

The Story of Balaam



Sorcery and Divination in the Torah
and the Ancient World

Sorcery vs. Divination

- Sorcery
 - Attempts to alter the future
 - Technique not fully understood
 - We're told, "Woe to those who sew pads on all armjoints and make bonnets for the head of every person, in order to entrap. You have announced the death of persons who will not die and the survival of persons who will not live—lying anything, big or little, contrary to the command of God" (Ezekial 22:18).

Sorcery continued

- Sorcery (*keshafim*) is banned in the Torah, *Devarim* 18:10-11:
- **10** There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that useth divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer,
- **11** or a charmer, or one that consulteth a ghost or a familiar spirit, or a necromancer.

לֹא-יִמְצֵא בְךָ,
מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ-
וּבִתּוֹ בְּאֵשׁ,
קֹסֵם קֹסֵמִים,
מַעֲוֹנֵן וּמְנַחֵשׁ
וּמְכַשֵּׁף.

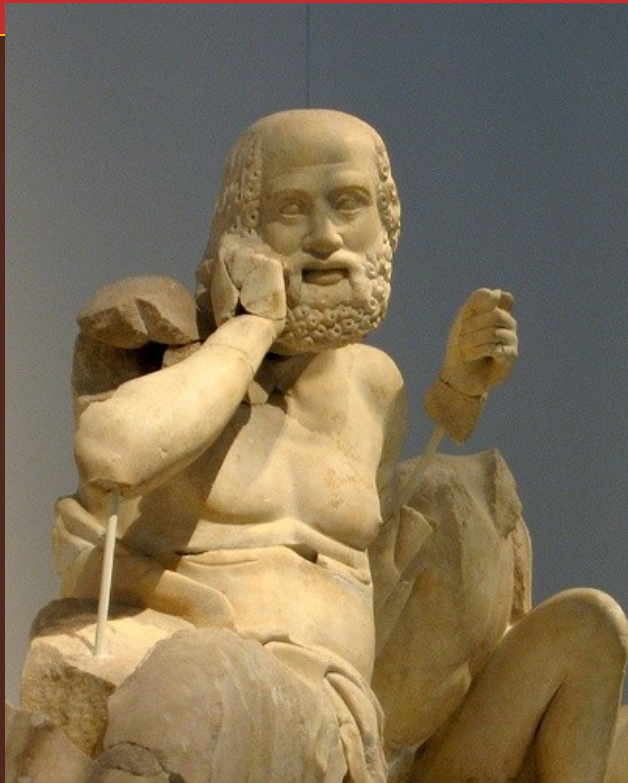
יֵאָמֵר וְחֹבֵר, חֹבֵר;
וְשֹׂאֵל אוֹב
וְיִדְעֹנִי,
וְדַרְשֵׁאֵל-

Sorcery in the Torah vs. the Ancient World

- In Mesopotamia, sorcery was allowed, specifically in the area of exorcising demons and countering the effects of black magic
- Black magic, such as putting a hex on an individual, was punishable by death because the use of black magic created antisocial behavior
- In the Torah, sorcery is wrong because it seeks to thwart the will of Hashem.
 - When we engage in sorcery, we are essentially saying that we want to negate God's plan and replace it with our own.
- Believing in sorcery is also saying that we believe something other than Hashem controls the world.

And What's Divination?

- A diviner is someone who can foretell future events, but does not seek to alter them



- div·i·na·tion : from Latin *divination-*, *divinatio*, from *divinare*
 - 1 : the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers
 - 2 : unusual insight : intuitive perception

Hepatoscopy is one type of divination



Sheep's liver in clay
Old Babylonian period
Circa 1900-1600 BCE
Location of origin:
likely Sippar,
in modern-day Iraq

Livers Weren't the Only Things People Read

Aeromancy: Divination from air and sky, concentrating especially on cloud shapes, comets, and other phenomena not usually seen in the skies

“When beggars die there are no *comets* seen;/
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death
of princes.” *Julius Caesar* (II, ii, 30-31)

There's More . . .

- Apantomancy: Divination through chance meetings of animals, like a black cat, birds and other creatures
- Astrology: Divination using celestial bodies, such as the sun, moon, stars and planets
- Ophiomancy: Divination using serpents
- Orniscopy or Orinithomancy: Divination through omens using birds, particularly birds in flight
- Oneiromancy: Divination through dreams
- Types of Divination

- **TEIRESIAS:** [*Led by a young boy*] Princes of Thebes . . . , thou standest on fate's fine edge. If thou wouldst learn the meaning of my words, heed the warnings of mine art. **As I took my place on mine old seat of augury, where all birds have been wont to gather within my ken, I heard a strange voice among them; they were screaming with dire, feverish rage, that drowned their language in jargon; and I knew that they were rending each other with their talons, murderously; the whirr of wings told no doubtful tale.** Forthwith, in fear, I essayed a burnt-sacrifice on a duly kindled altar: but from my offerings the Fire-god showed no flame; a dank moisture, oozing from the thigh-flesh, trickled forth upon the embers, and smoked, and sputtered; the gall was scattered to the air; and the streaming thighs lay bared of the fat that had been wrapped round them. Such was the failure of the rites by which I vainly asked a sign, as from this boy I learned; for he is my guide, as I am guide to others.

Orinithomancy
example from
Antigone

--From *Antigone*

Notice that divination is
accompanied by
sacrifice as it is in
Balaam story

Reminder of the Definition of Divination:

- A diviner is someone who can foretell future events, but does not seek to alter them

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 - 1 : the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers
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In fact, the Torah already told us what divination is:

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י לֹא-יִמְצֵא בְךָ,
מֵעַבְרֵי בְנוֹ-
וּבְתוֹבְאֵי שָׁ,
קִסְמִים קְסָמִים,
מְעוֹנֵן וּמְנַחֵשׁ
וּמְכַשֵּׁף.

יֵא וְחֹבֵר, חֹבֵר;
וְשֹׂא לְאוֹב
וְיִדְעֵנִי,
וְדַרְשֵׁא ל-

What does Balak want Balaam to do: sorcery or divination?

- ***Bamidbar 22: 6*** Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me; peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.'

וּוְעַתָּה לְכֹה־נֹא
אָרְה־לִי אֶת־הָעַם
הַזֶּה, כִּי־יַעֲצוּם הוּא
מִמֶּנִּי--אוּלַּי אוֹכֵל
נֶכֶה־בוֹ,
וְאֶגְרֹשׁנוּ מִן־
הָאָרֶץ: כִּי
יִדְעֵתִי, אֵת
אֲשֶׁר־תְּבָרֵךְ:
מִבְּרֵךְ, וְאֲשֶׁר
תְּאַר, יוֹאֵר

Is Balaam a Sorcerer or Diviner?

Balaam needs hilltops and solitude to work, a sign that he needs to read astronomical and other omens. These are the actions of a diviner:

ג וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם לְבָלָק, הֲתִצֵּיב עָלַי-
עֲלֵתָךְ, וְאֵלֶכָה אִלַּי יִקְרֶה יְהוָה
לְקִרְאתִי, וְדַבַּר מִה-יְרֵאֵנִי וְהִגִּדְתִּי
לְךָ; וַיֵּלֶךְ,
שָׁפִי.

3 And Balaam said unto Balak: 'Stand by thy burnt-offering, and I will go; peradventure the LORD will come to meet me; and whatsoever He showeth me I will tell thee.' And he went to a

And what does Balaam say he practices, sorcery or divination?

- **22: 18** And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak: 'If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do any thing, small or great.

יֵהוּ וַיַּעַן בַּלְעָם,
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־
עַבְדֵי בַלַּק,
אִם־יִתֶּן־לִי
בַּלְקָם לֶאֱמֹר
בְּיִתּוֹ, כִּסְּףִי
וְזָהָב־לִי,
אֹכֵל לֹעַבֵּר

אֶת־פִּי יִהְיֶה

עַל־לִפְתֵי

And again . . .



יב וַיַּעַן, וַיֹּאמֶר:
הֲלֹא, אֵת אֲשֶׁר
יְשׁוּיִם יְהוָה בִּפְּיִי--
אֲתוֹ אֶשְׁמַר, לְדַבֵּר

- **23: 12** And he answered and said: 'Must I not take heed to speak that which the LORD putteth in my mouth?'

And another time!

- **24:1:** And when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness.
- **2** And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe; and the spirit of God came upon him.

א וַיֵּרָא בַּלְעָם, כִּי
טוֹב בְּעֵינָיו יְיָ הוֹדָה
לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּלְא־
הַלֵּךְ כְּפַעַם־
בְּפַעַם, לִקְרֹאת
נְחֻשִׁים; וַיֵּשֶׁת
אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר,
פָּנָיו.

ב וַיֵּשֶׁא בַּלְעָם

אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּבְרַח

BALAAM ONLY SAYS HE IS A MOUTHPIECE FOR GOD, NOT ONE WHO ALTERS GOD'S WILL



AND, IN FACT, BALAAM SEEMS TO RISE IN PROPHETIC LEVELS AS THE STORY PROGRESSES!

SO WHERE DO WE GET THE IDEA THAT BALAAM WAS A BAD GUY?

- Is Balaam sneaking away to see Balak?

כַּבּ וַיִּחַר-אַף אֱלֹהִים, –
כִּי-הוֹלִךְ הוּא, וַיִּתְיַצֵּב
מִלְּאָרְיֵהוּהָבִדְרָךְ,
לְשַׁטֵּן לוֹ; וְהוּא רָכִיב
עַל-אֶתֹנוֹ, וְשָׁנִינְעָרָיו
עִמּוֹ.

22 And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD placed himself in the way for an adversary against him.--Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him.--

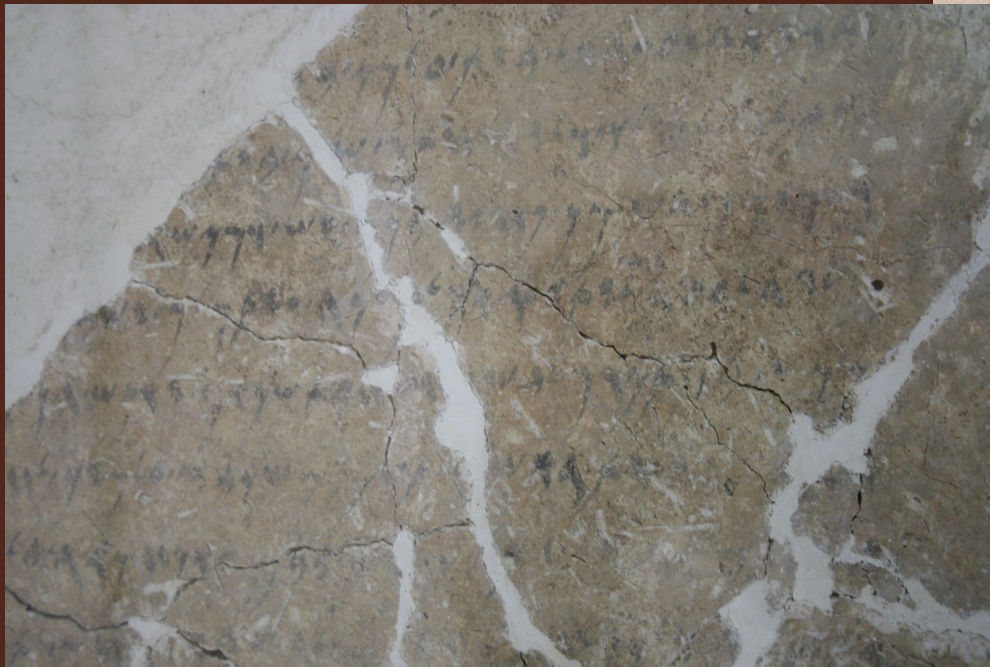
- As we've been reminded through the art of the presentation:
 - Balaam's treatment of the donkey is wrong.
 - Balaam is the seer, and yet even the most brutish animal in the world – the donkey – can see the messenger of God. Balaam cannot.

In addition, *Bamidbar* later
tells us:

טז הַיְהוָה נִהְיָה יוֹלֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
בְּדַבְרֵי בָלָעַם, לְמַסְרֵם-עַל בְּיְהוָה,
עַל-דְּבַר-פְּעוֹר; וְתַהֲיֶה מַגִּיפָה,
בְּעֵדֹת יְהוָה.

16 Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to revolt so as to break faith with the LORD in the matter of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

Balaam Outside of the Torah



In Lemaire's restoration of Combination I (above),

the column(s) and come see the deeds of the gods! The

INSCRIPTION AT DEIR 'ALLA MENTIONS BALAAM AS A SEER, A *DIVINER*

1. [This is] the account of [Balaam, son of Be]or, who was a seer of the gods. The gods came to him in the night, and he saw a vision



The Deir 'Alla
inscription
shows Balaam is
not a sorcerer!