



5 verses

While traditional Jewish sources explore the donkey's speech in terms of God's power over created persons, in contemporary Jewish commentary we also find a concern for the wellbeing of the donkey itself who is being unjustly treated by its master. Consider, for instance, the following five verses:

1. *"What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?"* (22:28). As the donkey opens its mouth to speak, its first utterance is not a justification for its own behavior but a challenge to its master's behavior:

2. *"Am I not the donkey you have ridden all your life?"* (22:30). The aging donkey points out the relationship between owner and beast which has existed for many years.

3. *"Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?"* (22:30). The donkey continues to challenge Balaam, who is now brought to silence. He no longer vents his anger, he simply replies 'No' to the donkey's question.

4. *"Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord..."* (22:31). While the donkey perceives the angel's presence on the road with immediacy, Balaam sees nothing until the Lord intervenes.

5. *"Why have you struck your donkey these three times?"* (22:32). The angel takes up the donkey's protest against its master, to which Balaam answers, *"I have sinned"* (22:34). Note, Balaam responds to the angel, but no apology is forthcoming to his donkey!

Think about it: *Those whom we expect to carry our daily burdens often go unappreciated: the devoted family member, the dedicated teacher, the faithful neighbor, carer... and of course the Lord's constant fidelity.*



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 22:2—25:9

Balak

Why reflect on Torah?

Mark David Walsh, an Australian Catholic educator and a student and teacher of Torah, makes the point that the early Jewish followers of Jesus sought to understand his life and death through the sacred texts of Jewish tradition. Their new texts—the gospels—had one eye on Christ and another on Torah in its broadest sense [that is, Jewish teaching in its oral and written traditions].

"For too long, Christians have read these texts with only one eye open (an eye towards Christ) and one eye closed (an eye towards Jewish interpretations of the text). In doing so they have read these texts in ways that their writers would never have imagined. The wisdom of the Sages and those who have followed them in the chain of Jewish tradition can open Christian eyes to a more expansive reading of God's Word."

(See Walsh's contributions at the website of Bat Kol Institute Jerusalem: www.batkol.info)

By drawing on Jewish sources and interpretative methods, this *Light of Torah* ministry encourages Christian parishioners to read the bible with both eyes open!



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 22:2—25:9

This Torah portion tells the story of a pagan king (Balak) who commissions a magician (Balaam) to curse the people of Israel. Despite his best efforts, Balaam is unable to curse Israel (see chapters 23-24). The power of the Lord's protection is such that the would-be curses are converted to blessings. The story's conclusion is anticipated in an earlier episode in chapter 22 which depicts Balaam with an unlikely conversation-partner: his donkey.

Tasting Torah

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" (Numbers 22:27-28)

We may be surprised to find a talking donkey in the Torah. After all, this is holy Scripture not Aesop's fables! The sages reminds us that every word of scripture has a divine purpose in directing our hearts and minds to the Lord. Read chapter 22, in the context of the overall Torah portion, and prayerfully ponder: how is God speaking to me through this unusual story? What purpose does a talking donkey serve in the sacred text?

Touching Torah

Perhaps you noticed that not only is the donkey given a voice (a voice of protest), it is also given enhanced sight. Three times the text says "*the donkey saw the angel of the Lord*" (22:23,25,27), although it is not until verse 31 that "*the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand.*" In the bible, references to 'seeing' and 'speaking' often convey more than a physical-sensory action. Why are we given this somewhat comical image of an ungainly beast who sees and speaks in ways that his clever human master cannot?

Depthing Torah

Turning to traditional Jewish sources we find this comment in Midrash Rabbah:
And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass. This was done to make known to him that the mouth and tongue are in the Lord's power and that if he wished to curse his mouth was in His power.. And the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam. But had he been blind? No; it merely served to inform him that the eye also is in His power.¹

From King Balak's words in 22:6 we know that in the pagan world Balaam is esteemed as a sorcerer with immense powers to impart blessings and curses as he wills. Yet here a mere donkey, miraculously given speech and the capacity to see angels, is able to challenge Balaam who is unseeing and brought to silence (v.30). What is being communicated here, argue the sages, is the Torah's scorn for human arrogance that would esteem human wisdom over the sovereignty of the Creator. Through Balaam's dialogue with a beast, the reader is reminded that a person's wisdom, power, eyes and tongue are subject to the authority of the Lord God who is the unique source of blessing, and to whom is entrusted the soul of every living thing.²

Doing Torah

The Midrash offers one view of the donkey's significance. What other interpretations arose as you pondered this text? (See overleaf) You may like to consider also 'donkey' characters in non-biblical literature (e.g., Shakespeare, CS Lewis).



Balaam in the Bible

Balaam's story is told in the Book of Numbers 22:1—24:25. He is also mentioned in:

- Numbers 31:8,16
- Deuteronomy 23:4-5
- Joshua 24:9-10
- Nehemiah 13:2
- Micah 6:5
- 2 Peter 2:15-16
- Jude 11
- Revelation 2:14

1. Numbers Rabbah 20:14-15.
2. See Leibowitz, 302.

Bibliography: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol. 2 (London/ NY: Soncino Press, 1983); Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2000); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.