Balaam and Abraham

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I. Introduction

The Tale of Balaam's Ass (Num. xxii 22-35), today an episode within the Balaam Narrative (Num. xxii 2-xxiv 25), has long been considered part of the J-source's version of Balaam's journey to Moab and his attempts to curse Israel at the behest of King Balak. Several recent examinations of the Balaam Narrative have tended to the conclusion that the Tale is a distinct literary entity, alien to the original Balaam Narrative and oracles as a whole—in other words, an interpolation. The main point of disagreement between these studies lies in the origin ascribed to the Tale: while Gross and Sturdy regard it as an adaptation of an originally independent folktale, Rofé views it as a piece specially composed to fit into the existing Balaam Narrative. The Tale of Balaam's Ass is a "burlesque" of Balaam as presented in the main Balaam Narrative, and reflects the late, hostile evaluation of Balaam common to other biblical passages (with the exception of Micah vi 5).

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1 See, e.g., G. B. Gray, Numbers (Edinburgh, 1903), pp. 307-22. For a convenient survey and critique of scholarship in the last 100 years, see A. Rofé, The Book of Balaam (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 10-30 (Hebrew).


3 Rofé, pp. 45-52. Rouillard, who, unlike the other scholars mentioned in n. 2, accepts the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis for the Balaam Narrative as a whole, suggests that the Tale may belong to a late stratum of J, born in reaction to the earlier J-version of the Balaam Narrative; see Rouillard, p. 239.
The present study will go a step further and demonstrate that this parody of Balaam was purposely modelled so as to evoke comparison, and at the same time contrast, with the Binding of Isaac (Akedah, Gen. xxii 1-19). The Tale can in fact be considered a "reflection story" of the Akedah.

A reflection story, as defined by Zakovitz, is one in which can be discerned the outlines of another narrative, but in inverse form, as one's reflection in the mirror. The "reflected" character and his actions are perceived as the antithesis of the original figure and his actions. The reader, appreciating the affinity between the original and its reflection, gains new insights in evaluating the characters—both the original and the invert—and their actions.⁵

In defining the Tale of Balaam's Ass as a reflection story of the Binding of Isaac, I am only following in the footsteps of the Rabbis, who detected both the similarity and the inverse relationship of the two narratives.

II. Setting, Characters and Plot

A. The setting of both tales is a journey by ass. But while Abraham sets out for Mt Moriah in obedience to God's command, Balaam saddles up for Moab in opposition to the divine will: "God's anger was kindled because he went" (Num. xxii 22). The Rabbis, commenting on both Gen. xxii 3 and Num. xxii 21, took repeated notice of this inverse relationship, understanding these verses as evidence of zeal on the part of both figures: that of Abraham, born out of love of God, and that of Balaam, arising from hatred of Israel.⁶

B. In both narratives an angel reveals himself to the protagonist at the climax of the plot (Gen. xxii 11; Num. xxii 31).⁷ Angels are