

Why Worry About Bilam?

Introduction

Who Needs to Know?

The Bilam and Balak narrative is unique in being the only extended story in the last four books of the Torah in which non-Jews form the entire cast of human characters and nobody from the Children of Israel is an active participant. The story spans three chapters, the first of which (Bemidbar 22) is dedicated to a back and forth as to whether Bilam will or won't go with Balak's messengers and will or won't curse the Israelites. An additional two complete chapters (23-24) detail the full contents of Bilam's soliloquies. This lengthy account almost begs the question: Of what concern was it to Hashem or the nation (or should it be for us who study the Torah) whether some heathen sorcerer had nice things to say or not about the Israelites?

What If Bilam had Cursed?

Devarim 23:6 describes how Hashem, in His abounding love for the Children of Israel, refused to let Bilam curse the nation, and transformed the curse into a blessing:

וְלֹא אָבָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמַע אֶל בְּלַעַם וַיְהַפֹּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת הַקְּלָלָה לְבִרְכָה כִּי אָהַבְךָ ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

And Hashem, your God, would not listen to Bilam, and Hashem, your God, turned the curse into a blessing because Hashem, your, God loved you.

This account of Hashem's efforts is later echoed by both Yehoshua and Mikhah in their brief summaries of Hashem's historical acts of kindness for the Children of Israel. But why do the Torah and these prophets take the trouble to single out this action of Hashem as if it were one of the most momentous and pivotal deeds He ever performed?¹ Would there have been any significant impact on the Israelites if Bilam had succeeded in cursing them as per his original intention? Could this have changed the course of history?

¹ Note also the thrice repeated phrase "ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ" in this verse from Devarim. This occurs elsewhere only in Devarim 10:12 and 12:18.

Why Worry About Bilam?

Exegetical Approaches

THIS PAGE IS STILL BEING DEVELOPED AND UPDATED

Overview

Classical commentators have a fundamental disagreement over whether powers of sorcery really exist in this world, or are just a figment of the imagination. This general question has important ramifications for understanding the specific story of Bilam. While some exegetes adopt a literal reading of the verses which imply that Bilam had the potential to harm the Children of Israel through his witchcraft, others like Ibn Kaspi and Abarbanel explain that the primary concern was over the psychological impact Bilam's curse would have on either the Israelites or their neighbors. Finally, a third approach argues that the very purpose of the episode was to demonstrate the powerlessness of black magic and its practitioners.

Inherently Harmful

Hashem prevented Bilam from cursing the Children of Israel because his curse had the potential to cause them significant damage.

SOURCES: Bavli Berakhot, Tanchuma, Gloss in R. Yosef Bekhor Shor,¹ Iggeret HaKodesh,² Ramban, 2nd opinion in Ralbag, Sforno, Netziv

Do forces of black magic exist?

- Most of these commentators suggest that some humans have the ability to manipulate or access impure powers so as to bring harm to others. They suggest two variations in understanding Bilam's specific capabilities:
 - **Magic** – Iggeret HaKodesh, Ramban, and Ralbag assert that through Bilam's knowledge of magic, he was able to manipulate the celestial spheres and negatively affect individuals or nations.
 - **Evil eye** – Tanchuma and Netziv suggest that Bilam made use of the "evil eye" to bring harm on the nation.³
- According to Bavli Berakhot and Sforno, Bilam did not make use of black magic but was rather privy to the one daily instant of God's anger and was able to take advantage of it.

Are magical acts independent of Hashem?

- Ralbag asserts that though one can learn the art of manipulating the stars, one cannot use this knowledge to harm someone who is under Hashem's providence.⁴
- According to Netziv, the powers of the evil eye are built into nature, and as long as Bilam was in sight of the nation,⁵ he could have brought them harm. Hashem, though, has power over nature, and can intervene to remove the evil eye.⁶

Parallel cases – There are many stories in Tanakh which suggest that there is real power in blessings/curses or other magical practices. For instance, the actions of Rivka and Yaakov to receive Yitzchak's blessing make sense only if one assumes that there was what to be obtained by the blessing. The simple

understanding of the story of Eshet Baalat HaOv also assumes special human powers, and that the lady really had the ability to bring Shemuel back to life.⁷

Bilam's reputation – "אֲשֶׁר תֹּאֵר יוֹאֵר" – According to this approach, Bilam's reputation was well earned since his curses were effective.⁸

"וּקְסָמִים בְּיָדָם"

- **For Bilam** – According to Sforno, the officers brought Bilam charms ("קְסָמִים"), the tools of his trade, so he could utilize them when cursing the nation.⁹
- **For the Midianites** – Netziv, in contrast, suggest that the Midianites used these for themselves to foretell whether Bilam would be successful. Seeing that he was to fail, they decided to leave, and are thus not heard of in the continuation of the story.

"וַאֲצִל אֶתְכֶם מִיָּדוֹ" – This verse is understood literally to mean that Hashem saved the nation from the potential harmful effects of Bilam's words.

Did Bilam have free will? Tanchuma suggests that Hashem removed Bilam's control over what came from his mouth.

Message of the donkey episode

- **Humbling experience** – Y. Kaufmann¹⁰ suggests that one of the problems with the art of magic is that the successful practitioner begins to think of himself as on par with God. Thus, Hashem sent the angel and donkey to dispel such thoughts from Bilam by teaching him that his powers of "sight" were not as good as he thought.
- **Loss of free will** – According to Tanchuma, the incident was supposed to warn Bilam that just as the donkey's mouth was under the control of God, so too Bilam would only be able to say what Hashem desired.
- **Hashem controls all** – One might alternatively suggest that the point was to teach Bilam that everything is really in the control of God, even witchcraft.

Understanding the plague at Baal Peor

- Ralbag asserts that the nation's status as idolaters (as evidenced by their sin at Baal Peor) was the very reason that God's providence alone was not enough to protect them from Bilam's curse. If, though, the nation deserved punishment and Hashem was about to bring upon them a plague regardless, why did Hashem not just let the punishment come via Bilam? See below, that Ralbag suggests that Hashem wanted to ensure that the nation recognize that the plague was a punishment for sin and not merely the result of a curse, so that they would then repent.
- The others might suggest that at this point in the narrative, the nation was still innocent, and therefore undeserving of any harm that might be caused by Bilam's words.

Were the Israelites aware of Balak's plans? According to this approach, whether or not the nation was aware of Balak's plan is irrelevant, as the danger was very real and present regardless.



Propaganda

Although Bilam's curse had no power, since both the Children of Israel and the other nations believed in its efficacy, Bilam's words had the potential to negatively affect the Israelites.

SOURCES: R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, Abarbanel

Do forces of black magic exist? Both Ibn Kaspi and Abarbanel assert that Bilam's curse would not have been able to bring damage to the Children of Israel, but for different reasons.

- **Curses are nonsense** – Ibn Kaspi dismisses as nonsense the notion of an effective curse, saying "אין בו"ממש".¹¹
- **No power against Israelite merits** – Abarbanel implies that the inefficacy of the curse was related to the merits of Israel and not the emptiness of magical practices. He himself does not deny the existence of magic,¹² but rather asserts that Bilam really was a magician,¹³ an astrologer who could read the stars.¹⁴

Astrology versus Divine providence – Abarbanel asserts that the movements of the stars regulate the events that happen on earth, but if these clash with Hashem's will, Hashem's leadership of the world holds sway, and He can change the heavenly schedule to match His desires.

Who believed in the curse?

- **The Children of Israel** – Ibn Kaspi asserts that many amongst the nation would have been anxious about Bilam's curse, believing (erroneously) that it could harm them. Though Hashem recognized that their concern was unfounded, He, nonetheless, did not want them to be nervous or frightened and so prevented Bilam from cursing.
- **Other nations** – According to Abarbanel, since foreign nations held Bilam's curses in high regard, they would trust in his words to attack the now cursed Israelites. To prevent such attacks, Hashem not only barred Bilam from cursing, but had him bless the nation.¹⁵

Parallel cases

- **Blood on doorposts** – Ibn Kaspi points to the command to spread blood on the doorposts during the Plague of Firstborns, as another case where Hashem acts to calm an erroneous belief of the masses.¹⁶
- **Struggle over Yaakov's blessing** – To highlight the weight that ancient society attached to blessings, Ibn Kaspi points to the fight of Yaakov and Esav over their father's blessing.

Bilam's reputation – "אֲשֶׁר תֹּאֵר יוֹאֵר" – Ibn Kaspi suggests that this was a mistaken reputation while Abarbanel claims that Bilam's knowledge of the stars gave him the ability to foretell people's futures and thus curse those who were to have misfortune and bless those who were to have good fortune.

"וּקְסָמִים בְּיָדָם" – According to Abarbanel, Balak viewed Bilam as a magician, and thus brought him magical charms.

"וְאַצֵּל אֶתְכֶם מִיָּדוֹ" – Ibn Kaspi asserts that these words of Yehoshua reflect the perspective of the nation (but not reality) who truly believed that they could have been destroyed due to Bilam's curse. According to Abarbanel the statement is true by all accounts, since aborting the curse really did protect the nation as it prevented others from gaining the confidence to fight against them.

Did Bilam have free will? Abarbanel asserts that Hashem took away Bilam's ability to say what he wanted, forcing his tongue to speak, just as he had forced the tongue of the donkey.

Message of the donkey episode – Both commentators assert that the episode taught an important message regarding the supremacy of Hashem's powers, but highlight different aspects:

- Ibn Kaspi maintains that this was a prophetic dream that was meant to teach Bilam that God had the power to stop Bilam from going all together, or to allow him to go but to control what emerged from his mouth.¹⁷
- According to Abarbanel, the incident relayed two related messages.
 - **Hashem trumps astrology** – Bilam, having spent most of his life as an astrologer and only recently begun to prophesy, was unclear about the relationship between Hashem's providence and the system of stars and constellations. When the two were not in sync, did Hashem or astrology win out? To teach Bilam that Hashem's will is supreme, Hashem set up an analogy of the donkey (representing the astrological system) being stopped by the angel (representing God's providence).
 - **Removal of free will** – The miraculous speech of the donkey taught Bilam that just as the donkey was forced to speak against its nature, so too Bilam would have no choice but to say what Hashem put in his mouth.

Were the Israelites aware of Balak's plans? This approach only works under the assumption that Bilam's curse would have been known to the world at large. It is not clear, though, that the Israelites would necessarily have been privy to the fact that they were cursed.



No Power to Harm

Bilam's curse had no intrinsic powers and would never have come to fruition, but Hashem thwarted it nonetheless so as to prevent a desecration of His name and to show His love for Israel.

SOURCES: Ibn Ezra, R. Bachya, 1st Opinion in Ralbag, Shadal, Malbim, Hoil Moshe

Do forces of black magic exist? Ibn Ezra asserts that there is no truth in magical practices,¹⁸ and it is for this reason that they are prohibited.

What form of desecration?

- According to Ibn Ezra, R. Bachya, and Ralbag, Hashem wanted to ensure that no one attributed the plague at Baal Peor to Bilam's curse rather than recognizing it as a punishment for sin.¹⁹
- Shadal asserts that the potential problem related to the prohibition against attacking Moav. Had Bilam cursed the Israelites, people would assume that his words, and not Hashem's command, is what led them to shy away from war.
- Hoil Moshe, in contrast, claims that a false prophet's utterance of a curse in the name of God upon His chosen nation, is in itself a desecration.²⁰

Bilam's reputation – "אָשֶׁר תֹּאֵר יוֹאֵר" – Ibn Ezra and Ralbag assert that Bilam had astrological knowledge that enabled him to recognize when misfortune/fortune was to befall, allowing him to curse or bless those whom he knew were to receive such a fate.²¹

"וּקְסָמִים בְּיָדָם" – These commentators maintain that the elders brought Bilam charms to aid him, for they all perceived him as a magician with the power to curse.

"וְאַצֵּל אֶתְכֶם מִיָּדוֹ" – This verse is difficult for this position since the Israelites were never in any real danger or in need of salvation. Ralbag, thus, suggests that had Bilam cursed the nation, they would never repent of their sin at Baal Peor, as they would attribute their punishment to the curse and not Hashem. This would have put them into even more danger as God tried to obliterate them.²²

Message of the donkey episode

- **Warning** – R. Bachya claims that Bilam was supposed to learn from the donkey who refused to continue on the path, that he too should not be continuing on the route he set for himself. The donkey's miraculous speech was supposed to teach him not to be haughty regarding his own cursing capabilities and to recognize that just as Hashem has the power to give the donkey speech, He can take away Bilam's speech
- **Mockery of magic** – Nechama Leibowitz²³ suggests that the whole incident was meant to mock the belief in the efficacy of magic to force the hand of Hashem. Bilam who thought he could see more than the ordinary human, and that he held the power to hurt or harm in his mouth, was taught that he could not even see what his donkey could, and that his mute animal, too, could speak, but only on Hashem's command.²⁴

Understanding the plague at Baal Peor – According to Ibn Ezra, R. Bachya, and Ralbag, specifically because Hashem was about to harm the nation, he wanted to clarify that He was the source of the punishment and not Bilam's curse.

Were others aware of Balak's plans? This position assumes that knowledge of Bilam's curse would have spread to both the nation of Israel and others. Ralbag suggests that due to the close proximity of the Israelites to Moav and their intermingling with their wives, word would have surely reached them.

¹ The nature of the glosses in R. Yosef Bekhor are unclear, and here the position taken does not match R. Yosef Bekhor Shor's other comments. See About R. Yosef Bekhor Shor for elaboration.

² The Iggeret HaKodesh was attributed to Ramban by R. Yisrael AlNakawa (Menorat HaMaor Vol.4, p.87), but see Chavel's introduction to Kitvei HaRamban that it was likely written by R. Azriel of Gerona.

³ See also Sforno who says that Hashem did not want Bilam to accompany the Moabites even if he were not to curse, lest he put upon them an evil eye.

⁴ He claims that, at the time of the story, the nation of Israel did not merit such providence due to their sins of idolatry. Therefore they would have been harmed had Hashem not ensured that no curse would be uttered.

⁵ The Netziv explains that this is the reason that Bilam wanted to stand in a place where he could see the Children of Israel while he spoke. Thus, in his first blessing he says, "כִּי מֵרֹאשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ" and later Balak tells him, "לָכֵן נָא אֲתִי אֶל מְקוֹם אַחֵר אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם"

⁶ He points out that when Bilam refers to himself as "שְׂתֵם הָעֵינַן", he is referring to the fact that the powers of his "evil eye" were removed.

⁷ Though this is not the only way that the story can be read, it is the most straightforward read of the text. Others claim that Hashem, rather than the lady, revived the prophet or that this was all taking place in

Shaul's imagination. Alternatively, the Baalat HaOv was a fraud who pretended to bring Shemuel to life. For elaboration, see Did Shemuel Come Back to Life?

⁸ Both Sforno and Netziv assert that he did not, though, have the ability to bless. [This is consistent with their understanding of Bilam's powers. Since these lay in the use of an evil eye/known Hashem' moment of anger, Bilam could cause harm but not good.] They maintain that Balak himself knew this which is why he did not ask that Moav be blessed, but that Israel be cursed. According to Sforno, he said, "כי ידעת את אשר" "תברך מברך" just to be polite, or, according to Netziv, to hint that anyone that Bilam "blessed" was really already blessed and was not thriving due to any words of Bilam.

⁹ The assumption is that these were useful for Bilam's magic.

¹⁰ See תולדות האמונה הישראלית 1:2 (Tel Aviv, 1960): 462-463, 497-498.

¹¹ He does not explicitly refer to it as black magic nor deny the possibility of such magic, and even hints that perhaps Bilam had some knowledge of this craft. In his comments to Shemuel 28, though, he questions, if there was some truth or wisdom behind magical practices (such as Baalat HaOv), why did Hashem prohibit them?

¹² In his comments on Vayikra 19, Abarbanel rejects Rambam's claim that magic is false, concluding instead that it exists: "הורו בזה כי ענין הכישוף הוא אמת". Thus, too, by the story of Eshet Ba'alat HaOv and Shaul, he claims that the Baalat HaOv really did have the power to bring Shemuel back to life.

¹³ Abarbanel notes that this description is not in contrast to his prophetic status. Bilam began his career as a "קוסם", but during this incident became a full prophet.

¹⁴ Abarbanel is somewhat ambiguous regarding the extent of these magical capabilities. In the beginning of his comments Abarbanel asserts that through Bilam's knowledge of astrology, he could bring good or evil upon others, but a few lines later, he claims that though Bilam could read the future, he could "not act to bring a blessing or curse."

¹⁵ The blessing would ensure that enemies refrained from fighting, thinking that they had no chance against a blessed nation. Abarbanel attributes the fear of the Canaanites that they were to fall into the hands of Israel to these blessings.

¹⁶ He explains that, in that era, people believed that blood was a panacea for fears and tension. Thus, Hashem commanded the Israelites to apply blood to their doors, so that they would not panic upon hearing the screams of the Egyptians as their firstborns died. See Purpose of the Pesach for elaboration. Compare also Shadal's understanding of the commandment of the half shekels (see Half Shekels – For Census or Tabernacle), as similarly stemming from a mistaken belief of the people.

¹⁷ Ibn Kaspi does not go into the specifics of the encounter, but presumably suggests that the speaking donkey taught the lesson that it is God who determines who can speak and what they say, while the sword-bearing angel impressed on Bilam that Hashem could detain him if He so wished.

¹⁸ He does not include knowledge of the constellations in this practice and believes that people who are learned in this craft can tell when good or bad fortune will befall a person.

¹⁹ According to Ralbag the purpose is not to prevent a desecration of Hashem's name through the misattribution, but rather to ensure that the Israelites are aware of their sins so that they repent.

²⁰ See also R. Yaakov Medan, (תש"ע), פרשת בלק (תש"ע), who proposes that due to Bilam's high stature amongst the nations, his cursing of the Israelites and negative portrayal of them would serve to lower their standing in the eyes of others.

²¹ Thus, though he really had no ability to actively cause a curse or blessing, it appeared to the world that his words caused the fortune (when in effect he was simply foretelling it).

²² See similarly R. Astruc, who generalizes the principle to all future sins and punishments. Cf. Malbim's somewhat forced reread of the verse in Yehoshua to refer to Hashem's present deliverance of the nation, rather than his past salvation in the time of Bilam.

²³ See her עיונים בספר במדבר (Jerusalem, 1996): 300.

²⁴ Cf. the similar explanation in Tanchuma Balak 9-10 above.