TB Sanhedrin 105a; Midrash Aggadah [Buber] Gen. 49, siman 16; Num. 23). In the singular, shefi is taken to indicate one lame foot; shefifon is interpreted as being a plural form, thus denoting two lame feet. This is rather like Binn's approach, as noted above. However, while there are a few Akkadian terms for "lame" or "crippled", šēpu is not one of them.  

Rashbam similarly explains that shefi means someone who is a lame, on the basis of ve-shuppu atzomotav ("his bones corrode" or "are rubbed away", Job 33:21). However, he understood from the Talmud that the word indicates the leg bone rather than the foot. The Talmud does use the word shofî to mean the top of the hip bone, the largest one in the leg (TB Hullin 92b; TB Avodah Zarah 25a). Rashbam therefore read the Talmud's interpretation of the phrase to mean an "injured leg," whereas the Talmud itself was closer to following the original connotation of shefi [as "foot"] based on the Akkadian root. The term šēpu can also denote the "foot of a mountain," which may be the source of the topographical interpretations noted above.

At this point one might ask: Why does the text specifically mention the fact that Balaam went on foot? The message conveyed here is that he lost the use of his female donkey after the talking episode. The shefi verse appears not long after that incident, just before his first attempt to curse the Israelites. It is my guess that even Onkelos, who translated shefi as "alone," meant that he walked on without the donkey – in other words, on foot. Balaam's ass is not mentioned after its encounter with the angel. Midrashic literature suggests that it was killed by the angel, leaving Balaam no choice but to continue on foot. There may, however, be a narrative function in the idea that Balaam proceeded on foot without his donkey, since it emphasizes the contrast between the two. While that dumb animal paid heed to the angel and stopped in its tracks, Balaam persisted in his course of action and ignored the heavenly warning. The famous prophet and seer was indeed more foolish than his ass!

NOTES
gartner and Johann J. Stamm understand the word to mean a barren hill.

2. Yehiel Tzvi Moskowitz, *Da’at Mikra: Bamidbar* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1988) p. 290. Moskowitz does not indicate who the "others" are, this omission suggesting that such interpreters are not generally quoted in the *Da’at Mikra* series.


5. The Vulgate attached the words *va-yelekh shefi* to the beginning of verse 4, as opposed to the Masoretic text, where they appear at the end of verse 3.


8. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 17, part 2 (CAD; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1992), s.v. šēpu, p. 294. I wish to thank Nili Samet, who was the first to translate *shefi* in Akkadian for me.

9. See Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), where hummur (p. 120), pessu (p. 273), and subbutu (p. 340) are all stated to mean "lame" or "crippled." However, šēpu has the meaning of "foot," "on foot," or even "foot of a mountain," not an injured foot (p. 367).

10. See Adin Steinsaltz, who follows Rashi in his interpretation of Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, suggesting that *shofi* is the highest bone in the leg.


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