“Here is a people that dwells alone, and that does not consider itself among the nations”: Balaam ben Beor and the National Boundaries of Ancient Israel

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# Table of Contents

Cover Page ...........................................................................................................................1  
Contents ...............................................................................................................................2  
Abstract ................................................................................................................................3  
Introduction: Torah as Mythology .......................................................................................4  
Chapter 1: Balaam the Ambiguous ....................................................................................12  
Chapter 2: The Deir Alla Text ...........................................................................................26  
Chapter 3: Cultic Warfare ..................................................................................................30  
Chapter 4: Balaam the Malevolent ....................................................................................36  
Conclusion .........................................................................................................................40  
Appendices .........................................................................................................................44  
  Appendix A: The Location of Tell Deir Alla.................................................................44  
  Appendix B: Territorial Divisions in the Ancient Near East ........................................45  
  Appendix C: Taxonomic Classifications of Israelite Nationhood ...............................46  
Bibliography ......................................................................................................................47
Abstract

Contrary to the claims of religious fundamentalists, the Torah is not a single, consistent work of sacred literature, handed by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Instead, it is a composite text, representing a collection of writings from a number of ancient Israelite authors. In this regard it is best viewed as ancient Israel's national mythology, as it uses narrative forms to present, for Israelite readers, a history of the world and of Israel. In turn, this history informs the manners in which audiences from ancient Israel to the present day conceive of God and the Israelite people.

Within that context, this thesis takes a close look at the figure of Balaam ben (son of) Beor, as he appears in Numbers 22-24 and 31. As a mythological character, Balaam acts to construct, reify, and strengthen the boundaries between Israel and foreign nations. Placing him in a direct and personal relationship with God, the Bible's authors and redactors establish him as a legitimate cultic authority. Simultaneously, however, they attack his credibility by associating him with such denigrated characters as the Pharaoh of the Exodus story and the prophets of Baal from 1 Kings 18. In so doing, they make Balaam the religious representative of Moab and Midian, two of Israel's traditional enemies, and therefore contrast him directly with God, who represents Israel. Inevitably, God outranks Balaam, and the authors therefore depict him as a model of cultic behavior expected of foreigners but disallowed to Israelites. As such, Israel's mythologizers posit Balaam as a boundary-crosser, only to redraw the lines so as to place him on the outside.

Cover Quote: Numbers 23:9, translation my own.
Introduction: Torah as Mythology

As a literary form, mythology uses narrative forms to posit, sacralize, and reify societal structures and values that its authors and redactors endorse. In its particular situation as Israel’s national mythology, the Hebrew Bible contains a number of different strands of authorship, each with its own particular set of objectives. In bringing the entire biblical corpus into its current form, a redactor or school of redactors intertwined the many strands into one. These redactors had a set of goals of their own which, informed by the Israel of their own day and age, may or may not have run parallel to the goals of any given passage’s original author. In carrying out this project, these redactors wielded pre-existing narratives – editing, enlarging, and discarding them as appropriate while simultaneously putting them in conversation with one another in order to formulate a single text – in order to put forth a mythology of their own. If, as Bruce Lincoln asserts, mythology is “ideology in narrative form,”1 then the biblical redactors compiled what now acts as Judaism’s sacred text in order to assert an ideological image of their ideal Israel. In this context, the narratives surrounding Balaam son of Beor evince an effort to reify the boundaries of Israelite nationhood by mythologizing a foreign Other. In the act of depicting Balaam as a foil to Israel in mythological space and time, the authors and redactors of the Balaam texts construct the Israel in which they wish to locate themselves in their own present.

Chapters 22-24 of the biblical Book of Numbers first present the reader with Balaam, who emerges as an anomalous figure because he appears in active communication with the God of Israel, yet he himself is not an Israelite. He comes on the scene in the employ of the Moabite king Balak and his Midianite allies, who have hired him to curse Israel. God, however, thwarts his mission, and ultimately forces Balaam to utter four beautiful poems blessing and praising

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1 Bruce Lincoln, Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), xii.
Israel, including the *Mah Tovu* passage that now features prominently in Jewish liturgy. While this passage, known as the “Balaam pericope,” features him most prominently, other sections of the Hebrew Bible do sporadically make references to Balaam, most notably Numbers 25 and 31. Despite his apparent close relationship with the God of Israel, the book of Numbers presents Balaam as the representative of Israel’s enemy Moab (and, to a lesser degree, of Israel’s other enemy Midian). As such, he serves as a foil against which Israel constructs its nationality.

Therefore the Balaam narrative serves well to illuminate those characteristics that make Israel distinct: Israel possesses those values that Balaam lacks and lacks those that Balaam possesses. Being narratives codified and canonized in the book of Numbers, the tales about Balaam compose a set of mythological accounts, each of which acts as a discursive element of the story that Israelites tell themselves about their own heritage.

Mythology, as a literary art form, exists as a mechanism by which storytellers harness the past and make it relevant to the present. We as modern Westerners like to think of the past as a fixed chronology of events. History, so the vision goes, contains a set of immutable stories whose repercussions teach lessons that reverberate into the present. This view makes a clear differentiation between the undeniable certitude of history and the literary inventiveness that we associate with fiction.\(^2\) In fact, however, this image has little relation to the real world: human memories are fallible, and, as a result, the past is fluid. As Lincoln explains, “few things are so unstable as the past, which survives and persists – to the extent that it does – at first through memory and then, after a relatively short time, through stories that are told and retold.”\(^3\) Thus, any individual’s knowledge of the past comes to that person through the telling of stories across years and generations. Every time a new storyteller passes on a tale, he or she adds his or her

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\(^3\) Bruce Lincoln, *Between History and Myth: Stories of Harald Fairhair and the Founding of the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014), 104.
own personal interpretation to the story, choosing to accentuate certain details, minimize others, and otherwise edit the story in order to make it consistent with his or her worldview. For this reason, an event loses its original shape as soon as its first storyteller relates it, and the meaning accorded it in its own time disappears, to be replaced with the significance that later narratives assign. Thus, while the narrative that comes to the listener may on the surface recount a legendary event, with emphasis on the characters and activities depicted therein, the real argument that the tale imparts comes through by means of “the subtlety, hidden interests, and consummate skill of the storytellers.”

The category of storytelling comprises a number of different forms: factual and fictive, entertaining and pedagogical, recent and distant. Mythology, according to Lincoln, encompasses those stories that place themselves in the distant past. Myths use this air of antiquity to make “strong claims for their own origin, authority, and status, constituting themselves as timeless ancestral tradition, wisdom of the ages, or the product of revelation.” By thus separating the myth from regular human processes – ascribing it either to divinity or to untraceable eons of human sagacity – mythologizers present a story “as a paradigmatic model for proper existence, always valid, always authoritative, always demanding of deep respect.” Asserting the timelessness both of a myth and of the lessons that it tells, a mythologizer brings the legendary past directly to bear on the present. As Claude Calame explains, “the result of such an effort of rationalization of the legendary past of one’s own culture is … the formulation of a continual temporal succession that makes the heroes of legend the real founders of the present.” While Calame’s emphasis on “heroes” betrays his background in the study of Greek mythology, his

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4 Lincoln, Between History and Myth, 104.
5 Lincoln, Between History and Myth, 2.
6 Lincoln, Between History and Myth, 115.
argument remains applicable across cultures: tales of the distant past, at a subtle, hidden level, justify and shape the present.

Because myths make such a powerful claim to legitimacy, they become important literary battlegrounds, as authors with competing perspectives struggle to ensure that their particular interpretation will predominate in the next generation. With this in mind, Lincoln explains that a myth’s continual revision demonstrates its nature as a battleground; whoever controls the means of propaegating the narrative controls the narrative itself.\(^8\) For this reason, variants proliferate. Importantly, however, this struggle for mythological dominance does not merely encompass an active mythologizer and passive audience. Instead, both writer and reader engage in the creation of myth; as Calame asserts, “‘Myths’ are not ‘texts’ but ‘discourses.’”\(^9\) The creation of a myth constitutes a vibrant dialogue between narrator and audience, in which listeners may limit the influence of a powerful storyteller both by pushing back against new alterations and, through acts of “selective hearing and reinterpretation,” instituting changes of their own. Over decades and centuries of this process, “what come to be accepted as standard, proper, or hegemonic versions of myths are collective products that have been negotiated between narrators and audiences over time.”\(^10\)

Few texts better exemplify this process of negotiation than the Hebrew Bible. As an official, sanctified canon, the Hebrew Bible epitomizes Lincoln’s conception of a “hegemonic version” of a myth. Additionally, the traditional notion of “Torah from Sinai” – the idea that the Pentateuch comprises a single text, given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai – is itself mythological, and while myths are not necessarily objectively false, this particular myth lies at some distance from the truth. Not only does the invocation of the divine and of a legendary hero locate this tale

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\(^8\) Lincoln, *Between History and Myth*, 105.
\(^10\) Lincoln, *Between History and Myth*, 150.
in the mythic past, but the idea that the Torah in its current form had just one author withers under the light of scholarly scrutiny. In its stead, scholars propose the “documentary hypothesis”: the idea that the Torah as we now know it comprises the work of at least four competing (though not in all cases contemporary) authors or schools of authorship, brought into its current form by a later redactor or school of redactors.

These various authors came onto the scene at different times in Israelite history, each with his own set of motivations. According to the outline that Richard Elliott Friedman provides in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, the two earliest Biblical authors are J (so called for the use of the divine name *YHWH*, which starts with a J in German) and E (distinguished by the use of the divine name *Elohim*). Both date from the divided kingdom period before the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. As E comes from the north and J from the south, the two act in contradistinction to one another. For some unknown reason, an early redactor combined the two into one text (which scholars call JE); P (the priestly author) came onto the scene sometime between 722 and 586 as a counterargument, written by the Aaronid priesthood in Jerusalem, to the pro-Moses JE. Scholars further assert that P must predate D (the Deuteronomist, author of much of Deuteronomy), since D is a prophetic response to the priestly P text; Friedman dates D to the reign of King Josiah (d. 609). Finally, all of these works come together into one book through the pen of a late redactor, writing in the early Second Temple period.11

The implications of the Bible’s nature as a composite text vary issue by issue. As one example, Naomi Koltun-Fromm, in her work *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, investigates the documentary hypothesis with regard to Israel’s holiness. While each narrative school for which the topic is relevant ascribes to Israel this quality, she argues, each approaches the matter in a

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slightly different way: E places Israel’s designation as holy in the distant future, as a result of Israel’s future fulfilment of the covenant with God, while D asserts that God assigned Israel its holiness in the distant past, at the time of the patriarchs. P (who in Koltun-Fromm’s understanding wrote only the first half of Leviticus) assigns holiness only to a small class of objects, thereby limiting the quality of holiness to a priestly class, while H (the Holiness code in the second half of Leviticus) allows and encourages all Israelites to follow God’s commandments and thereby become holy.\textsuperscript{12} While each of these schools agrees on the basic underlying point, the four narrative threads reveal four unique approaches to Israel’s holiness. Thus, even when in agreement, the Torah’s different narrative strands create contradictions within the text. This, argues Robert Alter, in fact represents the unique glory of the Hebrew Bible, and the manner in which it creates meaning: “In the Greek tradition, there were competing versions of the same myths, but never in a single text. Modern Western narratives generally insist on verisimilar consistency. In the Bible, however, the variants of a single story are sometimes placed in a kind of implicit dialogue with one another.”\textsuperscript{13} In this dialogue of sorts, the different narrative strands interact and intermingle with one another. They do not create a single, definite meaning, but rather – under the broader umbrella of the general claim shared by the source texts – provide interpretive space for the reader to reach his or her own conclusions. As such, the many Balaam texts, deriving as they do from a number of authorship traditions, feature a multitude of differing ideas about what separates Israel from other nations.

\textsuperscript{12} Naomi Koltun-Fromm, Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2010), 33-4. Koltun-Fromm’s work contains no account of holiness in J because the term for “holy” never appears in that body of literature. Koltun-Fromm’s divisions of P and H represent two subsections of the text that Friedman calls P.

\textsuperscript{13} Robert Alter, The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel (New York: Norton, 1999), 110-1n.
As a mechanism for national self-designation, Steven Grosby proposes the “boundary-generating referent”: a criterion that draws a line between the in-group and the out-group. In Israel’s case, Grosby asserts, the active referent is “the reinterpreted image of a historically distinctive past that separates the nation from other nations”; i.e., the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{14} The Bible’s authors and redactors, in compiling a text to serve as their national mythology, likely had in mind the purpose of – if not the theoretical backing behind – constructing “boundary-generating referents.” In telling the story of Israel’s national genesis and early development, the Bible provides a number of individuals and episodes whose stories provide fertile ground for the demarcation of national boundaries.\textsuperscript{15} Because these stories, written by Israelites, serve to distinguish Israel from foreign nations, they necessarily rank Israel above its neighbors. After all, no self-respecting Israelite author or redactor would deign to declare his own nation inferior to any other, particularly since Israel prides itself on its unique covenantal relationship with God. Thus, the boundaries that these stories generate do not place the separated parties on equal footing, but rather situate Israel above foreign nations. Of the stories in question, likely the most fruitful for exploration tells the tale of Balaam: an individual who seems to meet some but not all criteria for membership in the Israelite nation.

First introduced in Numbers 22-24, Balaam lacks Israelite ancestry but nonetheless has the capacity to communicate with and purvey the messages of the Israelite God. While the relationships between God and this foreigner affirms the idea of the Israelite God as the creator and king of all humanity, the character of Balaam also confirms, through his strained relationship with both God and the Israelites, that Israel receives God’s covenant, and that the other nations,


\textsuperscript{15} As an inherently incomplete set of examples, Grosby lists “the history of the putative kinship structure of Abraham-Isaac-and-Jacob, the Exodus tradition, and the traditions found from Joshua through 2 Kings” as well as “the law.” Grosby, “The Chosen People of Ancient Israel and the Occident,” 369.
while God’s creation, lack Israel’s unique status. Balaam’s quasi-prophetic capacity invites a comparison between him and such great heroes of the Israeliite tradition as Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, rather than ordinary Israelites. I use the term “quasi-prophetic” because the pericope never distinguishes his professional title. The scholarly literature has a lengthy and inconclusive debate on the appropriateness of ascribing to Balaam the title of prophet. These scholars, however, fail to recognize that the ambiguity likely results from a deliberate act on the part of the authors and redactors of the Book of Numbers. Given that this ambiguity characterizes Balaam’s depiction throughout the text of Numbers 22-24, I see it appropriate to maintain it in my own writing and thereby avoid assigning him the title of “prophet,” “seer,” “diviner,” or any other label. These common and characteristic ambiguities notwithstanding, Balaam’s behavior does

16 The Hebrew Bible is noticeably vague with regards to Balaam’s job description. He is never called נביא navi, the standard Hebrew word for “prophet,” but it is also never said that he is not a prophet. (A partial list of people called navi includes Abraham (Gen. 20:7), Aaron, (Ex. 7:1), Moses – who is named as the best of prophets (Deut. 34:10), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:20), Elijah (1 Kings 18:10), Elisha (2 Kings 6:12), Isaiah (Is. 37:2), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5), Habakkuk (Hab. 1:1), and Haggai (Hag. 1:1). In his own oracles he describes himself as שדי יחזה machazeh Shaddai “one who sees visions of God,” using the root חזח chazah “see” from which is derived חזח chozeh “seer” (Num. 24:4, 16). On the other hand, he fits the definition of navi given in Num. 12:6 as one to whom God speaks in a dream (Num. 22:9-12, 20). The scholarly literature is similarly divided on this question, with numerous authors giving detailed footnotes explaining their choice of words: Baruch Levine calls him (with no explanation) a “noted diviner”; Jacob Milgrom prefers “renowned seer”; David Marcus observes that “he uses divination techniques like a typical Mesopotamian seer,” but his regular communication with God distinguishes him as “a prophet of God”; Joel N. Lohr says that “if Balaam were from Israel, he would be called a prophet (נביא)”; Michael Moore manages to call him “seer,” “oneiromantic,” and “oracle-reciter” – all subsumed under the broader category of “diviner/seer” – all in the same sentence; and finally, R. W. L. Moberly argues that “because Num. 22-24 depicts Balaam for the most part in categories from Hebrew prophecy elsewhere, to call him a ‘seer’ rather than a ‘prophet’ would … distract from, more than illuminate, the working assumptions of the Balaam narrative. The wide-ranging generic term ‘prophet’ … is the least misleading, as long as it is used with the appropriate nuance.”

While much ink and energy has been expended upon this question, the scholars all seem to miss a very important point: the Bible intentionally goes out of its way to avoid giving Balaam a title. This ambiguity, being characteristic of Numbers 22-24’s depiction of Balaam, only adds to the multidimensionality of his character. For that reason, it seems best to me, despite the grammatical and syntactical clunkiness that it may cause, to attempt to preserve that ambiguity while writing about Balaam in English.

not match that expected of an Israelite, nor does he declare himself a member of the Israelite community. Thus, the ultimately appropriate characterization of Balaam marks him as foreign to the nation of Israel. As a foreigner, Balaam demonstrates the firmness of the boundary between Israel and the other nations. The Balaam mythology – as depicted in Numbers 22-24 and in other biblical passages, notably Numbers 31, that invoke his character – deprives him of the distinguishing factors that mark Israel as special.

Chapter 1: Balaam the Ambiguous

In a rare moment of consensus between traditional Jewish commentary and modern scholarly criticism, there seems to be near-universal agreement that the Balaam pericope is an entity of separate and independent authorship from the surrounding chapters of the Book of Numbers, brought into its current form and place17 by a later redactor who seems to have had significant influence over the current form of this “identifiable literary unit.”18 (Friedman assigns the vast majority of these chapters to E but also hedges his bets by asserting that “the Balaam episode is perhaps the hardest section in the Torah in which to delineate sources.”19) While the narrative therefore should be recognized as its own independent story, the fact of its late insertion means that its constructors and redactors were likely aware of the other traditions present in the Torah (or at least Genesis-Numbers), as well as the text itself as it stood before the pericope’s insertion. As such, references and allusions to other Torah texts, as well as the particular textual location and context of the pericope, are best viewed as intentional constructions on the part of its authors and redactors.

17 The story seems to have been inserted here because it is geographically consistent with the surrounding chapters: Num. 22:1 brings Israel to the Plains of Moab (Moab being the country which Balak rules), and Num. 25:1 sees Israelite men sleeping with Moabite women. Levine, Numbers 21-36, 137.
18 Levine, Numbers 21-36, 137.
The story begins with Israel encamped on the boundary of Moab, where the Moabite king Balak, fearing the great numbers of Israelites alongside his kingdom, sends (in consultation with his Midianite allies\textsuperscript{20}) for the diviner Balaam ben Beor to curse the Israelites and thereby weaken them. Balaam, however, cannot accept the commission without the permission of Israel’s God, and on first consultation God refuses; when asked a second time, God allows Balaam to accept the job, but only with the restriction that Balaam’s specific words remain limited in accordance with the divine will. Yet Balaam’s departure arouses God’s fury\textsuperscript{21} and God therefore sends an angel to block the road. The angel remains invisible to Balaam but not to his donkey; after Balaam engages in a physical and verbal altercation with his mount, God opens his eyes. Seeing the angel, Balaam recognizes the error of his ways and offers to return home, but the angel insists that he continue, reasserting that the words he utters will be God’s and not his own. Upon his arrival at Moab, Balaam four times attempts, at Balak’s urging, to curse Israel, but four times God speaks through him, giving voice to beautiful oracular poetry – these poems being the original literary structures around which the pericope’s authors constructed the remainder of the passage.\textsuperscript{22} With that Balaam leaves for home.

\textsuperscript{20} Richard Elliott Friedman convincingly argues that the presence of the Midianites in Numbers 22 is a later redactor’s edit intended to merge the J-source story of Baal Peor, in which Israelites consort with Moabites (Num. 25:1-5) with the P-source story of Peor, featuring Midianites (Num. 25:6-19, 31:1-20). Friedman, \textit{The Bible with Sources Revealed}, 280-1, 280n, 287-8, 287n, 298-9.

\textsuperscript{21} The Bible gives no explanation for the change in the divine mind. While scholars have proposed a number of different theories, it is not within the scope of this paper to guess as to why this might be.

\textsuperscript{22} Baruch Levine proposes convincingly that the poems predate the biblical literature contextualizing them, arguing that “the Balaam narratives take their cue from the poems, but they reinterpret the issues reflected in them. The narratives represent a later composition, emanating from a very different circle of biblical authors.” In fact, on the basis of the many different names for God appearing in the poems as well as the existence of non-Israelite Balaam texts found at Deir ‘Alla, Levine suggests that Balaam’s poems may originally have been in written in tribute to the regional Canaanite god El, and that the author/redactor of the surrounding narrative undertook to subsume El into the national divinity YHVH. If Levine’s analysis is to be trusted, we can see here another attempt on the part of the biblical author to define Israel’s special characteristic, this time as its monotheistic religious practice – dovetailing neatly with later Biblical authorship’s common goal of promoting the centralization of worship. While such an argument is likely an attempt to promote Israelite unity against Israelite regionalism rather than against a foreign Other, it nonetheless remains consistent with the author’s general objective of setting Israel aside and above. Levine, \textit{Numbers 21-36}, 208, 218-9.
Trying to pin down Balaam’s relationship with the God of Israel presents the student of the Bible with quite a challenge, as the deliberate ambiguity underlying his job title characterizes his presentation in its entirety. First off, it emerges that Balaam interacts specifically with the God of Israel; no other gods appear in the text, implying that the pericope’s authors held not that “our God is superior to the other gods” but that “our God is the one and only god.” That Balaam has the capacity to converse with Israel’s God – not just to receive messages, but to carry on two-way conversations – is evident from the biblical text. Additionally, it appears that Balaam’s doings concern God: while the text never states that Balaam calls upon God, God certainly seems to come to him precisely at those moments that he would most desire divine consultation. To call it coincidental that God twice addresses Balaam at night just after the arrival of Moabite functionaries\(^{23}\) would be a highly circumspect claim; rather, God feels a need to intervene in the interchange between Balaam and the Moabites. Yet unlike Abraham and Moses, who can change God’s mind – Abraham bargains down the number of virtuous people that would be required for God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah,\(^{24}\) and Moses persuades God to spare the Israelite people after the Golden Calf incident\(^{25}\) – Balaam lacks influence not only over others’ decision-making capacities but even his own. For Abraham and Moses, these moments of reciprocity demonstrate close and intimate relationships between God and these respective individuals; this intimacy indicates that Abraham and Moses have been on the receiving end of particular, covenantal divine distinction. Balaam, however, demonstrably lacks the intimacy that characterizes God’s relationships with Abraham and Moses. The mythology deprives him of the power of speech not only on the divine plane but also on the human, as he travels to Moab only on the condition that he will speak only the words that God puts in his mouth. This puts Balaam in a unique and

\(^{23}\) Num. 22:9, 20.
\(^{24}\) Gen. 18:23-32.
\(^{25}\) Ex. 32:9-14.
precarious position: he possesses a communication ability that is simultaneously both superhuman and subhuman.

The ability to communicate with God elevates Balaam over most of Israel; as Moses at one point laments, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!” 26 Indeed, few Israelites possess the power of communication with God, making it all the more extraordinary for it to be granted to a foreigner. God’s interactions with Balaam invite comparisons to two other characters: Abimelech, king of Gerar, and Rebecca’s brother Laban. God communicates with Laban rather briefly: as Laban chases Jacob, who has recently fled from Laban’s household with his two wives – Laban’s daughters – in tow, God visits Laban in a dream and says, ‘Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad.’ 27 The Torah provides more details in the Abimelech episode: as Abraham and Sarah journey into Abimelech’s kingdom of Gerar, Abimelech, believing Sarah to be Abraham’s sister rather than his wife, takes her into his household. God then comes to him in a dream, saying, “You are to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.” Abimelech protests that he was not aware that she was married. In reply, God assents, stating that, for that very reason, divine interference prevented Abimelech from sleeping with Sarah. God then commands Abimelech to restore Sarah to Abraham. 28

In both of these episodes, God comes in a dream to the non-Israelite to intervene in that individual’s activity and warn against misbehavior. While the language of the Balaam pericope

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26 Num. 11:29. Joshua reports to Moses that two otherwise unknown Israelites, Eldad and Medad, are prophesying, and urges Moses to put an end to their activities. Moses, however, expresses a desire that more, not fewer, Israelites would be capable of hearing and purveying the divine word. The quotation is from the New Revised Standard Version translation; in this paper, all biblical translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

27 Gen. 31:24.

28 Gen. 20:1-7. It is also notable that God, when speaking to Abimelech, refers to Abraham as a prophet (navi), a claim that at least implies that Abimelech is not. While it is interesting to then see how this bears on Balaam’s character, it would be a stretch to use this as evidence to prove that Balaam is not a navi.
does not perfectly match that of the two episodes in Genesis, these two scenes certainly parallel God’s communications with Balaam in Numbers 22. At night, God manifests the divine self to a non-Israelite individual, in order to caution that individual against a certain behavior. In both Abimelech’s case and Balaam’s, the recipient of the message has the ability to respond and carry on a conversation with God. Yet two features of the Balaam episode make his experience distinctive. First, these nighttime (likely dream) conversations are not the only times that God speaks to Balaam: when Balaam offers sacrifices before his first and second oracles, God presents the divine self to Balaam in order to place a message in his mouth. Notably, God accepts Balaam’s offerings and through those offerings, it seems, Balaam successfully summons God. Second, a close observer will note that God’s engagement with Laban and Abimelech directly protects individuals who will become the progenitors of the Israelite nation. On the surface, however, the Balaam episode does not follow this pattern: what direct effect might a conversation between Moabite dignitaries and a man from far away have on the fate of the Israelite nation, that it might parallel people on the verge of harming Jacob or Sarah? The high level of concern that God pays to Balaam’s case demonstrates that a successful appeal on the part of the Moabite dignitaries would have had the same result as Laban attacking Jacob. Balaam therefore must have had the same capacity to damage Israel as those other two men. This could

29 Compare “ Ebola אל-אבר המייל ב_resize_?הילהל” (Gen. 20:3, all translations in this note my own) and “ Ebola אל-_lab 이름 ב_resize_?הילהל” (Gen. 31:14) to “ Ebola אל-אבר המיילל” (Num. 22:9), with context from verse 8 indicating that this episode occurs at night and “ Ebola אל-אבר המיילל” (Num. 22:20).
30 Num. 23:4, 16.
31 While before God came (bec) to Balaam, now God meets (קד) Balaam. The change in language seems to indicate that the first interaction was entirely God’s doing, while the latter required the agency of both.
32 The book of Numbers indicates that Balaam is from a place called Pethor, which is “on the river” (Num. 22:5, translation my own). The pericope itself is unclear as to the exact location of Pethor, but commentators almost universally identify the river in question with the Euphrates or one of its tributaries, placing Balaam’s hometown significantly to the east of any place that any biblical character has been since Abram left his hometown of Haran in Genesis 12. Milgrom, The JPS Torah Commentary, 186n. The first oracle, a much older text than the pericope, identifies Balaam as being from Aram, to the east (13:7).
only happen if the power to bless and to curse that Balak cites when sending for Balaam\textsuperscript{33} is indeed operative. Balaam must therefore be successful and capable in his cultic vocation.\textsuperscript{34}

In another of its many ambiguities, the pericope never explicitly names the divinity to which Balaam makes those offerings. Additionally, while the passage takes care not to name any other divinities aside from the God of Israel, Balak does take Balaam to “the high places of Baal,” where Balaam offers his first sacrifice.\textsuperscript{35} This suggests that there may well have been an earlier tradition in which Balaam works in the service of Baal, or at least that affiliates Balaam and/or Balak with Baal. In this particular text, however, Baal cannot engage with the human actors, because in the minds of the pericope’s mythologizers Baal is merely a figment of the collective human imagination. As only the God of Israel is a true god, only the God of Israel can respond to Balaam and grant him cultic success.

On the other side of the equation, however, Balaam’s inability to control his own speech invites a comparison to Pharaoh – the Torah’s foremost example of a man whose power is merely a mirage. Throughout the Exodus narrative, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart at crucial points, forcing Pharaoh to hold the Israelites in slavery even as doing so becomes progressively worse for Egypt. Only by this tactic can God justify bringing all ten plagues upon Egypt; had Pharaoh been able to release Israel sooner, the latter, more damaging plagues would never have occurred. As God explains to Moses, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{36} Doing so creates a scenario in which God, facing Egyptian

\textsuperscript{33} Num. 22:6.
\textsuperscript{34} My usage of the words “cult,” “cultus,” “cultic,” etc. relies on a contemporary scholarly understanding of these words that is not in any way derogatory but rather understands these words as relating “to the historical and cultural manifestations of the situationally transcendent sacred.” In other words, “cult” refers to the mechanisms by which humans are capable of accessing the divine and, in turn, the divine is represented in the human realm. \textit{The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion}, s.v. “cult.”
\textsuperscript{35} Num. 22:41.
\textsuperscript{36} Ex. 7:3.
resistance, may take Israel out of Egypt “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”37 as Jews commemorate annually at the Passover Seder. Certainly such a demonstration of divine might serves to build loyalty to God among the Israelites. Expanding the scope of perusal reveals that it also functions as an act of warfare on a divine scale. In the Egyptian understanding of the cosmos, Pharaoh – in addition to being the human sovereign – was the earthly manifestation of the falcon god (and god of royalty) Horus and therefore a divine being.38 When God brings the plagues upon Egypt, this act signifies a declaration of war against Pharaoh in his divine capacity. If the God of Israel can control Pharaoh’s actions and wreak havoc on the land that Pharaoh claims the ability and strength to protect, then Israel’s God, the ancient observer would conclude, overpowers the gods of Egypt. And if the God of Israel outranks the gods of Egypt, then, since gods represent and are aligned with their nations, the logical reader of this myth must inescapably conclude that Israel outranks Egypt.39 While this episode constitutes a reversal in order of the principle that a victory of one nation over another in war signifies the superiority of that nation’s God, the principle itself remains operative in this instance. Thus, by writing this episode of divine strength into their national mythology, the Bible’s authors asserted Israelite power in the face of Egyptian weakness, both human and divine.

Given, then, that God’s control over Pharaoh’s behavior serves to delineate and emphasize Pharaoh’s own incapacities in the face of his claimed power, divine dominance of Balaam’s speech likely acts in parallel. Just as God humbles Pharaoh by turning his perceived strength – his claim to divinity – into a demonstrable weakness, so too does God make manifest

37 Deut. 26:8.
38 Like Horus, the Egyptian Pharaoh was also seen as the son of the sun god Re. Unlike a regular human, the Pharaoh was thought to undergo a full apotheosis upon his death and become Osiris, god of the underworld. The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, 3rd ed., s.v. “Pharaoh.”
39 For more on perceptions of warfare between nations as being also warfare between those nations’ divinities, see Grosby, “The Chosen People of Ancient Israel and the Occident,” 371.
Balaam’s incapacity. Balak hires Balaam because of the supposed efficacy of his word, saying, “Curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I … for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed.”  

By restricting Balaam’s orations, God attacks the very heart of his supposed power. Perhaps the blessings and curses that Balaam utters are efficacious, but this efficacy comes not from their nature as Balaam’s words but rather that as God’s. Since Balaam may utter only the words that God feeds to him, he lacks the freedom to complete the task of cursing Israel for which Balak hired him. Thus, by asserting control over Balaam’s freedom of speech, God deals a fatal blow to his legitimacy as a cultic figure.

The authors of the pericope also cleverly play on a passage from one of the poems to denigrate Balaam’s authority. In the middle of the third poem, Balaam asserts, “For there is no omen [ַ��נ‎ nachash] in Jacob and no divination [قسام‎ qesem] in Israel; at once it is told to Jacob and Israel what God has planned.”  

Two key words from this poetic line appear elsewhere in the pericope, both in the plural: the emissaries that Balak sends to Balaam bring with them렘ם q’samim “tools of divination,” while Balaam himself generally beseeches the divine presence by means ofاخبار n’chashim “omens.”  

Yet as Balaam himself pronounces, omens do not exist in Israel. Not because they lack efficacy, but because they are not necessary: Israel, in its distinctive nature, has prophets who receive the divine word directly from God, not needing omens to interpret God’s messages. So signifies the passive phrase “at once it is told to Jacob and Israel”: Israel need do nothing to receive the divine word. Instead, God acts, and Israel receives. Rather than call for a divine revelation, Israel simply receives one – and in good time. Indeed, the mythology elsewhere confirms that direct prophecy separates Israel from the Seven Nations who previously occupied Canaan:

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41 Num. 23:23, translation my own.
When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must learn not to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination [בש קִסּוֹם q’samim], or is a soothsayer, an augur [מִנְחָשׁ m’nachash], or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or spirits, or one who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. … Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners [בש qosmim], as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you to do so.  

Using the same words that appear in the Balaam pericope, this passage affirms that Israel, thanks to its special status, does not need omens. Were it to make use of omens, Israel would deny its distinction. As a result, Israel cannot include or make use of Balaam and his ilk. His trade, far from being authoritative, is in fact abhorrent.

The deliberate ambiguity that characterizes Balaam further shines forth via the language that describes his relationship with God. Perhaps the most poignant phrase in the entirety of the pericope appears in Balaam’s response to the second set of Moabite emissaries, when he tells them, “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God [יהוה אלהי YHWH Elohay], to do less or more.” The phrase by which Balaam refers to Israel’s divinity in this passage is extraordinary in that Balaam, using the first-person possessive ending -י, asserts that Israel’s God is also his God. (Additionally, the combination of the two most common names for the divine in a single phrase – names which not only characterize but also give titles to the J and E strands of biblical authorship – indicates a late date for the passage.) In the whole of the Hebrew Bible the phrase YHWH Elohay appears just 14 times; the vast majority of those appearances come in late poetic or prophetic texts where this kind of emphatic appeal might be expected.

43 Deut. 18:9-12, 14.
44 Num. 22:18.
An appearance of this phrase much riper for comparison, however, comes from the episode in which King David purchases from Araunah the Jebusite his threshing-floor for a place to build an altar and offer a sacrifice – the same site that will later become the location of the Temple. Insisting on paying for the threshing-floor and the for oxen to be sacrificed, David tells Araunah, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God [\textit{YHWH Elohay}] that cost me nothing,” a response to Araunah’s earlier benediction, “May the Lord your God [\textit{יהוה אלהך YHWH Elohecha}] respond favorably to you.”

Araunah’s description of Israel’s God with the second person possessive rightly demarcates this Jebusite as one outside of the Israelite community; David, by repeating Araunah’s terminology and placing himself within Israel, constructs the national boundary between the two of them. Notably, Araunah uses the grammatically plural construction \textit{Elohecha} and not its singular equivalent \textit{אלך elecha}, which in Biblical Hebrew marks not a distinction between many gods and one but rather a distinction between the Israelite God and any deity. In so doing, he suggests that even non-Israelites understand and recognize the power and divinity of the God of Israel. Simultaneously, however, he consciously places himself outside of God’s community, allowing David to seize an opportunity to identify himself with God. The fact that Balaam seems to accept Israel’s God as his own is striking enough; the fact that the very same phrase that he utilizes to do so acts elsewhere in Israelite mythology as a “boundary-generating referent” makes it all the more conspicuous. If God-language acts as a manner of constructing a wall between Israel and foreign nations, the biblical authors in this particular passage allow Balaam to try to claim a place inside the wall.

In this regard a comparison between Balaam and the prophets of Baal who appear in 1 Kings 18 will prove highly illuminating. In contrast to the presentation of Balaam, the text of 1 Kings introduces these individuals with a title, specifically the title of ה\textit{נבי navi} “prophet” that,  

\footnote{2 Sam. 24:23-4.}
when applied to Balaam in postbiblical literature, becomes the subject of incessant scholarly debate. However, unlike Balaam, these prophets deny the legitimacy of Israel’s God, to the extent that they attempt to demonstrate the power of Baal over and against that of Israel’s God. Unlike Elijah, “a prophet of YHWH,” these 450 men are explicitly “Baal’s prophets.” They worship Baal, and when challenged to perform their prophetic act, they invoke Baal. This act marks their prophecy as void: as the story so vividly demonstrates, their fealty to Baal generates nothing. Their many rituals – invocations of Baal’s name, dances, self-mutilations, and the like – are inconsequential, while Israel’s God, when prompted by a simple prayer from Elijah, can send fire that consumes a drenched offering and a trench full of water. Like the Ten Plagues, this episode presents the earthly manifestation of a cosmic battle, this time between Israel’s God and the Canaanite god Baal. God wins the battle. Therefore God is powerful and Baal powerless; extending this principle, God’s officiants possess strength while those loyal to Baal lack it. Therefore, even if he does not have the honorific that the text grants to the prophets of Baal, Balaam possesses a much stronger virtue: his cultic activity has actual efficacy.

Yet even in this seeming show of power and strength, the text implies an important caveat: Balaam pledges fealty to God, but God makes no show of alliance beyond simple association in the reverse direction. If this seems to contradict the premise that underlies the entire pericope – that God actively and willingly communicates with Balaam – one must remember the cosmic structure that the text’s redactors would have imagined. Under the monotheistic worldview of the text’s late redactors, Israel’s God is the lone powerful god in the cosmos. This is the One God who created the universe and everything in it, the other nations

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40 1 Kings 18:22, translation my own.
47 In a lengthy section entitled “Is the Hebrew Bible monotheistic?,” Benjamin D. Sommer lays out a convincing argument for why, when the Bible is read as a collected corpus, the monolatry (dedication to one god) prescribed in the Hebrew Bible should be regarded as monotheistic rather than polytheistic, i.e. the one God of Israel should be
included. Therefore, even if this God has selected a distinctive role for Israel and marked Israel separately from the other nations, there exists no reason why God should necessarily avoid association with non-Israelite individuals. Indeed, if the non-Israelite nations are to have any connections beyond the mortal plane, it must be through the God of Israel: Balaam’s cultic capacity could not have been efficacious if he, like Pharaoh or the prophets of Baal, claimed to draw his authority from a foreign divinity. Thus, by assigning Israel’s God as his patron, the mythologizers display Balaam before a late Israelite audience as a legitimate and empowered cultic authority. The capacities that the comparisons to Laban and Abimelech demonstrate can only be credited to a choice on God’s part to empower Balaam. At the same time, however, God marks Balaam’s cultic power as that of a non-Israelite, distinguishing Israel from the mass of other nations from which Balaam emerges. This relationship, notably, does not serve an appeal for converts. Rather, the argument directs internally: If Israel’s God is universal, than the desertion of Israel’s God will necessarily lead the worshipper to venerate a false god, since the idea of “you shall have no other gods beside me” has been replaced with “there are no other gods beside me.” Israelites, like Balaam, should recognize God’s universal authority, and therefore maintain fealty to God.

As mentioned previously, the pericope features a highly atypical distribution of divine names, which, I suggest, indicates a strong influence over the text from the hand of a late redactor (which, in turn, accommodates this passage’s use of the late monotheistic paradigm).

worshipped not simply because this particular God has Israel’s best interests in mind but because this God is the only true god. Benjamin D. Sommer, The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2009), 159-72.

48 Perhaps no biblical text better exemplifies this new monotheism (characteristic of the era that gave us both P and D) than Deuteronomy 4:35, which states, “For you it [the Exodus from Egypt] was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord [YHWH] is God; there is no other beside him.”

49 Levine suggests on this basis that the pericope postdates the compilation of JE in the 7th century BCE, leading to a likely conclusion that it was written in the late 7th or 6th century BCE. Levine, Numbers 21-36, 237. Thus the pericope, at its earliest possible dating, is approximately contemporary with P.
The combination of both divine names *YHWH* and *Elohim* (the base form that, with possessive suffixes, gives *Elohay* and *Elohecha*), rarely seen together, appears just once in Numbers 22-24; otherwise the two names seem to be scattered throughout the pericope, in a manner that Baruch Levine calls “blatantly inconsistent” with the expectations of a source-critical reader. There does, however, seem to be a pattern, but finding it requires an eye trained to read the text as a self-contained unit rather than through the lens of source-critical analysis: Balaam speaks of God almost exclusively as *YHWH*, but when the text depicts God acting in concert with Balaam, God does so under the name of *Elohim*. Joel Lohr suggests that this passage represents an early manifestation of the common practice of distinguishing attributes of God at play by means of the divine name used; in this case *YHWH* is God’s more personal name, while *Elohim* is “generic and noncovenantal.”

Lohr makes this claim without substantiation. Corroboration, however, comes from the fact that a taboo quickly arose against pronouncing the name *YHWH* or writing it out in non-sacred texts (a convention that I follow when typing in Hebrew) but not against doing so with the name *Elohim*. In the second century BCE, the authors of the Septuagint, translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek, rendered *YHWH* as κύριος *kyrios* “lord” – a direct translation not of *YHWH* but of its euphemistic replacement אדון *Adonai* “my lord.” Additionally, there exists a linguistic tie between *Elohim* the word אל *el*, meaning “god,” but no such connection exists for the name

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51 Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen*, 145. Certainly this idea that the name *YHWH* indicates a stronger relationship to God than *Elohim* comes to fore in the Septuagint, where *YHWH* is generally translated κύριος *kyrios* “lord” (stemming from the practice of pronouncing *YHWH* as *Adonai*, which means “my lord”), while *Elohim* becomes the more generic θεός *theos* “God,” the same word used in classical Greek texts to indicate the divinities of Olympus. Given this distinction, it is noticeable that the translators of the Septuagint made an attempt to erase the connection between Balaam and God by generally translating *YHWH* as *theos* (and never *Elohim* as *kyrios*) in the Balaam pericope. Additionally, the translators of the Septuagint entirely eliminate the force of the phrase *YHWH* *Elohay,* taking out the pronoun in translating it as κύριου τοῦ θεοῦ *kyriou tou theou* “the lord God.” John William Wevers, “The Balaam Narrative According to the Septuagint,” in *Lectures et Relectures de la Bible, Festschrift P. M. Bogaert*, ed. Jean M. Auwers and Andre Wemin, 133-44 (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 1999), 135.
YHWH, indicating that it likely derives from a much older personal name for God. Furthermore, in support of Lohr’s claim, God comes to both Laban and Abimelech under the name Elohim. Backing for Lohr’s argument also can be found in the work of Richard Elliott Friedman, who studies the appearances of YHWH and Elohim in J- and E-source biblical passages. In the J-source, the narration refers to God as YHWH from start to finish. E, however, introduces God as Elohim and only begins using YHWH at the Burning Bush. In that episode God introduces God’s self as איהו אשה איהו Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh “I am what I am,” a first-person formulation of the third-person phrase (“he is what he is”) for which the acronym YHWH stands. As such, God identifies by the explicitly personal name YHWH.

The distinction between the usages of YHWH in E and J, Friedman argues, stems from the two authors’ rival agendas: the stories of Genesis, particularly those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, highlight the institution of Davidic rule that J supports. For instance, the story of the cave of Machpelah connects Abraham – along with Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah – to David’s hometown of Hebron. E, emphasizing Levite power, privileges the Mosaic covenant at Sinai over the Abrahamic covenant. The fact that E only introduces the name of YHWH at the moment that, in his text, emerges as the critical inflection point of Israelite history – while J, who does not designate a biblical climax, names God as YHWH throughout – strongly indicates that the name YHWH invokes God in the covenantal role. Reading the text under Lohr’s premise suggests that the redactor aimed to distinguish between God’s interactions with Israelites and God’s interactions with foreigners. Israel, as God’s people, has the right to use God’s special personal name; the other nations, recognizing God’s creation of and sovereignty over the world,

53 Ex. 5:14.
54 Gen. 23:19, 2 Sam. 2:1.
55 Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?, 9-11.
may and by all rights ought to acknowledge God, but can only do so using God’s general name. Balaam, by appealing to God as YHWH, attempts to cross from foreigner to Israelite, but God, responding as Elohim, asserts and reinforces Balaam’s status outside of the distinct nation.

These many cross-textual comparisons and analyses, taken together, serve to build up Balaam as a powerful and respected character, only then to tear him down as one foreign to the nation that venerates this myth and, therefore, not a member of the nation divinely distinguished for preferential treatment. The Bible’s redactors, it appears, needed to pay homage to Balaam’s credibility in order for their disparagement of that same credibility to have any effect. Yet the author never makes explicit arguments for Balaam’s power; rather than forthrightly asserting Balaam’s abilities, the mythologizer primarily aims to assimilate Balaam to God and assert that God provides such abilities. This stems from the fact that the text’s authors, redactors, and original readers likely already shared a collective conception of Balaam. No explicit connection needed to be made between Balaam son of Beor and “a person who holds cultic authority” because that connection was already common knowledge.

Chapter 2: The Deir Alla Text

In 1967, excavators at the site of Tell Deir Alla on the banks of the Jabbok River in the northeastern part of modern Jordan (see Appendix A) uncovered a stele containing fragmentary texts written in a dialect of Aramaic, inscribed on the stele in the first half of the 8th century BCE. Thanks to a number of factors – among them the fragmentary condition of the surviving material and the damage that forces of nature have done to the stele over the years – the text

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proved difficult to render and even harder to translate.\textsuperscript{57} Nonetheless, the text’s protagonist unquestionably bears the name “Balaam son of Beor” and has access to the divine realm.\textsuperscript{58} This figure, therefore, must be the same Balaam who appears in Numbers 22-24. That said, the Deir Alla text is not of Israelite provenance: the invocation of many Near Eastern divinities but the noticeable absence of \textit{YHWH} indicates that the text roots from a community not under Israelite cultural influence. Other materials at Deir Alla suggests an Ammonite identification for the site, although the proto-Aramaic language of the inscription provides evidence contrary to this hypothesis. Overall, Edward Cook asserts, there is “no good reason to think that the provenance of the original text is outside Trans-Jordan.”\textsuperscript{59} The text therefore likely belongs to Ammon, Moab, or another one of the nations situated directly to Israel’s east, or possibly even one of the Transjordanian Israelite tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh (see Appendix B).\textsuperscript{60} Of these options, the fact that the Numbers text aligns Balaam with Moab hints that the wider Near Eastern mythological figure of Balaam may have been known as a Moabite, or at least that framing him as one furthered the objectives of the pericope’s redactors.

\textsuperscript{57} Compounding the challenge are a number of issues of translation: the Aramaic of the era had more consonantal sounds than it had characters, so the exact significance of any given character is unknown; the text demonstrates a number of grammatical constructions otherwise foreign to surviving Aramaic texts of the period; and the text is by a significant margin the oldest surviving text of Aramaic poetry, meaning that it may contain idioms or constructions foreign to prose but perfectly natural to a text of this type. Jacob Hoftijzer, “The Prophet Balaam in a 6th Century Aramaic Inscription,” \textit{Biblical Archaeologist}, vol. 39, no. 1 (Mar. 1976), 11-7, 11-2.

\textsuperscript{58} Cook, “The Balaam Text from Tell Deir Alla,” 241-3.

\textsuperscript{59} Cook, “The Balaam Text from Tell Deir Alla,” 238.

\textsuperscript{60} Baruch Levine supports the theory that the Deir Alla inscription belonged to a “heterodox” group of Israelites living in Transjordan who either rejected worship of \textit{YHWH} or worshipped that god alongside a pantheon of other Near Eastern divinities. Levine, \textit{Numbers 21-36}, 230-3. In the eyes of the Bible’s redactors, these Israelites would have been functionally equivalent to foreigners, as they, by rejecting the commandment to worship no other gods (Ex. 20:3), forfeited their distinct status. The book of Joshua expresses a lot of tension about these tribes, as Joshua has to remind Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh that even though their homes and lands may lie in Transjordan, they must remain loyal to the God who promised Abraham an inheritance in Cisjordan (Josh. 1:12-5, Gen. 13:15). However, Joshua’s exertions do not hold. As Rachel Havrelock explains, “Edom, Moab, Ammon, Aram, Gilead, Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh are best thought of as regional players in a borderland who alternately battle and blend with one another”; the three Transjordanian tribes thus are more Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite than they are Israeliite. Rachel Havrelock, \textit{River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line} (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 123. For more on the Jordan as the figurative boundary between ancient Israel and Other, see Havrelock, Introduction-Chapter 5, 1-134.
A brief reference to the origin mythology of Genesis places Balaam in particularly ignominious company, from an Israelite perspective. While the Genesis narrative serves primarily to tell the origin story of Israel, it also gives brief asides that explain the origin of many of its neighbors, Midian and Moab among them. The nation of Midian was born of the fourth son of Keturah, Abraham’s second wife, whom he married after Sarah’s death. Therefore, Midian is Abrahamic in ancestry, but also irrelevant: Midian comes onto the scene well after God promises that the divine covenant with Abraham will be inherited by Abraham’s descendants through Isaac. Whereas obscurity characterizes Midian’s birth story, disgrace distinguishes Moab’s: the original Moab is a child of incest, born to Lot and Lot’s elder daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The children of Midian, therefore, descend from an unimportant child, a brief aside in the text; the children of Moab, by all rights, never should have been born in the first place. Neither holds the glorious pedigree of the children of Israel, descended from favored son after favored son. When Balaam enters the story in the employ of Moab and Midian, he aligns himself on the wrong side of this ancestry divide. As Israel’s cousin nation, Moab logically occupies nearby territory; yet from a socio-religious standpoint, the two nations could not be further apart. Claiming descent from a pure and select bloodline, Israel emphasizes its distinction among the nations of the Near East; Moab, meanwhile, carries the mark of impurity from its very genesis. While those not descended from Israel definitely can join the Israelite community (for instance, the “mixed multitude” that joins in the Exodus), they must conduct and identify themselves as Israelites. Balaam, aligning himself instead with the

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63 Gen. 19:37.
64 Ex. 12:38.
descendants of irrelevant and ignominious characters, serves to reinforce Israel’s separation and distinction.

Noticeably, the Deir Alla text fills a hole in the biblical pericope: it gives Balaam a title. Specifically, the text calls him a *chazeh ilahin* “seer of the gods.” While the vocalization is necessarily conjectural, *ilahin* is without a doubt cognate to the Hebrew *Elohim*. While in an Israelite context *ilahin* could conceivably allude to the single God of Israel, given that the Deir Alla text enumerates a veritable litany of divinities (among them El, the *shaddayin*, and *Shamash*), it rather refers to a non-Israelite pantheon that Balaam serves. (The listing of divinities here makes the fact that the divinity to whom Balaam sacrifices goes unnamed in the pericope, as well as the overarching fact that the only named deity is Israel’s God, all the more potent.) Similarly, *chazeh* corresponds to the Biblical Hebrew יַחַזֵּה חֶזֶה “seer,” and both stem from the same proto-Semitic root meaning “to see.” The fact that the cultural context names him explicitly as a seer makes Numbers’ ambiguity with regard to his character all the more unmistakable and marks it as quite likely deliberate. In both of these cases, a comparison to the Deir Alla text emphasizes the already odd characteristics of the pericope, further suggesting authorial intent to depict Balaam as a boundary-cropper. This role, in turn, allows him to act as a boundary generator.

Thanks to the non-Israelite heritage of the Deir Alla text, it seems highly unlikely that it and the Balaam pericope share an author, or that one directly inspired the other. Rather, it

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65 While Jo Ann Hackett gives only a transliteration of the text into English characters (along with a vocalized transliteration), her notes on the script indicate that the transliteration corresponds to the Hebrew characters יהוה אלהים. I have altered her transliteration slightly to fit my transliteration scheme. Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir Alla* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980), 27.

66 Like *ilahin*, *shaddayin* is a plural construction, likely indicating a group of divinities. *Shaddayin* is likely linguistically related in some way to the *Shaddai* (sometimes *El Shaddai*) of the Hebrew Bible, one of the lesser-used names of Israel’s God. The invocation of Shamash is conjectural, as only the opening consonant (*sh*) is preserved on the stele. The scholarly consensus proposes Shamash as the most likely Near Eastern divinity for Balaam to invoke, with Shagar frequently suggested as an alternative. Cook, “The Balaam Text from Tell Deir Alla,” 241-3, 240n, 241n.
appears that the two texts, of authorship independent of one another, stem from a commonly shared set of traditions featuring Balaam.\textsuperscript{67} The existence of such a set of traditions strongly suggests that Balaam was a familiar figure in the ancient Near East; a reader of the Bible in the early years of its composition would be aware of his legacy and therefore recognize him as a known and mythologized figure of Israel’s neighboring communities. As a result, the Bible’s authors did not need to give context and explanation for Balaam’s appearance in the text. The biblical reader would, on the invocation of his name, already be familiar with the basic outlines of his character.

Chapter 3: Cultic Warfare

Balaam, being thus a mytho-historical figure\textsuperscript{68} belonging to a neighboring, possibly unfriendly but certainly competing nation, might seem more than a little out of place in Israel’s national mythology. Particularly, it makes little sense that a seer of someone else’s gods would have his cultic prowess portrayed in a positive or even ambiguous light, or that someone in a close relationship with the ilahin at Deir Alla would also have a relationship with \textit{YHWH}. However, this presentation actually makes perfect sense in light of the pericope’s historical context. First, it bears noting that even though the narrative of the pericope reflects a late author or redactor, the four oracles recited in Balaam’s name in Numbers 22-24 – the material which the narrative was designed to contextualize and support – are extremely early texts: Baruch Levine dates them in the early ninth century BCE.\textsuperscript{69} Thus, the inclusion of Balaam in the Bible permits the presentation of these four orations, texts which laud the Israelite nation and which the

\textsuperscript{67} The Deir Alla text likely dates from the early 8th century BCE. The poems preserved in Numbers 22-24 are at least a half century older, and probably closer to a full century. The narrative portions of the pericope are about 200 years younger, and the Tale of the Jenny may be another century younger than that. Cook, “The Balaam Text from Deir Alla,” 237. Levine, \textit{Numbers 21-36}, 232, 237.

\textsuperscript{68} I call Balaam a “mytho-historical figure” because the Deir Alla inscription demonstrates his presence in Near Eastern non-Israelite mythology, but there is no way to determine whether or not he was a real historical individual.

\textsuperscript{69} The pericope itself, however, is probably from the 6th century BCE. Levine, \textit{Numbers 21-36}, 232, 237.
redactors therefore would be inclined to include. To reject Balaam would have meant rejecting
the poems and the basis for distinction that they present.

Second, it demonstrates the universal strength of Israel’s God. Perhaps in the ninth and
eighth centuries BCE it was conceivable that Israel and its neighbors could share a cultic
authority figure, and that each could invoke the Balaam myth in the veneration of its national
god(s). By the time of the Bible’s redaction, however, such a perspective would have been
anathema to Israel’s elite. Instead, Balaam could have the authority that the Deir Alla text posits
only if the God of Israel, in the divine role of creator of the universe and therefore creator of all
of the nations, had chosen to patronize and grant cultic prowess to the non-Israelite Balaam.
Thus, even if he claims to operate within the Moabite cosmology – as the Deir Alla text reports –
Balaam’s cultic authority in fact must result from his relationship with the God of Israel. As a
result, Balaam compares positively to the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings (worshippers of a false
god) and to Pharaoh (a human pretender to divinity). Unlike those who falsely claim cultic
power, Balaam has the world’s true God as his patron, and therefore has real abilities.

Yet, Numbers asserts, God’s patronage of Balaam is markedly incomplete. As the above
comparison to Laban and Abimelech highlights, Balaam’s God-given cultic capacities do not
extend to the point where Balaam may damage Israel: at that moment, God intervenes and
revokes Balaam’s ability. As long as Balaam’s cultus-for-hire pertains solely to matters relating
to the mundane nations, he and God enjoy a happy working relationship – a relationship that
Numbers’ authors do not hesitate to depict positively. But as soon as Balak commissions Balaam
to curse Israel, the paradigm shifts dramatically. No longer does God contentedly indulge
Balaam. Instead, even if Balaam does not recognize it at first, the relationship between God and
Balaam has transformed into a transcendent war – one that God handily wins.
Like the conflict between God and Pharaoh, this divine battle serves to indicate the strength of Israel over its enemies. When the Ten Plagues categorically reject Pharaoh’s claim to divinity, they demonstrate the superiority not only of Israel’s God over Egypt’s gods and Israelite cultus over its Egyptian counterpart, but of the Israelite nation over Egypt. Pharaoh leads Egypt both cultically and politically; he loses his cultic status in the Ten Plagues and his political standing when his army drowns in the Sea of Reeds. The same paradigm appears in the Balaam pericope, this time between Israel and Moab. Balak, being king of Moab,\(^{70}\) represents Moab’s political authority. Even if Numbers does not explicitly declare Balaam to be a Moabite, as soon as he first accepts (or tries to accept) the commission of the Moabite king Balak,\(^{71}\) he comes to represent Moabite cultic practice. (As his employing committee also includes Midianite representatives, he perhaps could be said to represent Midian as well.\(^{72}\) ) Balak’s objective in hiring Balaam signifies a declaration of ritual warfare: he asks Balaam to “curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land.”\(^{73}\) By opting to accede to Balak’s wishes, Balaam attempts to put his cultic power to work attacking Israel. Israel’s God thus springs into action in defense of God’s nation, and by forcing Balaam to bless rather than curse Israel, highlights Balaam’s weakness. Additionally, God not only negates but reverses Balak’s schemes, demonstrating Israelite superiority over Moab in the political sphere. Like Pharaoh after the plagues, Balaam stands thoroughly shamed, and the nation he represents has no choice but to kneel, defeated, before Israel.

\(^{70}\) Num. 22:4.

\(^{71}\) Num. 22:8.

\(^{72}\) The narrative of the pericope is clearly about interactions between Balaam and Balak. Midian appears just twice, in 22:4 and 22:7. Both times the text frames Midian as a secondary partner to Moab, but this partnership does not last for the entirety of even the pericope’s opening scenes. In all likelihood the mentions of Midian were the edits of a late redactor, designed to incorporate this narrative with the story told in Numbers 25 and 31 (to be expounded upon below).

\(^{73}\) Num. 22:6.
Another striking similarity between the stories of the Exodus and Balaam is that Israel’s enemies in both cases share a reason for instigating conflict: a fear of Israel’s numerical strength. The narrator of the Balaam pericope opens the story with the assertion that “Moab was in great dread of the people [Israel], because they were so numerous.” In a similar vein, Pharaoh (in his capacity as a political rather than cultic leader) justifies enslaving the Israelites by telling his people, “The Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Both Balak and Pharaoh cannot and do not recognize, however, that the massive size of the Israelite nation is not mere coincidence. Rather, Israel’s enormity, the Israelite mythologizer asserts, represents the product of divine will and fulfills the Abrahamic covenant. Among the many promises to Abram, God swears that his offspring will be as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky. Since the Bible presents the Abrahamic covenant passing from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob (who will be the progenitor of the Israelite nation), it stands to reason that this promise belongs to Jacob and his descendants as well. Thus, when Balak and Pharaoh fear Israel’s vast size, they attempt to destroy something wrought not by human means but by God’s fulfillment of an ancient promise. Any attempt to damage, shrink, or ruin Israel necessarily conflicts with God’s will and prompts God to take up arms in defense of Israel.

Given that Numbers presents Balaam as Moab’s champion in a cultic battle between Moab and Israel, it seems quite odd that the pericope does not distinguish Balaam himself as a Moabite but rather leaves his heritage unknown. When Balak wants to commission Balaam, he sends representatives to a place called Pethor, in Balaam’s ancestral homeland, which the Bible

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74 Num. 22:3.
75 Ex. 1:10-11.
76 Gen. 13:16, 15:5.
text unhelpfully clarifies as being “on the river.” There may conceivably have been an ancient Moabite town called Pethor (on the Jordan, perhaps), with which the pericope’s redactors expected their readers to be familiar; if so, the pericope would assert Balaam’s Moabite identity. However, the reference to “the land of the children of his [Balaam’s] people” suggests that Balaam and Balak are of different ethnicities, rendering this proposition unlikely. A more likely answer supposes that Balaam’s heritage is just another of the many deliberate ambiguities surrounding his character, and that the redactors left this element of his identity open so that he might be readily identified with any nation that comes to supplant Moab as Israel’s traditional enemy.

Such a theory conforms with the geopolitical situation in the time of the text’s redaction. The myth that the pericope reports likely first arose in an era when Moab was among Israel’s primary enemies, as was the case for much of Israel’s early history. However, by the time that the Balaam pericope was recorded in the form we now know, likely in the 6th or 7th century BCE, Moab had been supplanted by the Assyrian imperial behemoth to the east, which in turn would fall to Babylonia during that period. Those readers that attempt to locate Pethor all but universally identify “the river” with the Euphrates – which flows through the Assyrian and Babylonian homelands. In all likelihood, this identification stems from an attempt, at the time of the pericope’s redaction, to associate Balaam – and the feelings of animosity directed through him towards Moab – with either Assyria or Babylonia. In so doing, the text’s authors apply the

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77 Num. 22:5. The phrase פטורה אשר על הנער pethorah asher al hana’ar “to Pethor that is on the river” (translation my own) could conceivably either clarify that Pethor is on the river or distinguish between a riverine city of Pethor and an inland one. In either case, both the exact location of Pethor and the river in question are left entirely unclear. The text of the first oracle identifies Balaam as being from Aram, to the east (23:7), but the author of the pericope appears to have chosen to ignore this little detail.
78 Num. 22:5.
79 Milgrom, The JPS Torah Commentary, 186n.
mythology to their present era, arguing that just as God defeated Israel’s enemies in days gone by, God will again destroy those who mean to harm Israel.

Returning to the Balaam pericope, special attention should be paid to Numbers 22:21-35 – within the larger pericope a separate and self-contained literary unit on its own right that, borrowing a term from Baruch Levine, we will call the “Tale of the Jenny.” David Marcus deems this section, rife with slights against and ridicule of Balaam, an “anti-prophetic satire,” distinguishing a number of ironies in the narrative as well as a few other categories of satire. In perhaps the most salient irony of the passage, when God opens the jenny’s mouth and allows her to speak it is a thoroughly fantastic exercise, but God performs the same action with regards to Balaam – opening his eyes – enabling him only to do exactly what he has already claimed the ability to do. Some additional ironies are of what Marcus calls the “measure for measure” type, in which a person suffers the harm that he had intended for another. Balaam’s anger at his donkey is without substance, but God is justifiably angry at him; Balaam continues to strike his donkey without successfully forcing her to advance, but the angel continues to advance on him without him noticing; Balaam wishes he had a sword, which would give him the power to kill his (in his eyes) recalcitrant donkey, but the angel actually has a sword and nearly kills Balaam. For Marcus, this and additional satiric evidence demonstrates that the author/redactor of this text “tried to diminish Balaam’s stature by emphasizing the fact that he was essentially incompetent,

80 In a common technique of biblical authorship, a passage is set aside by a phrase that appears in the same or similar forms in the first and last verse. Here, the phrase in question is הילך עם vayeleich im-sarei Moav “he went with the chiefs of Moab” in 22:21 and הילך בלק vayeleich Bil’am in-sarei Valak “Balaam went with the chiefs of Balak” in 22:35. Baruch Levine suggests that this particular short passage may be post-exilic. Levine, Numbers 21-36, 237.
81 Levine, Numbers 21-36, 154. A “jenny” is a female donkey.
82 Marcus, From Balaam to Jonah, 29-41.
83 Marcus, From Balaam to Jonah, 16, 33.
84 Marcus, From Balaam to Jonah, 33. The Hebrew וחיר vayichar-af “he was angry” appears in both cases.
85 Here the repeated word is ווסף vayosef “he continued.”
86 This time חרגתי haragti “I would kill” is repeated.
able to operate only with God’s help.” Marcus’ phrasing here misleads; Balaam relies not upon “God’s help,” but rather God’s command.

Incompetent on his own, Balaam acts as God’s pawn, functioning to support and carry out the divine will. In this context the pericope’s deliberate refusal to entitle Balaam seems particularly salient: not only is he not a navi, he is also not a chozeh nor a roeh. Like chozeh, roeh is an extant biblical term best translated as “seer” both stem from Hebrew roots meaning “to see.” Chozeh, we recall, is the title that Balaam receives in the Deir Alla text. In the pericope, however, Balaam does not deserve these titles because, as the Tale of the Jenny so plainly demonstrates, he cannot see: blind to the angel, he cannot access the divine world of which he claims knowledge. Thus, through this blindness, the pericope explicitly rejects the visual implications of the title of chozeh. Instead, Balaam’s relationship with God exists solely at God’s whim, and thus the myth depicts him, like Pharaoh, as God’s plaything. When convenient, God supports him, but when he threatens Israel, God does not hesitate to unleash the full divine force in embarrassing, discrediting, and shaming everything for which he stands. Thus the mythologizer places Balaam and Israel at opposite poles, with Israel receiving God’s mark of superiority.

Chapter 4: Balaam the Malevolent

Disappearing from the narrative at the end of Numbers 24, Balaam re-appears briefly in Numbers 31, where he emerges only to die. In this short section, Israel goes to war against Midian. Proving victorious, they kill all of the males, among whom the text names six: Midian’s five kings, and Balaam. Upon the army’s return to camp, Moses becomes angry because they killed the men but spared the women who, Moses says, “on Balaam’s advice, made the Israelite

87 Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 166.
88 Cf. 2 Kings 17:13 and 1 Sam. 9:9.
89 Num. 31:7-8.
act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor.”90 The “affair of Peor,” in turn, refers to the events of Numbers 25. A composite chapter, Numbers 25 begins with a J section,91 in which Israelite men sleep with Moabite women and, through these sexual liaisons, the Midianites lure them away from the worship of God towards Baal of Peor. Unsurprisingly, this angers God, who orders Moses to kill all apostasizing Israelites. Starting in verse 6, the author changes from J to P,92 and the story changes as well: the women in question are no longer Moabite but now Midianite. Aaron’s grandson Phinehas kills an Israelite man and Midianite woman in flagrante, checking a plague that took 24,000 Israelite lives. God commends Phinehas for his actions and proceeds to once again order a massacre in vengeance for the disloyal acts. This time Israel must kill the Midianites – the battle that takes place in Numbers 31.

On a surface level, Numbers 25 and 31 serve to explain the appearance of Midian in the pericope. In the pericope, Midian appears as a tangential afterthought: the story clearly focuses on Moab, and Midian appears only in brief, and always in conjunction with Moab rather than acting on its own; Midian therefore adds no unique occasions or activities to the story. Midian appears in this fashion because its presence in the pericope likely comes from the pen of a late redactor (later than that of the pericope writ large), who aimed to make chapters 22-24 compatible with 25 and 31.93 Chapter 25 brings the compatibility question to the fore: it brings together what appear to be two disparate but strikingly similar traditions. By writing sequentially the two different narratives about inappropriate sexual relations between Israelite men and foreign women – the former from J, with Moab, and leading to idolatry; the latter from P, with Midian, and wrong seemingly for the simple act of a sexual liaison with a Midianite (P,  

90 Num. 31:16.  
91 Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, 287.  
92 Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, 288.  
Friedman notes, has a particular vendetta against Midian\(^94\) – the author presents them as one story. Because the war in Numbers 31 was ordered in Numbers 25, then Numbers 31 is part of this story; and since Balaam appears in Numbers 31, some ancient redactor must have thought, the Balaam pericope must be part of this story too. Yet the Balaam pericope focuses on Moab, and Numbers 31 on Midian. The redactor solved this dilemma by adding Midian to the pericope, making Balaam an agent of Midian as well as Moab and explaining his association therewith.

Numbers 31 adds (by implication in both cases) two new pieces of information about Balaam: he is a Midianite, and the events of Numbers 25 were his fault.\(^95\) In all likelihood these claims come from a separate tradition about Balaam that does not include the pericope, nor does it include 25:1-5. If so, however, the surviving evidence for this tradition is quite scant: all that survives are these two assertions, meaning that we today do not even know if this tradition considered Balaam to have any sort of cultic authority! For that reason investigating this tradition separately from the pericope will bear no fruit. On the other hand, knowing that a redactor intentionally combined the two traditions, we can attempt to determine the results of that act.

The claim that Balaam orchestrated the “affair of Peor” makes him a deceiver and an Israelite enemy. In the pericope, he appears as a mercenary: he has no personal disagreement with Israel, but rather attempts to act to Israel’s detriment because doing so benefits his employer. When that attempt fails, he goes home.\(^96\) (The fact that the pericope ends with Balaam’s departure, rather than his death, allows for his re-emergence in chapter 31. In all likelihood he need not die in the pericope because his actions therein ultimately prove to be to Israel’s benefit; however, there remains the possibility that a redactor edited his death out of the

\(^{94}\) Being the work of an Aaronid priesthood in competition with Moses’ descendants, P aims to support Aaron and denigrate Moses. One way of doing so is by disparaging Midian, which represents an attack on Moses via his Midianite wife. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 204.

\(^{95}\) Num. 31:8, 16.

\(^{96}\) Num. 24:25.
pericope in order to depict it here and therefore permit the inclusion of this tradition.) Yet, Num. 31:16 implies, the pericope omits a crucial detail: before going home, Balaam suggested to someone – probably to the Midianite emissaries, maybe Balak – a new technique for destroying Israel. His recommendation has no cultic element; Balak did not hire him to provide such counsel. Having made this suggestion betrays for Balaam a new motive: hatred of Israel, a hatred so powerful it induces him to leave his vocation as an unaligned cultic mercenary and take up a new one as adviser to Israel’s enemies. This hatred, Susan Niditch writes, fully coincides with the goals of Numbers 31: the chapter demonstrates an “us-them attitude,” and its authors “are anxious to discount any connections with foreigners found in the tradition.”97 The Balaam of the pericope is, as demonstrated above, an ambiguous figure. The Balaam of Numbers 31, however, is clearly Israel’s enemy, well deserving of the death penalty meted out to him. By writing these two separate (but approximately contemporaneous) traditions together, the redactor adds a black mark next to Balaam’s name. He is a villain, and Israel must be kept far from the likes of him.

Also of interest are the conclusions of the two parts of chapter 25, when God first orders the deaths of the apostatizing Israelites,98 and later war on Midian.99 Considered individually, as separate traditions, these seem little more than bland details. But when placed together into one story, these commands run in parallel. As such, they leave the reader with the conclusion that the author considers the apostatizing men of Israel equivalent to the deceitful Midianites (Balaam among them), and therefore both deserve death as punishment. Thus, the text implies that the Israelite men, by deserting God in favor of Baal of Peor, have forfeited their distinct status (and their lives) and become like Midianites.

98 Num. 25:4-5.
Noticeably, the J section at the start of chapter 25 imagines a different cosmic structure than chapters 22-24. While 22-24 saw the God of Israel through a monotheistic lens, 25 seems instead predicated upon what Benjamin Sommer calls “polytheistic monolatry”: exclusive loyalty to one deity, but with the recognition that other powerful gods do exist.100 Perhaps no text best exemplifies this idea of “polytheistic monolatry” than Deuteronomy 32:8-9: “When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.” (Although our current text presents it in Deuteronomy, the “Song of Moses” in Deut. 32 reflects the perspective not of the Deuteronomist but of its much earlier author.101) In this worldview, for every god there is a nation, and thus for every nation there is a god. While Israel’s God (the Most High) may reign supreme in the divine realm, the gods are as numerous as the nations, and each of these deities possesses power. Israel owes its loyalty to God, then, not because God is the only true deity, but because God is Israel’s particular national deity. The apostasy of Numbers 25:1-5 thus represents a rejection of Israel’s God in favor of Baal, and therefore a rejection of Israel in favor of Moab. Those (in any generation) who fail to worship God, the text argues, renounce their membership in the Israelite nation.

Conclusion

One last enlightening comparison puts Balaam side by side with Ruth, the heroine of her titular biblical book. Their respective texts associate both of these characters with Moab; the former by employment, the latter by birth. Ruth, however, becomes an Israelite when she renounces the divinities and kinship connections of her birth, telling her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people,

100 Sommer, The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel, 147.
101 Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?, 255, 260.
and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – and there will I be buried.”102 Here Ruth pledges to accompany her mother-in-law from the day of her oath until the day of her death. But that is not the extent of her promise; she also swears to join Israel in kinship and in worship: “your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” With such a statement, Ruth outlines the two classificatory categories that define an Israelite. An Israelite must have kinship relations with the Israelite people, and an Israelite must worship the Israelite God. Even though she was born Moabite, Ruth meets these qualifications. Therefore, by the end of the text the author leaves no doubt as to her Israelite status: she becomes a progenitor of one of Israel’s greatest heroes, King David.103

These classifications match perfectly the taxonomic system for modeling social structures that Bruce Lincoln proposes in his work *Discourse and the Construction of Society*. Lincoln posits that humans construct the social world according to a set of “binary oppositions,” which determine the roles and relationships between individuals and groups within society.104 Attempting to divide the world’s populace into the two categories of Israelite and foreigner, Israelites asked two questions: First, does the person have the necessary ethnic, kinship, or interpersonal ties to be a member of our community? Second, does the person worship our God? (Notably, Ruth asserts membership in the Israelite nation before worship of God.) Only those for whom both answers are “yes” are to be considered true Israelites; as we saw in Numbers 25 and 31, Israelites by birth who apostatize reject their distinct status. Because Ruth answers “yes” to both questions, she is a full Israelite.

102 Ruth 1:16-7.
103 Ruth 4:17.
Balaam, however, does not have a place in this structure: he answers “no” to the first question, and therefore the second question – the question of divine loyalties – need not be posed to him. Yet his answer to that second question is “yes.” This puts Balaam into the category that Lincoln calls anomaly: “any entity, the existence of which goes unrecognized under the terms of a given taxonomy.”105 Anomalies can have one of two purposes. Either the anomaly demonstrates the invalidity of the system, or it acts as the exception that proves the rule. Those who support the system relegate the anomaly to the margins or reject it outright, and in that act they reaffirm the system.106 Balaam falls into the latter category. The taxonomic system of ancient Israel does not have a place for him, so the authors and redactors of Numbers take particular care to lump him into the category of “foreigner.” For this reason the myth deprives Balaam of the characteristics that define and delineate Israel. Through this means of proposing and then nullifying a potential threat, the authors reify the system.

As the product of an Israelite mindset, this classification structure necessarily privileges Israel. Using Lincoln’s models, we can diagram the taxonomy that the Balaam myths posit (Appendix C). In accordance with Lincoln’s practice, we have labeled what we call “true Israelites” with the coding “+/+”; the two other categories have “+/−” and “−/−” coding. These symbols, small as they may be, carry value judgment upon them, implying that the designation of “+/+” marks an Israelite as not just distinct, but superior. An Edomite or Moabite might look at the same system of classification but appraise it oppositely, supposing membership in Israel to be fraternizing with the enemy and worship of Israel’s God an act of apostasy. The myths that survive as the Biblical canon, however, are Israelite, and thus they view Israel through a self-referential lens. As Christopher Flood observes, “a myth is only true for the social group that

105 Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 165.
106 Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 166.
experiences it as such.”\textsuperscript{107} The Balaam myths of Numbers, then, are by Israelite authors, for Israelite audiences. They aim to persuade Israelites where their own national boundaries lie; how foreigners might read them matters little.

Yet while it remains easy to paint the boundary-generating purpose of the myth in broad strokes, the exact contours of the many narratives which comprise the argument remain challenging to capture. In its very nature a myth is an elusive and inconclusive tale; because it makes a point through the artistic but expansive means of narrative and metaphor, it necessarily creates loose ends that are challenging, if not impossible, to tie up. This, Lincoln explains, is a fundamental tenet of the art: “At a certain point, however, it becomes apparent that there is no convenient point of closure. The characters keep multiplying, the plot keeps ramifying, and every incident connects to others. Although one surely would like to complete the job, that goal keeps receding, \textit{and that is just the point}.\textsuperscript{108} Indeed, the development of a myth continues through the ages. Whenever a reader or commentator imbues the narrative with a new meaning, the process of mythologizing shifts forward. The new interpretation in question need not follow the strict presentational standards expected of mythology. Rather, as Lincoln flippantly asserts, “If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes.”\textsuperscript{109} Thus, outlining boundary generation in the Balaam mythology is itself a mythologizing process; scholarly references aim to validate this paper’s argument in the same manner that invocations of ancient cultural referents validate the arguments in the Torah. In this way, even though the Hebrew Bible’s original audience is long since dead, as long as people deem the Balaam mythology worthy of attention, new readers will continue to use it to discuss, debate, and delineate Israel’s boundaries.

\textsuperscript{108} Lincoln, \textit{Between History and Myth}, 104. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{109} Lincoln, \textit{Theorizing Myth}, 209.
Appendix A: The Location of Tell Deir Alla

Appendix B: Territorial Divisions in the Ancient Near East

Appendix C: Taxonomic Classifications of Israelite Nationhood

**Taxonomizers**

All

1. Israelite kin
   - Yes
   - No

2. Israelite worship
   - Yes
   - No

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