THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST TWO POEMS OF BALAAM

(Num. xxiii 7-10, 18-24)

by

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The aim of this article is to show: 1. that the first two poems of Balaam (Num. xxiii 7-10 and xxiii 18-24), commonly ascribed to E, are composed according to the stylistic principle of concentric symmetry, the strophes being organized in a scheme A-B-A’ (first poem) and A-B-C-B’-A’ (second poem); 2. that it is advantageous for biblical scholars to be aware of the exact literary structure of these poems.

1. The literary structure

Today’s Bibles, in both Hebrew and modern translations, commonly present these two passages as poetic compositions, arranged in a free succession of stichs or verses. They do not mark the presence of strophes. In fact, even though some scholars have proposed a subdivision into strophes1), others have rejected it as improbable2). My examination confirms the presence of strophes, in the subdivision proposed by Tournay (see n. 1); and it goes farther, finding ...

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1) For instance: S. Mowinckel, “Der Ursprung der Bilhâmsage”, ZAW 48 (1930), pp. 262-3; R. Tournay, RB 71 (1964), p. 284. Mowinckel distinguishes four strophes in the first poem: 7ab + cd; 8ab + (a supposedly missing verse similar to v. 20); 9ab + cd; 10ab + cd; in the second poem five strophes: 18ab + 19ab; 19cd + 20ab; 21ab + cd; (v. 22 is suppressed, as a repetition of 24, 8) 23ab + cd; 24ab + cd. Tournay distinguishes: in the first poem an initial distich (7ab) and three strophes (7cd + 8ab; 9ab + cd; 10ab + cd); in the second poem an initial distich (18ab) and five strophes (19ab + cd; 20ab + 21ab; 21cd + 22ab; 23ab + cd; 24ab + cd). Thus he neither adds nor suppresses anything.

among the strophes a precise interrelation, governed by a scheme of concentric symmetry³).

Let us reread and reconsider the two poems.

a) Num. xxiii 7-10

7a \( mn_{-}mr_{\;}^m_{\;}yn_{\;}^b_{\;}h_{\;}l_{\;}g \) From Aram has brought me Balak,
b \( mlk_{-}mw_{\;}^b_{\;}mb_{\;}rr_{\;}_{\;}g_{\;}d_{\;}m \) the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

7c \( lk_{\;}^b_{\;}rb_{\;}_{\;}^l_{\;}y_{\;}^q_{\;}b \) “Come, curse for me Jacob!
d \( wlk_{\;}^b_{\;}zm_{\;}^m_{\;}y_{\;}^s_{\;}r_{\;}^l_{\;} \) Come, execrate Israel!”

8a \( mh_{\;}^b_{\;}q_{\;}b_{\;}l_{\;}_{\;}^q_{\;}bh_{\;}^l_{\;}l \) How can I denounce him whom God
b \( wmb_{\;}^b_{\;}zm_{\;}^m_{\;}l_{\;}_{\;}^q_{\;}m_{\;}y_{\;}h_{\;}b_{\;}h \) has not denounced?

d \( zv_{\;}^l_{\;}l_{\;}^b_{\;}rb_{\;}_{\;}^q_{\;}b_{\;}h_{\;}l_{\;} \) How can I execrate him whom YHWH

9a \( ky_{\;}^m_{\;}mr_{\;}^t_{\;}s_{\;}ym_{\;}^r_{\;}^n_{\;}w \) For from the top of the rocks I see
b \( wmb_{\;}^b_{\;}y_{\;}_{\;}^s_{\;}w_{\;}r_{\;}_{\;}n_{\;}w_{\;} \) him,
c \( h_{\;}^m_{\;}^t_{\;}m_{\;}l_{\;}d_{\;}d_{\;}y_{\;}s_{\;}k_{\;}n_{\;} \) from the hills I behold him:
d \( wbg_{\;}w_{\;}y_{\;}_{\;}^l_{\;}_{\;}^y_{\;}t_{\;}s_{\;}b_{\;} \) Lo, a people dwelling alone,

c \( 2v_{\;}bg_{\;}w_{\;}y_{\;}_{\;}^m_{\;}l_{\;}_{\;}^b_{\;}v_{\;}m_{\;} \) not reckoning itself among the nations.

10a \( my_{\;}^m_{\;}mb_{\;}^t_{\;}r_{\;}p_{\;}_{\;}^r_{\;}q_{\;}b_{\;}h \) Who can count the dust of Jacob?
b \( wms_{\;}p_{\;}^t_{\;}r_{\;}_{\;}^b_{\;}y_{\;}_{\;}^s_{\;}r_{\;}^l_{\;} \) Who can number the dust-clouds of

c \( tmt_{\;}^n_{\;}p_{\;}^b_{\;}_{\;}^y_{\;}n_{\;}t_{\;}_{\;}^y_{\;}_{\;}s_{\;}_{\;}r_{\;}_{\;}y_{\;}m_{\;} \) Israel?
d \( w_{\;}^b_{\;}h_{\;}b_{\;}y_{\;}t_{\;}r_{\;}b_{\;}y_{\;}t_{\;}_{\;}^k_{\;}m_{\;}b_{\;}w_{\;} \) Let me die the death of the righteous!

Le my end be like his!

On the left, I give the consonantal text of the Hebrew tradition, from BHS. The connecting line under two words denotes that they supposedly form a single metric (word-concept) unit. The subdivision and arrangement of the poem anticipate the results of the examination. For a conjectural reconstruction of the original text, see the article of Albright mentioned in n. 2. I adopt only two minor corrections of the MT in v. 10b. Instead of \( \ddm_{\;}s_{\;}p_{\;}^t_{\;} \) I read \( \ddm_{\;}s_{\;}p_{\;}^t_{\;} \) (see below, under 2a). Thus the MT has here probably lost a metric unit. Instead of \( ^{\ddm_{\;}r_{\;}b_{\;}d_{\;}^l_{\;}^t_{\;}\ddm_{\;}t_{\;}r_{\;}b_{\;}d_{\;}^d_{\;}^t_{\;} \) I read \( t_{\;}r_{\;}b_{\;}d_{\;}^d_{\;}^t_{\;} \) (see below, under 2a). Thus
the MT has here probably regained the lost metric unit (a metric

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