

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



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²Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

³Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites,⁴ and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.”

Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time,⁵ sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, “There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me.⁶ Come then, put a curse upon this people

וַיִּרְא בַלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמְרֵי:

וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעַם מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא
וַיִּקְּץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר
מוֹאָב אֶל־זַקְנֵי מִדְיָן עֲתָה יִלְחֲכוּ הַקְהָל
אֶת־כָּל־סְבִיבֵינֵינוּ בְּלַחֵף הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יֶרֶק
הַשָּׂדֶה

וּבַלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מָלְךְ לְמוֹאָב בִּעַת הַהוּא:
וַיִּשְׁלַח מְלֹאכִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר
פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַנְּהַר אַרְצָה בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹ
לְקַרְא־לוֹ לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה עִם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם
הַנְּהַה כֶּסֶה אֶת־עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יִשֹּׁב
מִמֶּלְי: ⁶ וְעַתָּה לְכֵה־נָא אֶרְה־לִּי אֶת־

BALAAM THE DIVINER (22:2–24:25)

THE HIRING OF BALAAM (22:2–21)

2. Amorites The kingdom of Sihon, mentioned in 21:21,25–26,31–32.

4. elders of Midian Midian was a confederation of peoples, some of whom may have been ruled by the Moabite king.

5. Pethor Identified with Pitru on the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates, some 12 miles (20 km) south of Carchemish. It was at least a

20-day journey from Pethor to Moab, a distance of about 400 miles (640 km). Because the text records four such journeys, the traveling would have taken about three months.

it hides the earth from view Israel is compared with a locust plague, a common simile for an invading army.

6. Balaam’s curse is expected to weaken the Israelites so that Moab can defeat them in battle and expel them from its land.

This *parashah* contains what may be the only comic passage in the Torah. It tells how Balaam, reputedly the world’s most powerful wizard, cannot find his way out of his own neighborhood, and how his attempts to curse Israel are turned into blessings in his mouth. The overall message, however, is a serious one: God continues to watch over Israel and extend divine protection to them, despite their recalcitrant behavior and lack of appreciation. Human efforts to harm the people Israel will not prevail.

This story’s most memorable feature is the talking donkey. Here, as in so many tales in folklore when animals behave like humans, it raises questions: “What does it mean to be human? What makes us different from other animals?” Seeing the angel blocking the path, the

donkey can recognize, better than Balaam does, that what they are setting out to do is wrong. Human beings should have the capacity to know right from wrong. When temptation and weakness blind us to the wrongness of what we are doing, we are no better than dumb animals.

Some rabbinical sources see Balaam as an authentic prophet, sent to the gentiles as Moses was sent to the Israelites. For that reason, his incantations were to be feared and God had to change his curses into blessings. Others see Balaam as a pathetic, arrogant fraud whose only successful trick was to fool himself into believing that God approved of his intentions. “When the gift of prophecy was given to the gentile nations, many of them misused it, seeking to destroy rather than to bless” (Tanḥ. 1).

for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

⁷The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message. ⁸He said to them, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the LORD may instruct me.” So the Moabite dignitaries stayed with Balaam.

⁹God came to Balaam and said, “What do these people want of you?” ¹⁰Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ¹¹Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off.” ¹²But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed.”

¹³Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak’s dignitaries, “Go back to your own country,

הָעַם הַזֶּה כִּי־עָצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל נִפְהֶבּוּ וְאֶגְרֹשְׁנוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תִּבְרַךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תֵּאָר יוֹאֵר:

⁷וַיֵּלְכוּ זִקְנֵי מוֹאָב וְזִקְנֵי מִדְיָן וְקַסָּמִים בְּיָדָם וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בַּלְעָם וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו דְּבַרֵי בַלָּק: ⁸וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיהֶם לִינּוּ פֹה הַלְיִלָּה וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי אֶתְכֶם דְּבַר כַּאֲשֶׁר יִדְבֹר יְהוָה אֵלַי וַיִּשְׁבוּ שְׂרֵי־מוֹאָב עִם־בַּלְעָם:

⁹וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים בַּלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב שָׁלַח אֵלָי: ¹¹הִנֵּה הָעַם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּכַּס אֶת־עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ עֲתָה לְכָה קָבֵה־לִּי אֹתוֹ אוּלַי אוּכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וְגִרְשָׁתִּיו: ¹²וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם לֹא תִלָּךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת־הָעַם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:

¹³וַיָּקָם בַּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־שְׂרֵי בַלָּק לְכוּ אֶל־אֲרֻצְכֶם כִּי מֵאֵן יְהוָה

שני
[חמישי]

7. versed in divination The Hebrew idiom may mean that they took divinatory materials with them. The text emphasizes that Balaam is a diviner (one who predicts the future), not a sorcerer (one who alters the future through cursing and blessing), as Balak makes him out to be.

8. Spend the night Thus Balaam might receive a divine message in a dream.

9. What do these people want God, of course knows, but uses this rhetorical question to open a conversation (as in Gen. 3:9, 4:9).

12. they are blessed They are already blessed

from the time of the patriarchs, and the blessing cannot be reversed by a curse.

13. Balaam arose in the morning Evidently, God appeared to him in the night.

the LORD will not let me go Balaam omits the full reason—that cursing Israel is futile—not because he hoped later to change God’s mind but because it would have brought the episode to an end had the emissaries reported this reason to Balak.

the LORD It was not unusual for a non-Israelite to invoke the name of Israel’s God. Abimelech the Philistine did that in Gen. 26:28.

“The opposition between God and the sorcerer is the opposition between the true Deity and human wisdom. Sorcery is one of the heathen arts, grounded in people’s believing in their own power to force God to reveal the divine secrets” (Y. Kaufmann).

CHAPTER 22

2–20. The first mention of Balak (v. 2) does not describe him as a king. One account has

him beginning as a courtier who seized the throne by manipulating people’s fear of Israel (H. Soloveichik).

Why didn’t Balak hire Balaam to bless his own people rather than to curse Israel (since “whom you bless is blessed indeed,” v. 6)? He was so consumed by hatred that he forgot about his people’s needs and could think only about hurting his enemy (*Beit Ramah*).

In verse 12, God tells Balaam not to go, so

for the LORD will not let me go with you.”¹⁴The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”

¹⁵Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. ¹⁶They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me. ¹⁷I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.” ¹⁸Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “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. ¹⁹So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the LORD may say to me.” ²⁰That 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.”

²¹When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dig-

לְתַתִּי לְהֵלֶךְ עִמָּכֶם: ¹⁴ וַיִּקְוּמוּ שְׂרֵי מוֹאָב וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בָּלָק וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֵן בְּלַעַם הֵלֶךְ עִמָּנוּ:

¹⁵ וַיִּסַּף עוֹד בָּלָק שְׁלַח שְׂרִים רַבִּים וּנְכַבְדִּים מֵאֵלֶּה: ¹⁶ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ כֹּה אָמַר בָּלָק בֶּן-צִפּוֹר אֶל-נָא תִמְנַע מִהֲלֹךְ אֵלַי: ¹⁷ כִּי-כַבֵּד אֶכְבְּדְּךָ מְאֹד וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמַר אֵלַי אֶעֱשֶׂה וּלְכֶה-נָא קִבְּה-לִי אֵת הָעַם הַזֶּה: ¹⁸ וַיַּעַן בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַבְדֵי בָלָק אִם-יִתֵּן-לִי בָלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קִטְנָה אוֹ גְדוּלָה: ¹⁹ וְעַתָּה שָׁבוּ נָא בְּזֶה גַם-אַתֶּם הַלַּיְלָה וְאִדְעָה מִה-יִסַּף יְהוָה דְּבַר עִמִּי: ²⁰ וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בְּלַעַם לִילָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם-לִקְרֹא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לָךְ אַתֶּם וְאֵף אֶת-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבַּר אֵלַיךְ אֵתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה:

שלישי ²¹ וַיִּקָּם בְּלַעַם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת-אַתָּנוֹ

14. The emissaries do not mention that the Lord is the author of Balaam’s refusal. The narrator may be indicating that the Moabites were so convinced of Balaam’s inherent power to curse Israel that they regarded Balaam’s reliance on the Lord as an excuse to back out.

17. I will reward you richly Literally, “I will honor you greatly.” This is a euphemism for monetary rewards, as the next verse makes explicit.

18. The LORD my God This affirmation might explain why Moab sought the help of Balaam even though the seer lived so far away. Perhaps Moab believed that Balaam’s allegiance to

and intimacy with Israel’s God would stand him in good stead as he attempted to persuade God to curse His people Israel.

19. what else Perhaps the Lord will change His mind. Such indeed is the unspoken premise behind all forms of divination. The same ritual procedures are repeated until a favorable omen is received. Even in dream interpretation, a single dream is not decisive. Thus Balaam can sincerely hope that in his second dream he will learn that the Lord has changed His mind.

20. That night God came to Balaam That is, in a dream.

he spurns the Moabite invitation. Balak sends a second delegation, adding an element not mentioned by the first: “I will reward you richly” (v. 17). Can we see Balaam’s dream in verse 20 as arising from a repressed wish to accept the assignment? Did the wizard, blinded by the prospect of riches, fool himself into believing that Balak’s request was legitimate? In the view of Maimonides, based on a comment in the Midrash, God did not simply give Balaam permission to go, but gave

him permission to exercise his free will. As the Midrash puts it, “I desire not the destruction of the wicked, but since you are bent on following this path that will lead to your destruction, I will not prevent you from doing so” (Num. R. 20:12).

21. Balaam saddled his ass The Sages take this as implying his great eagerness to set forth. **departed with the Moabite dignitaries** Suggests that he was fully with them in intent (BT Sanh. 105b).

nitaries. ²²But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the LORD placed himself in his way as an adversary.

He was riding on his she-ass, with his two servants alongside, ²³when the ass caught sight of the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The ass swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road. ²⁴The angel of the LORD then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side. ²⁵The ass, seeing the angel of the LORD, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he beat her again. ²⁶Once more the angel of the LORD moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left. ²⁷When the ass now saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was furious and beat the ass with his stick.

²⁸Then the LORD opened the ass's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"

²⁹Balaam said to the ass, "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd

וַיִּלֶךְ עִם־שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב׃ ²² וַיִּחַר־אַף אֱלֹהִים כִּי־הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְיַצֵּב מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה בְּדַרְךָ לְשֹׁטֵן לוֹ׃

וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל־אֲתוֹנוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו עִמּוֹ׃ ²³ וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֲתוֹן אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה נֹצֵב בְּדַרְךָ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹופָהּ בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּטֵּט הָאֲתוֹן מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַתֵּלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּךְ בַּלְעָם אֶת־הָאֲתוֹן לְהַטְתָּהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ׃ ²⁴ וַיַּעֲמֹד מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכְּרָמִים גְּדֵר מְזֵה וּגְדֵר מְזֵה׃ ²⁵ וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֲתוֹן אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה וַתִּלְחָץ אֶל־הַקִּיר וַתִּלְחָץ אֶת־רִגְלָהּ בַּלְעָם אֶל־הַקִּיר וַיִּסֹּף לְהַפְתָּהּ׃ ²⁶ וַיִּוֹסֶף מִלְאָךְ־יְהוָה עָבוֹר וַיַּעֲמֹד בְּמָקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין־דֶּרֶךְ לַנְּטוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמָאוֹל׃ ²⁷ וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֲתוֹן אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בַּלְעָם וַיִּחַר־אַף בַּלְעָם וַיִּךְ אֶת־הָאֲתוֹן בַּמֶּקֶל׃

²⁸ וַיִּפְתַּח יְהוָה אֶת־פִּי הָאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבַלְעָם מָה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים׃ ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם לְאֲתוֹן כִּי הִתְעַלְלָתְ בִּי לֹא יִשְׁחָרֵב בְּיָדֵי כִּי עָתָה

BALAAAM AND THE ASS (vv. 22–35)

22. But God was incensed Balaam's compliance indicates his eagerness to curse Israel, arousing the anger of God.

two servants Balak's officials have disappeared.

23. into the fields Implies that the fields had no fences along the road.

24. a lane Perhaps a hollowed-out furrow that served as a path.

fence Literally, "a wall of stones."

25. wall That is, the surface of the stony fence.

beat her again The first time was for a purpose—to get the ass back on the road. Here,

the lack of purpose serves to indicate that Balaam struck the ass in sheer anger. The story about the ass lampoons Balaam, making him out to be a fool.

27. When the ass now saw For the third time, in contrast to Balaam's persistent blindness.

with his stick An index of his mounting anger; perhaps previously he struck with his hand or a strap.

28. The LORD opened the ass's mouth That is, God gave the ass the power of speech. Note that the use of fables—stories of talking animals or plants—is rare in the Bible (see Gen. 3:1–5; for Jotham's see Judg. 9:7–15).

29. If I had a sword The irony rests in the

25. A rabbinical tradition identifies this wall with the pile of stones erected by Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:51), each promising never to cross that point with hostile intent toward

the other. Balaam, identified as a descendant of Laban the Aramean (see Num. 23:7), is about to violate that accord.

29. If I had a sword This sorcerer, who is

kill you.”³⁰The ass said to Balaam, “Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?” And he answered, “No.”

³¹Then the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. ³²The angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. ³³And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her.” ³⁴Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way. If you still disapprove, I will turn back.” ³⁵But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you.” So Balaam went on with Balak’s dignitaries.

הַרְגָתִיךָ: ³⁰וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֲתוֹן אֶל-בְּלָעַם הַלּוֹא אָנֹכִי אֲתֹנְךָ אֲשֶׁר-רִכַּבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדְךָ עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲהִסְפֵּן הַסִּפְנָתִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא:

³¹וַיִּגַּל יְהוָה אֶת-עֵינָיו בְּלָעַם וַיֵּרֶא אֶת-מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה נֹצֵב בְּדַרְךָ וְחָרְבּוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְאֹפָיו: ³²וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה עַל-מָה הִכִּיתָ אֶת-אֲתֹנְךָ זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ רְגָלִים הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי יֹצֵאתִי לְשֹׁטֵן כִּי-יָרַט הַדָּרֶךְ לְנֹגְדִי: ³³וַתִּרְאֵנִי הָאֲתוֹן וַתֵּט שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים אֹלֵי נִטְתָּה מִפְּנֵי כִי עֲתָה גַם-אֲתַכֶּה* הַרְגָתִי וְאוֹתָהּ הַחַיִּיתִי: ³⁴וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעַם אֶל-מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה חָטָאתִי כִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִי אַתָּה נֹצֵב לְקִרְאתִי בְּדַרְךָ וְעֲתָה אִם-רַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲשׁוּבָה לִי: ³⁵וַיֹּאמֶר מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֶל-בְּלָעַם לֵךְ עִם-הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאַפֵּס אֶת-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תִּדְבֹּר וַיֵּלֶךְ בְּלָעַם עִם-שָׂרֵי בָלַק:

33. v. יתיר ה'

fact that the sword Balaam seeks is close at hand with the angel, whom he, the seer, cannot see.

30. Have I been in the habit Balaam’s impetuous rage is answered by the considered and justifiable argument of the ass.

31. the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes The wording is deliberate, a sardonic contradiction of Balaam’s claim that his “eyes are opened” to God’s revelation (24:4,16).

32–33. these three times . . . those three times This expression is repeated by the angel to mock

Balaam: The dumb animal shied away from me three times; but you, the all-wise seer, did not shy away from me even once.

34. I did not know In contradiction to Balaam’s claim that he “obtains knowledge from the Most High” (24:16).

35. Balaam’s two servants, who disappeared, have been replaced by Balak’s dignitaries.

what I tell you The angel, here identified with the “I” of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord’s surrogate.

setting out to destroy an entire people with words, needs a sword to harm a donkey (Tanh. 9). The passage calls to mind the comment of the Sages that one who gives a sword to an angry person violates the commandment “You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind” (Lev. 19:14). Rationalist commentators interpret the incident of the talking ass in a nonliteral manner. Maimonides sees it occur-

ring in a dream. Luzzatto suggests that the donkey brayed plaintively and Balaam intuited what it was trying to convey. The Midrash lists Balaam’s ass as one of several miracles created by God in the last hours of Creation. This would mean that its speaking did not violate natural law. God created a world in which donkeys would not speak, except for this donkey at this moment.

³⁶When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, which is on the Arnon border, at its farthest point. ³⁷Balak said to Balaam, “When I first sent to invite you, why didn’t you come to me? Am I really unable to reward you?” ³⁸But Balaam said to Balak, “And now that I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.”

³⁹Balaam went with Balak and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

⁴⁰Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and had them served to Balaam and the dignitaries with him. ⁴¹In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people.

23 Balaam said to Balak, “Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me.” ²Balak did as Balaam di-

THE MEETING OF BALAK AND BALAAM
(22:36–23:6)

36. Ir-moab Probably identical with Ar of Moab (21:15,28) on the southern shore of the upper Arnon River.

Arnon border That is, the northern border of Moab, which presumes that Balaam came from the north.

at its farthest point Balak paid Balaam the utmost respect due him by meeting him at the point at which Balaam crossed into Moabite territory.

CHAPTER 23

Presumably Balaam’s curses would have no effect. Why does God go to the trouble of directing his speech? The Midrash comments on verse 5 (“the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth”): “As a rider puts a bit in the mouth of his horse, to control him” (Num. R. 20:20). Astruc suggests that God did this lest others interpret any disaster that might befall Israel as resulting from Balaam’s curse, strengthening their belief in wizardry. Abravanel says

³⁶וַיִּשְׁמַע בַּלַּק כִּי בָא בִלְעָם וַיֵּצֵא לְקִרְיַתוֹ אֶל-עִיר מוֹאָב אֲשֶׁר עַל-גְּבוּל אַרְנוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶצֶה הַגְּבוּל: ³⁷וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בִּלְעָם הֲלֹא שָׁלַח שְׁלַחְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ לְקַרְאֲלֶךָ לָמָּה לֹא-הִלַּכְתָּ אֵלַי הֲאִמְנֹם לֹא אוֹכַל כִּבְדְּךָ: ³⁸וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק הֲיִנְהַבְּאֵתִי אֵלֶיךָ עֲתָה הֲיִכַל אוֹכַל דִּבְרַ מְאוּמָה הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂיִם אֱלֹהִים בְּפִי אֲתוּ אֲדַבֵּר:

³⁹וַיֵּלֶךְ בִּלְעָם עִם-בַּלַּק וַיָּבֹאוּ קִרְיַת חֻצוֹת: ⁴⁰וַיַּזְבַּח בַּלַּק בָּקָר וְצֹאן וַיִּשְׁלַח לְבִלְעָם וּלְשָׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ: ⁴¹וַיְהִי בַבֶּקֶר וַיִּקַּח בַּלַּק אֶת-בִּלְעָם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ בַמּוֹת בַּעַל וַיִּרְא מִשָּׁם קֶצֶה הָעָם:

רביעי
[ששי]

כג וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק בְּנֵה-לִי בַזָּה שְׁבַעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בַזָּה שְׁבַעָה פָרִים וּשְׁבַעָה אֵילִים: ²וַיַּעַשׂ בַּלַּק כַּאֲשֶׁר

40. sacrificed Balak sacrificed a well-being offering (*zevah sh'lamim*), the meat of which is eaten by the worshiper and his guests.

41. In the morning Sacrificial ritual implies entering into a state of sanctification, a preliminary requirement for a divine encounter.

he could see a portion of the people The object must be within sight for a curse against it to be effective. Balak, however, fears that the sight of too many Israelites may nullify and even reverse the curse. Hence, he allows Balaam to see only a portion of the Israelites.

that it is to avoid Israel’s enemies’ gaining confidence from Balaam’s words. Kaspi notes, “A true friend will spare his friend mental anguish and concern, even if he knows there is no basis for it.” The Israelites, having grown up in Egypt, a land of superstition and sorcery, might tend to take Balaam’s curses seriously and thus be demoralized. By the same token, they might be strengthened by his blessings. Praise from a prominent gentile might heighten their devotion to achieving their goals.

rected; and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings while I am gone. Perhaps the LORD will grant me a manifestation, and whatever He reveals to me I will tell you.” And he went off alone.

⁴God manifested Himself to Balaam, who said to Him, “I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.” ⁵And the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”

⁶So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and all the Moabite dignitaries with him. ⁷He took up his theme, and said:

From Aram has Balak brought me,
Moab’s king from the hills of the East:
Come, curse me Jacob,
Come, tell Israel’s doom!

⁸How can I damn whom God has not
damned,

How doom when the LORD has not doomed?

⁹As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations,

23:2. a bull and a ram The most expensive—and, therefore, the most desirable—animals in the sacrificial system.

3. Stay They worked in tandem. Balak stood at his sacrifice while the diviner sought omens.

your offerings Literally, “your burnt offering,” which the specific sacrifice required.

reveals to me Via omens.

I will tell you I will interpret for you.

4. offered up The subject is Balak, not Balaam.

5. the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth The Lord told him the exact words.

THE FIRST ORACLE (vv. 7–10)

All of the oracles are in verse form, probably attesting to their antiquity.

דִּבֶּר בְּלַעַם וַיַּעַל בְּלַק וּבְלַעַם פָּר וְאַיִל
בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם לְבָלַק הַתִּיַצֵּב
עַל-עַלְתֶּךָ וְאַלְכָה אוֹלַי יִקְרָה יְהוָה
לְקִרְאַתִּי וּדְבַר מַה-יִּרְאֵנִי וְהִגַּדְתִּי לָךְ
וַיֵּלֶךְ שָׁפִי:

⁴ וַיִּקָּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אֶת-שִׁבְעַת הַמִּזְבְּחוֹת עָרַכְתִּי וְאָעַל פָּר
וְאַיִל בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ⁵ וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה דְּבַר בְּפִי
בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל-בָּלַק וְכֹה תִדְבָּר:
⁶ וַיָּשָׁב אֵלָיו וְהִנֵּה נֹצֵב עַל-עַלְתּוֹ הוּא
וְכָל-שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב: ⁷ וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

מִן-אַרָם יִנְחֵנִי בְלַק
מִלֶּךְ-מוֹאָב מֵהַרְרֵי-קְדָם
לְכֹה אָרְה־לִּי יַעֲקֹב
וּלְכֹה זַעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁸ מָה אֶקְבֹּ לֹא קִבָּה אֶל
וּמָה אֶזְעַם לֹא זַעַם יְהוָה:
⁹ כִּי-מִרְאֵשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ
וּמִגְבָּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרָנוּ
הַן-עַם לְבָדָד יִשְׁכֵּן
וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב:

7. theme Hebrew: *mashal*, which has no precise rendering and is never used for the discourses of Israel’s prophets. This indicates that Balaam’s oracle is not to be reckoned as prophecy.

hills of the East Hebrew: *har rei kedem*; literally, “hills of Kedem [east].” It seems to designate a specific territory in the Syrian desert, east of the Phoenician coast.

9. apart In terms of strength and security.

reckoned The people Israel will not share the fate of other nations.

people . . . nations Hebrew: *am . . . goyim*; here the first term refers to Israelites, and the second to non-Israelites. Usually “*am*” is a more intimate, ethnic designation than the political designation “*goyim*.”

9. a people that dwells apart, / Not reckoned among the nations One prominent thinker suggested that the Jewish people survived in the Diaspora, not despite the enmity

¹⁰Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?
May I die the death of the upright,
May my fate be like theirs!

מִי מִנְהַ עֵפֶר יַעֲקֹב
וּמִסְפָּר אֶת־רֹבַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
תָּמַת נַפְשִׁי מוֹת יִשְׁרָיִם
וּתְהִי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְמֵהוּ:

¹¹Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!”

¹²He replied, “I can only repeat faithfully what the LORD puts in my mouth.” ¹³Then Balak said to him, “Come with me to another place from which you can see them—you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them—and damn them for me from there.”

¹⁴With that, he took him to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ¹⁵And [Balaam] said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings, while I seek a manifestation yonder.”

¹⁶The LORD manifested Himself to Balaam and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus.” ¹⁷He went to him and

¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלָק אֶל־בַּלְעָם מַה עָשִׂיתָ לִּי
לְקַב אִיבִי לְקַחְתִּיךָ וְהִנֵּה בִּרְכַת בְּרַךְ:

¹²וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֵת אֲשֶׁר יְשִׁים יְהוָה

בְּפִי אֲתוֹ אֲשַׁמֵּר לְדַבֵּר: ¹³וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו

בָּלָק לֶךְ נָא לְכֹה־נָא אִתִּי אֶל־מְקוֹם אַחַר

אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם אֶפֶס קִצְהוּ תִרְאֶה

וְכֹלוּ לֹא תִרְאֶה וְקִבְנוּ־לִי מִשָּׁם:

¹⁴וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׂדֵה צַפִּים אֶל־רֹאשׁ הַפְּסֻגָה

וַיִּבֶן שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל

בְּמִזְבֵּחַ: ¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בָּלָק הֲתִיַּצֵּב כֹּה

עַל־עֲלֹתֶךָ וְאֲנֹכִי אֶקְרָה כֹּה:

¹⁶וַיִּקֶּר יְהוָה אֶל־בַּלְעָם וַיִּשֶׂם דְּבַר בְּפִיו

וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל־בָּלָק וְכֹה תִדַּבֵּר: ¹⁷וַיָּבֵא

10. dust-cloud The image here is of the dust raised by Israel’s marching hosts. (The translation is based on emending the text’s *et rova* to *turba-at* or *turba*, meaning “dust cloud.”)

my fate Balaam’s wish illustrates the blessing that every nation and person will desire to receive from God—to share the fate of Israel.

BALAK’S REACTION AND SECOND ATTEMPT (vv. 11–17)

13. another place Balaam will continue to

try the same oracular procedure to effect a favorable omen, this time at another location, perhaps believing that a change of place might lead to a change of luck.

only a portion Balak was showing Balaam an even smaller segment of the Israelite camp than before, fearing that the sight of too many Israelites would once again produce a blessing.

14. Sedehzophim Literally, “mountain of the watchmen.” A lookout post for astronomical observation or for observing the flight of birds.

of their neighbors but precisely because of it. If we ever became objects of their friendship, it would be harder to avoid assimilating (Baal Shem Tov). Several anti-Zionist Orthodox rabbis of the early 20th century based their opposition to Zionism on this verse’s praise of the Jewish people for not being a nation like other nations. Even the liberal thinker Rosenzweig feared that the Jewish people would lose its distinctive greatness if it “re-entered history” as a political state.

10. May I die the death of the upright The

Sages, suspicious of Balaam, take him to be saying “May I live as a greedy, degenerate sinner all my days and become righteous just before my death.”

13. you will see only a portion of them Individual Israelites may not be that impressive, but it has always been the genius of the Jewish people that the whole added up to more than the sum of its parts. Ordinary people combine to create extraordinary communities, sites of holiness, and charity (Menahem Mendel of Kotzk).

found him standing beside his offerings, and the Moabite dignitaries with him. Balak asked him, “What did the LORD say?”¹⁸ And he took up his theme, and said:

אֵלָיו וְהֵנּוּ נֶצֶב עַל-עֲלֹתוֹ וְשָׂרֵי מוֹאָב
אָתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בִּלְק מֵהַדְּבָר יְהוָה:
וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר¹⁸

Up, Balak, attend,
Give ear unto me, son of Zippor!
¹⁹God is not man to be capricious,
Or mortal to change His mind.
Would He speak and not act,
Promise and not fulfill?
²⁰My message was to bless:
When He blesses, I cannot reverse it.
²¹No harm is in sight for Jacob,
No woe in view for Israel.
The LORD their God is with them,
And their King’s acclaim in their midst.
²²God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
²³Lo, there is no augury in Jacob,
No divining in Israel:
Jacob is told at once,
Yea Israel, what God has planned.

קוֹם בִּלְק וּשְׁמָע
הֶאֱזִינָה עָדֵי בְנוֹ צִפּוֹר:
¹⁹לֹא אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּכְזֹב
וּבֶן-אָדָם וַיִּתְנַחֵם
הֵהוּא אָמַר וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה
וַדְּבָר וְלֹא יִקְיַמְנָה:
²⁰הִנֵּה בָרַךְ לְקַחְתִּי
וּבִרְךָ וְלֹא אֲשִׁיבָנָה:
²¹לֹא-הֵבִיט אָוֶן בְּיַעֲקֹב
וְלֹא-רָאָה עֵמֶל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיו עִמּוֹ
וַתְרוֹעַת מְלֶךְ בּוֹ:
²²אֵל מוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם
כְּתוֹעַפֹת רָאִם לוֹ:
²³כִּי לֹא-נֶחֱשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב
וְלֹא-קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
כְּעַת יֹאמֶר לְיַעֲקֹב
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵהַפֶּעַל אֵל:

17. What did the LORD say? For the first time, Balak recognizes that Israel’s God alone determines Israel’s fate.

THE SECOND ORACLE (vv. 18–24)

21. acclaim Hebrew: *t’ru-ah*, the military alarm sounded by trumpet or *shofar*. It can also mean a shout of joy.

22. freed them Balaam subtly corrects Balak’s assertion that Israel was “a people come out of Egypt” (22:5), as if it had successfully escaped from slavery without divine help.

wild ox The metaphor refers to God. In the ancient Near East, gods often were depicted with horns or wearing horned crowns.

23. augury Hebrew: *nahash*, which refers to observing omens such as the flight of birds, or reading the entrails of a domesticated animal.

divining A tacit admission that magic works but that Israel has no need for it.

planned Because God has provided Israel with prophets, it has no need to resort to magical arts to determine His will.

18. Up, Balak Balaam had referred to Balak as “king” (22:10); having encountered the true sovereign, he no longer does so (N. Leibowitz).

21. No harm is in sight Literally, “[God] sees no evil in Israel.” The *Tanḥuma* understands this to teach that God, out of love, overlooks Israel’s faults. Ibn Ezra, by contrast, reads

the verse: “Only when God sees no evil in Israel is the LORD with them.” Israel is not vulnerable to curses when they do God’s will. Entice them to sin grievously, as the Moabites do in chapter 25, and God will no longer be a protective presence in their midst. “A Jew is never alone; God is always with every Jew” (Baal Shem Tov).

²⁴Lo, a people that rises like a lion,
Leaps up like the king of beasts,
Rests not till it has feasted on prey
And drunk the blood of the slain.

הַיְהוָה עָם בְּלִבֵּי יִקְוֹם ²⁴
וּכְאֵרִי יִתְנַשֵּׂא
לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יֵאכַל טֶרֶף
וְדַם-חַלְלִים יִשְׁתֶּה:

²⁵Thereupon Balak said to Balaam, “Don’t curse them and don’t bless them!” ²⁶In reply, Balaam said to Balak, “But I told you: Whatever the LORD says, that I must do.” ²⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them for me there.” ²⁸Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland. ²⁹Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here.” ³⁰Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בַּלְעָם גַּם-קִבְּ לֹא ²⁵
תִּקְבְּנוּ גַם-פָּרָךְ לֹא תִבְרַכְנוּ: ²⁶ וַיַּעַן
בַּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בַּלַּק הֲלֹא דִבַּרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ
לֵאמֹר כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-יְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶתּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה:
וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בַּלְעָם לְכֵה-נָא אֶקְחֶךָ ²⁷
אֶל-מְקוֹם אַחֵר אוֹלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵינַי
הֵאֱלֹהִים וְקִבְּתוּ לִי מִשָּׁם: ²⁸ וַיִּקַּח בַּלַּק
אֶת-בַּלְעָם רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוּר הַנִּשְׁקָף עַל-פְּנֵי
הַיְשִׁימֹן: ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק בְּנֵה-
לִי בְזֵה שְׁבַעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בְזֵה
שְׁבַעָה פָּרִים וְשְׁבַעָה אֵילִים: ³⁰ וַיַּעַשׂ
בַּלַּק כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בַּלְעָם וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל
בְּמִזְבֵּחַ:

ששי
[שביעי]

24 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. ²As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the

כד וַיִּרְא בַלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינַי יְהוָה
לְבַרְךָ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא-הָלַךְ כְּפַעַם-
בְּפַעַם לִקְרֹאת נְחֹשִׁים וַיִּשֶׁת אֶל-הַמְדַבֵּר
פָּנָיו: ² וַיִּשָּׂא בַלְעָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-

THE THIRD ORACLE (23:25–24:9)

This is the climactic oracle. In the first oracle, only God determines blessing and curse (23:8); in the second, God’s blessing cannot be revoked (23:20); in this, the third, those who bless or curse Israel will themselves be blessed or cursed.

27. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them A submissive, almost plaintive utterance, acknowledging the power of God. Balak’s previous order, in verse 13, had been: “Damn them.” The transformation in Balak is now clear. He must reckon with the power of Israel’s God. **will deem it right** Literally, “be straight in the eyes of.” That is, be to his liking.

24:1. in search of omens The reason he separated himself from Balak on the previous two oc-

casions is now clarified. While Balak attended to the sacrifices, Balaam went off by himself to search for portents of the future.

toward the wilderness Balaam, convinced that God intends only blessing for Israel (23:20), no longer needs to follow Balak’s precaution that he see only a portion of Israel lest the curse be ineffectual. He can now view the entire Israelite encampment with impunity. Rather than timidly catching a glimpse of the edge of the Israelite camp, Balaam now boldly steps forward so that he can see all of the people Israel.

2. the spirit of God came upon him Instead of seeking God in a dream or having God’s words “put into his mouth,” Balaam is now invested with the divine spirit and falls into an ecstatic state, the mark of a prophet.

spirit of God came upon him. ³Taking up his theme, he said:

יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁכַן לְשִׁבְטֵי וְתִהְיֶה עָלָיו רוּחַ
אֱלֹהִים: ³ וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
⁴Word of him who hears God's speech,
Who beholds visions from the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
⁵How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!
⁶Like palm-groves that stretch out,
Like gardens beside a river,
Like aloes planted by the LORD,
Like cedars beside the water;
⁷Their boughs drip with moisture,
Their roots have abundant water.
Their king shall rise above Agag,
Their kingdom shall be exalted.
⁸God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
They shall devour enemy nations,
Crush their bones,
And smash their arrows.

נְאֻם בְּלַעַם בְּנוֹ בְעוֹר
וְנְאֻם הַגֹּבֵר שֶׁתָּם הָעֵינַן:
נְאֻם שֹׁמֵעַ אִמְרֵי-אֵל
אֲשֶׁר מַחֲזֶה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֶה
נִפְל וְגִלּוֹי עֵינָיִם:
מֵה-טִבּוֹ אֱהַלְיָךְ יַעֲקֹב
מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
כְּנַחְלִים נָטְוִי
כְּגִנַּת עָלֵי נְהַר
כְּאֵהָלִים נֹטֵעַ יְהוָה
כְּאֶרְזִים עֲלֵי-מַיִם:
יִזְל-מַיִם מִדְּלָיו
וְזָרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים
וַיִּרֶם מֵאֲגַל מַלְכוֹ
וַתִּנְשָׂא מַלְכֹתוֹ:
אֶל מוֹצִיאוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם
כְּתוֹעַפֹת רְאֵם לוֹ
יֵאכֹל גּוֹיִם צָרוֹ
וְעִצְמֹתֵיהֶם יִגְרֵם
וְחִצָּיו יִמְחָץ:

3-4. Balaam introduces himself as one who is privy to God's direct revelation.

4. Almighty Hebrew: *Shaddai*, an ancient name for Israel's God (Gen. 17:1, 28:3).

Prostrate An act that acknowledges and pays homage to the Presence of God.

but with eyes unveiled Either his eyes were literally "opened" or, more likely, he was figuratively "enlightened"; i.e., he saw with his inner eye.

5. fair That is, pleasing.

dwellings Parallel to "tents." The Hebrew word (*mishk'notekha*) includes the plural of *mishkan* (tabernacle; temporary structure).

6. aloes A sweet-smelling tree whose sap is used as a perfume.

7. Their boughs drip The image is one of trees (v. 6) so drenched that their boughs drip water. The vegetation will be watered from above and below. Water is a common metaphor for affluence.

Their roots Literally, "and its seed." This is a reference to posterity.

Their king Thrice promised by God to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6,16, 35:11).

Agag King of Amalek during the reign of Israel's King Saul (1 Sam. 15:8). The Amalekites were Israel's most dreaded enemy in the time of Moses (e.g., Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-18).

8. Is for them That is, for Israel.

devour An image of military conquest.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

24:5. This verse is the source for the prayer *Mah Tovu*, recited daily upon entering a synagogue. And the Talmud bases its requirements for respecting privacy on this verse, explaining that Balaam was moved to praise the tents of Jacob because the arrangement of their entrances made it impossible for a family to see inside the tents of others, showing respect for privacy (BT BB 60a).

⁹They crouch, they lie down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them?
Blessed are they who bless you,
Accursed they who curse you!

פָּרַע שָׁכַב כַּאֲרִי
וּכְלָבִיא מִי יְקִימוּנוּ
מְבֹרָכֶיךָ בָּרוּךְ
וְאָרְרֶיךָ אָרוּר:

¹⁰Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. “I called you,” Balak said to Balaam, “to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! ¹¹Back with you at once to your own place! I was going to reward you richly, but the LORD has denied you the reward.” ¹²Balaam replied to Balak, “But I even told the messengers you sent to me, ¹³Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the LORD’s command. What the LORD says, that I must say.” ¹⁴And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come.” ¹⁵He took up his theme, and said:

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
¹⁶Word of him who hears God’s speech,
Who obtains knowledge from the Most High,
And beholds visions from the Almighty,

¹⁰וַיַּחַר-אֵף בַּלֶּק אֶל-בְּלָעַם וַיִּסְפַּק אֶת-
כַּפָּיו וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלֶּק אֶל-בְּלָעַם לֵקֵב אֵיבֵי
קְרָאתֶיךָ וְהִנֵּה בִרְכַת בְּרוּךְ זֶה שְׁלַשׁ
פְּעָמִים: ¹¹וְעַתָּה בְּרוּח־לֶךָ אֶל-מְקוֹמְךָ
אֲמַרְתִּי כִּבְד אֲכַבְדְּךָ וְהִנֵּה מִנְעַךְ יְהוָה
מִכְבוֹד: ¹²וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעַם אֶל-בַּלֶּק הֲלֹא
גַם אֶל-מְלֹאכֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַחְתָּ אֵלַי דִּבַּרְתִּי
לֵאמֹר: ¹³אִם-יִתֶּן-לִי בַלֶּק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ
כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה
לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה מִלְּבָי אֲשֶׁר-יִדְבֵר
יְהוָה אֵתוֹ אֲדַבֵּר: ¹⁴וְעַתָּה הִנְנִי הוֹלֵךְ
לְעַמִּי לִכְהֵן אִיעֲצֶךָ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָעָם
הַזֶּה לְעַמְּךָ בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים: ¹⁵וַיִּשָּׂא
מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

נָאִם בְּלָעַם בְּנוֹ בְּעַר
וְנָאִם הַגִּבֹּר שְׁתָּם הָעֵינַן:
נָאִם שָׁמַע אֲמַר־יָאֵל
וַיִּדַע דַּעַת עֲלִיוֹן
מִחֹזֵה שְׂדֵי יְחֻזָּה

9. crouch That is, they rest. In the second oracle, the lion rises and does not rest until it eats its prey. Here, the sated lion lies down to rest. Even when it is in a state of repose, who would dare rouse it?

Blessed . . . Accursed Everyone will bless you in order to be blessed and will desist from cursing you for fear of being cursed (cf. Gen. 12:3).

THE FOURTH ORACLE (vv. 10–19)

Still imbued with prophetic inspiration, Balaam turns his attention to the future of Balak’s country, Moab. Most of the words and references in these verses remain obscure.

10. struck his hands together A derisive gesture.

13. could not of my own accord Balaam, like Moses, acts only on God’s instructions.

14. inform you That is, of God’s plan. **what this people will do to your people** Implies that the oracle will deal only with Moab. **in days to come** Not “the end of days” but the near future from the speaker’s point of view.

15–16. These verses are almost identical with verses 3–4. The repetition of Balaam’s self-introduction signifies that he continues to prophesy under the influence of the divine spirit without resort to divination.

Most High Hebrew: *Elyon*, a name for God (Gen. 14:18–22, Deut. 32:8). (The Canaanite creator god, El, who also bears this name, may be meant in Gen. 14.)

Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:

¹⁷What I see for them is not yet,
What I behold will not be soon:
A star rises from Jacob,
A scepter comes forth from Israel;
It smashes the brow of Moab,
The foundation of all children of Seth.

¹⁸Edom becomes a possession,
Yea, Seir a possession of its enemies;
But Israel is triumphant.

¹⁹A victor issues from Jacob
To wipe out what is left of Ir.

²⁰He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme, he said:

A leading nation is Amalek;
But its fate is to perish forever.

²¹He saw the Kenites and, taking up his theme, he said:

Though your abode be secure,
And your nest be set among cliffs,
²²Yet shall Kain be consumed,
When Asshur takes you captive.

17. Balaam's visionary powers soar from the present to behold the distant future.

star Hebrew: *kokhav*, which has been interpreted as an image of a king, as the messianic king, and as a "host" in the sense of "multitude of an army."

smashes . . . Moab A fitting and ironic conclusion to the Balaam story. Balak of Moab wished to curse Israel; instead, his hired seer, Balaam, curses Moab.

children of Seth A general term for all the nomadic groups descended from Abraham (see Gen. 25) and considered to be his kinsmen. The Sethites were a nomadic people located somewhere in Canaan. Israel was promised dominance

over them in the patriarchal blessings (as in Gen. 27:29). They have been identified with the Sutu nomads mentioned frequently in Egyptian texts as wandering through the desert regions of the area.

ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS (vv. 20–25)
Balaam is still on the heights as a series of nations come into view. From the Moabite plateau one can see into the Negeb—home of the Amalekites, Asshurim, and Kenites.

21. Kenites A nomadic group that attached itself to Midian, Amalek, and Israel. It ranged from the Sinai Peninsula to the Galilee as far as Kadesh.

נִפְלַ וּגְלוֹי עֵינָיִם:

¹⁷ אֲרָאֲנֹ וְלֹא עֲתָה

אֲשׁוּרְנֹ וְלֹא קָרוֹב

דֶּרֶךְ כּוֹכָב מִיַּעֲקֹב

וְקָם שִׁבְט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

וּמַחֲץ פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב

וְקָרַקַר כָּל־בְּנֵי־שֵׁת:

¹⁸ וְהָיָה אֱדוֹם יִרְשָׁה

וְהָיָה יִרְשָׁה שְׂעִיר אִיֻּבִי

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל עָשָׂה חַיִּל:

¹⁹ וַיִּרְדֵּי מִיַּעֲקֹב

וְהָאֲבִיד שָׂרִיד מְעִיר:

²⁰ וַיִּרְא אֶת־עַמְלֵק וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

רִאשִׁית גּוֹיִם עַמְלֵק

וְאַחֲרֵיתוֹ עַד־י אֲבָד:

²¹ וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַקֵּינִי וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

אֵיתָן מוֹשָׁבְךָ

וְשִׁים בְּסַלְעַ קַנָּה:

²² כִּי אִם־יְהִיָּה לְבַעַר קִיָּן

עַד־מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׁבְּךָ:

CHAPTER 24

17. Some 14 centuries after this event, when Simeon bar Kosiba led a revolt against Ro-

man occupation, Akiva called him Bar Kokhba, "son of a star," and applied this verse to him as the triumphant ruler predicted by the Torah. His revolt, alas, ended in defeat and destruction.

²³He took up his theme and said:

Alas, who can survive except God has willed it!

²⁴Ships come from the quarter of Kittim;

They subject Asshur, subject Eber.

They, too, shall perish forever.

²⁵Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way.

וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֹי מִי יְחִיָּה מִשְׁמוֹ אֵל:
 וְצִיִּים מִיַּד כִּתִּיִם
 וְעֲנוּ אַשּׁוּר וְעֲנוּ-עֵבֶר
 וְגַם-הוּא עַדֵּי אָבֵד:

וַיֵּקֶם בַּלְעָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְמִקְמוֹ וְגַם-
 בַּלַּק הָלַךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ: פ

25 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, ²who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. ³Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the LORD was incensed with Israel. ⁴The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the LORD, so that the

כה וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֵׁטִים וַיַּחֲלֵ
 הָעָם לְזָנוֹת אֶל-בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב: ²וַתִּקְרְאוּן
 לָעָם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכַל הָעָם
 וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶן: ³וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל
 לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּחֲרֵ-אֵף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁴וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קַח אֶת-כָּל-
 רֹאשֵׁי הָעָם וְהוֹקַע אוֹתָם לִיהוָה נֶגֶד

24. Kittim Cyprus. This verse may refer to the invasions of the sea peoples in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E.

IDOLATRY AND EXPIATION AT BAAL-PEOR (25:1–18)

Balaam’s prediction of Israel’s glorious promise is dashed by the events at Baal-peor. The nation that dwells alone with its God abruptly pollutes itself with idolatry.

THE APOSTASY (vv. 1–9)

1. at Shittim Literally, “in the acacias.” Its full name was Abel-shittim. It was from there that Joshua sent out spies and led Israel across the Jordan.

Moabite women Apparently, Moabites continued to dwell in the territory after Sihon and the Israelites conquered it.

2. Sexual attraction led to Israelite participation in the sacrificial feasts at the shrine of Baal-peor.

3. attached itself to Israel transferred its allegiance from *YHVH* to Baal or engaged in acts

of the ritual sexual intercourse required in Baal worship.

Baal-peor “Baal”: the name of the god; “peor”: the name of the site.

the LORD was incensed God’s anger frequently takes the form of a devastating plague (see 17:11).

4. ringleaders Hebrew: *rashei ha-am*, literally, “heads of the people,” simply means “leaders” (see 10:4, 13:3). It suggests that innocent and guilty leaders alike were to be executed.

impaled The punishment for idolatry was death by stoning, with the body then hanged for public display. Impaling is a rare punishment (see Deut. 21:22–23), carried out also on the sons of Saul by the Gibeonites for breach of covenant (2 Sam. 21).

before the LORD That impaled corpses would

25. Each went back to his previous way of thinking, unaffected by having encountered

God’s protecting love for Israel. God’s word can only affect people who are willing to change.

LORD's wrath may turn away from Israel.”⁵ So Moses said to Israel's officials, “Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor.”

⁶Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. ⁷When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, ⁸he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. ⁹Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

הַשָּׁמַשׁ וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אַף־יְהוָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל׃
 5 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרַגוּ
 אִישׁ אֶנְשָׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעֹר׃
 6 וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב
 אֶל־אֶחָיו אֶת־הַמִּדְיָנִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה
 וּלְעֵינֵי כָל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִמָּה בְכִים
 מִפְּתֵיחַ אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד׃ 7 וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן־
 אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקָּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה
 וַיִּקַּח רֶמַח בְּיָדוֹ׃ 8 וַיָּבֵא אַחֵר אִישׁ־
 יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַקְּבֵה וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת־
 אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־קִבְתָּהּ
 וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמַּגָּפָה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ 9 וַיְהִי
 הַמָּוֶתִים בַּמַּגָּפָה אַרְבָּעָה וָעֶשְׂרִים
 אֶלֶף׃ פ

have brought ritual defilement to the sanctuary is not a consideration, because an emergency situation prevailed.

the LORD's wrath Here, this means the plague. In the Bible it is not unusual for the Lord to refer to Himself in the third person (e.g., Exod. 12:11,14).

5. Israel's officials Hebrew: *shof'tei Yisra-el*; the root שפט (often understood as “to judge”) frequently means “to rule” or “to administer.” The judge (*shofet*) is also an officer (*sar*). Moses appointed military officers as commanders and judges, on Jethro's advice. The two functions overlap, with the commander frequently acting in a judicial capacity. This was the practice throughout Mesopotamia.

his men That is, those under his command. Some assume that the execution was carried out. It is more likely, however, that God's wrath was assuaged by Phinehas's act before Moses' order could be fulfilled.

6. This act, committed before the sanctuary in the sight of Moses and the people while they

were bewailing the plague in supplication to God, was a flagrant escalation of Israel's sin.

who were weeping While Moses and the community were weeping, the couple passed them by.

7. Phinehas An Egyptian name meaning “the Nubian.” Phinehas was at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting in his capacity as chief of the sanctuary guards (1 Chron. 9:20), an office held by his father before him (Num. 3:32). Eleazar the high priest did not act in this instance because he was forbidden to come into contact with the dead under any circumstances (Lev. 21:10–12).

spear A short-shafted pike that could be held in both hands and, like the modern bayonet, thrust downward on a recumbent body. Phinehas would have been armed if he was on duty.

9. twenty-four thousand This count probably included the rest of the older generation who were doomed to die in the wilderness, because it is expressly certified in the census that follows this incident.

CHAPTER 25

9. Hirsch contrasts the 24,000 who die here with the 3,000 who died after worshipping the Golden Calf and concludes that sexual immorality is a greater temptation than idolatry. Israel, at this point an ado-

lescent nation, is vulnerable to the sexually charged orgiastic worship and fertility cult of the Moabites. In all likelihood, this is why the Torah later calls for the destruction of all Canaanite altars and holy places in such stark terms when Israel occupies the Promised Land.

הַפְּטָרָה בַּלַּק

HAFTARAH FOR BALAK

MICAH 5:6–6:8

(When Hukkat and Balak are combined, recite this haftarah.)

The exact time of Micah's prophecy is unspecified. According to the first verse of his book, he lived and labored during the mid-8th century B.C.E., the period of the kings mentioned there. It was a time of expanding Assyrian power; the prophet's words of doom (1:2–3:12) may either anticipate or reflect the Assyrian invasions that led to the destruction and dispersion of the northern kingdom in 722–721 B.C.E.

The *haftarah* opens with two prophecies addressed to the remnant of Jacob after the destruction and dispersion. The first prophecy turns on the image of dew, or droplets of water, in a message that gives hope to the people that their renewal will come directly from God (Micah 5:6). As dew comes from heaven without any mortal involvement, so may Israel hope in a resurrection among the nations through divine grace. The second prophecy introduces the simile of a "fierce lion . . . / Which tramples wherever it goes / And rends, with none to deliver" (v. 7). This figure of power and violence gives a sense of empowerment to the nation in exile. Its tone of brute physicality stands in marked contrast to the opening prophecy. The two prophecies presumably were delivered on separate occasions, reflecting two moods or sensibilities.

The prophet climaxes his first two prophecies with a further vision of divine action. "In that day" of regeneration and victory, God will destroy the Israelites' military arsenal and its idolatrous practices (vv. 9–13). The verb "destroy" (*v'hikhrati*) is repeated four times in these verses, like a persistent hammer beat, and is complemented by four other verbs of wreck and ruin. Divine intervention will be total, eradicating the people's reliance on physical force and false worship.

Speaking on God's behalf, Micah then con-

fronts the nation by recalling deeds of divine redemption in the past (6:3–5). The prophet summons the natural world to testify, along with Israel itself, whether God has ever failed them or brought them into danger. The prophet is certain that memory will yield only recollections of the "gracious acts of the LORD" on their behalf.

Hearing all this, the people ponder how best to "approach the LORD" and "Do homage to God on high." The poignancy and the pathos of their proposals (vv. 6–7) leave no reason to doubt their earnestness. The prophet, rejecting the human desire to offer one's earthly goods as an act of entreaty, speaks the word of God through tradition (v. 8).

RELATION OF THE *HAFTARAH* TO THE *PARASHAH*

Micah recalls to the people "what Balak king of Moab / Plotted against you [i.e., your ancestors], / And how Balaam . . . Responded to him" (6:5). This episode, one of God's "gracious acts" for His people, provides a direct link to the *parashah* (Num. 22:2–25:9).

The echo of Balaam's words in the *haftarah* provocatively juxtaposes that seer's contemplative sight with the prophet's moral demands. Evocation of the wondrous gaze in Numbers (24:5), "How fair are your tents, O Jacob" (*mah tovu ohalekha ya-akov*), is now balanced by Micah's statement of "what is good [*mah tov*]" behavior in God's sight. Aesthetics and similes of nature (palm groves, gardens, aloes, and cedars beside the water in Num. 24:6) thus stand on one side, and the tasks of covenantal responsibility on the other. It need not be so, however. Visions of the natural world need not result in moral blindness any more than moral clarity must contradict the insights of nature. The mature mind may sustain the teachings of both the *parashah* and the *haftarah*. It is the challenge of higher religious consciousness.

5 ⁶The remnant of Jacob shall be,
In the midst of the many peoples,
Like dew from the LORD,
Like droplets on grass—
Which do not look to any man
Nor place their hope in mortals.

⁷The remnant of Jacob
Shall be among the nations,
In the midst of the many peoples,
Like a lion among beasts of the wild,
Like a fierce lion among flocks of sheep,
Which tramples wherever it goes
And rends, with none to deliver.

⁸Your hand shall prevail over your foes,
And all your enemies shall be cut down!

⁹In that day

—declares the LORD—

I will destroy the horses in your midst
And wreck your chariots.

¹⁰I will destroy the cities of your land
And demolish all your fortresses.

¹¹I will destroy the sorcery you practice,
And you shall have no more soothsayers.

¹²I will destroy your idols
And the sacred pillars in your midst;
And no more shall you bow down
To the work of your hands.

¹³I will tear down the sacred posts in your
midst

ה ⁶וְהָיָה | שְׂאִרֵי יַעֲקֹב
בְּקֶרֶב עַמִּים רַבִּים
כְּטֵל מֵאֵת יְהוָה
כְּרִבִּיּוֹם עַל־יְעֹשֵׁב
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְוֶה לְאִישׁ
וְלֹא יִיחַל לְבַנֵּי אָדָם:
⁷וְהָיָה שְׂאִרֵי יַעֲקֹב
בְּגוֹיִם
בְּקֶרֶב עַמִּים רַבִּים
כְּאֲרִיָּה בְּבַהֲמוֹת יַעַר
כְּכַפִּיר בְּעִדְרֵי־צֹאן
אֲשֶׁר אִם־עֶבֶר וְרִמַּס
וְטָרַף וְאִין מִצִּיל:
⁸תָּרַם יָדָךְ עַל־צָרֶיךָ
וְכָל־אֲיֹבֶיךָ יִכָּרְתוּ: פ
⁹וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם־הַהוּא
נָאֵם־יְהוָה
וְהִכֵּיתִי סוּסֶיךָ מִקֶּרְבֶּךָ
וְהִאֲבֹדְתִי מִרְכָּבְתֶיךָ:
¹⁰וְהִכֵּרְתִי עָרֶיךָ * אֶרְצֶךָ
וְהִרְסֹתִי כָל־מִבְצָרֶיךָ:
¹¹וְהִכֵּרְתִי כְשָׁפִים מִיָּדְךָ
וּמַעֲוֹנִים לֹא יִהְיוּ־לְךָ:
¹²וְהִכֵּרְתִי פְסִילֶיךָ
וּמִצְבוֹתֶיךָ מִקֶּרְבֶּךָ
וְלֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עוֹד
לְמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ:
¹³וְנָתַשְׁתִּי אֲשִׁירֶיךָ מִקֶּרְבֶּךָ

v. 10. לשון שנאה

Micah 5:6. remnant of Jacob In its original context, these references to the remnant refer to the contemporary exile of Israelites in Assyria and elsewhere. Later generations would read them as a messianic hope for their own time.

Like dew from the LORD Israel's remnant will be graced with divine sustenance and renewal, which asks nothing in return.

8. Your hand shall prevail over your foes Most commentators regard this as God's promise to Israel, but it can also be interpreted as Israel's prayer to God.

13. sacred posts Hebrew: *asherim*; prohibited by the Torah (Deut. 16:21–22). Destruction of Canaanite *asherim* is commanded in Exod. 34:13.

And destroy your cities.
 14In anger and wrath
 Will I wreak retribution
 On the nations that have not obeyed.

וְהַשְׁמַדְתִּי עָרֶיךָ*
 וְעָשִׂיתִי בְּאַף
 וּבַחֲמָה נֶקֶם
 אֶת־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמְעוּ: ס

6 Hear what the LORD is saying:
 Come, present [My] case before the moun-
 tains,
 And let the hills hear you pleading.

שָׁמְעוּ־נָא אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֹמֵר
 קוּם רִיב אֶת־הַהָרִים
 וְתִשְׁמַעְנָה הַגְּבָעוֹת קוֹלְךָ:

2Hear, you mountains, the case of the LORD—
 You firm foundations of the earth!
 For the LORD has a case against His people,
 He has a suit against Israel.

שָׁמְעוּ הָרִים אֶת־רִיב יְהוָה
 וְהָאֲתָנִים מְסָדֵי אֶרֶץ
 כִּי רִיב לִיהוָה עַם־עַמּוֹ
 וְעַם־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתּוֹכַח:

3“My people!
 What wrong have I done you?
 What hardship have I caused you?
 Testify against Me.

עַמִּי
 מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ
 וּמָה הִלְאַתִּיךָ
 עֲנֵה בִי:

4In fact,
 I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
 I redeemed you from the house of bondage,
 And I sent before you
 Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

עֲנֵה בִי
 הֵעֲלֵתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
 וּמִבֵּית עַבְדִּים פְּדִיתִיךָ
 וְאֶשְׁלַח לְפָנֶיךָ
 אֶת־מֹשֶׁה אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם:

5“My people,
 Remember what Balak king of Moab
 Plotted against you,
 And how Balaam son of Beor
 Responded to him.
 [Recall your passage]
 From Shittim to Gilgal—

עַמִּי
 זְכַרְנָא מַה־יַּעַץ
 בָּלַק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב
 וּמַה־עָנָה אֹתוֹ
 בְּלַעַם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר
 מִן־הַשְּׁטִיִּם

לשון שנאה v. 13.

14. nations that have not obeyed The mention here of other nations—and their disobedience—is puzzling. Some commentators propose emending the word at the heart of this difficulty (*goyim*, “nations”) to read *ge-im*, “arrogant ones.” Then the prophet would be referring to the “arrogant ones” of Israel.

Micah 6:5. From Shittim to Gilgal A syn-

opsis of places of divine beneficence, from the wilderness wanderings to settlement of the Promised Land. Shittim was the place of Israelite encampment where God transformed Balaam’s prophecy for the good of the Israelites (Num. 22:1, 25:1, 33:48–49). Gilgal was the cult site where Saul’s kingship was renewed after his victory against the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:14).

And you will recognize
The gracious acts of the LORD.”

עַד-הַגְּלָגָל
לְמַעַן דַּעַת
צְדָקוֹת יְהוָה:

⁶With what shall I approach the LORD,
Do homage to God on high?
Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?

בַּמָּה אֶקְדֹּם יְהוָה
אֶפֶף לְאֱלֹהֵי מָרוֹם
הָאֶקְדַּמְנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת
בְּעִגְלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה:

⁷Would the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams,

הֲיִרְצֶה יְהוָה בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים
בְּרִבְבוֹת נְחִלֵי-שָׁמֶן
הָאֶתֵּן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי
פְרִי בִטְנֵי חַטָּאת נַפְשֵׁי:

With myriads of streams of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgres-
sion,
The fruit of my body for my sins?

⁸“He has told you, O man, what is good,
And what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice
And to love goodness,
And to walk modestly with your God.”

הֲגִיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה-טוֹב
וּמַה-יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ
כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט
וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לִכְתּוֹת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ: פ

6–8. A classic expression of the primacy of morality over sacrifice. Other prophets (Amos 5:21–25; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10–20) also articulate divine contempt for the performance of rituals in the absence of moral behavior.

He has told you . . . what the LORD requires
This usually is understood as two parts of one injunction, referring both to what is good and to what the Lord requires as a doubled expression. However, because of the accent marks in the Hebrew text, the second phrase may be interpreted as specifying the injunction (“And what does the LORD require of you: / Only to do justice”).
justice . . . goodness . . . walk modestly

Abravanel astutely interprets this triad as a graded series of obligations: (1) the demands of justice—the formalities and externals of civil and criminal law; (2) the requirement of loving-kindness—actions performed in the spirit of the law, going beyond its formal, minimal demands; and (3) the inwardness of true piety hidden from the world at large.

For Rosenzweig, justice and goodness are goals yet to be accomplished. Humility before God, by contrast, is the unconditional starting point of all true living. It is a standing before the world in a “wholly present trust,” daring to “say ‘Truly!’ to the truth” at every moment.