

## The Hybrid Story of Balaam (Numbers 22–24): Theology for the Diaspora in the Torah<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The strange character of Numbers 22–24 as a story about foreigners and their attempts to rule YHWH can successfully be read with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern. Focusing on the characters' relationships in this text, Balak is the hegemon and Balaam the subaltern, and this constitutes much of their communicational failures. The donkey's episode serves as a lesson for the reader as well as for Balaam who is the hegemon in this case: he learns—as Balak does not—that God is the real worldly and 'wordly' hegemon. This monotheistic message is explained to the Judean readers/listeners through non-Judean protagonists. Many details point to an origin of the final text in a reception of the deuteronomistic YHWH/Assur/Israel constellation and theology in Persian times.

### Keywords

Balaam, hybridity, monotheism, postcolonialism, deuteronomist

### Introduction: Foreigners Wherever We Lift our Eyes

In the Balaam story (Num. 22–24), at first sight, all the participating human figures are foreigners in someone's eyes. Israel is not yet in its promised but unseen homeland but rests at the border, on the banks of the Jordan. Balaam is a foreign prophet although in some odd ways kin to Israel. Just like Israel's ancestors he comes from the Euphrates (Num. 22:5; Josh. 24:2), from Aram respectively (Num. 23:7; Deut. 26:5),<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>) This article is a revised version of a paper read at the European Association of Biblical Studies Annual Meeting 2005 in Dresden.

<sup>2</sup>) See Knauf (2003).

just like Moses he climbs the Pisgah seeing Israel the people (Num. 23:14) where Moses sees Israel the land (Deut. 34:1).

In contrast, the Moabite king, Balak, an archetypal foreigner to Israel, considers himself to be native to his own land, and he is a xenophobe as well as he makes clear in 22:4: 'This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field'. In modern times this fear of being swamped by immigrants is a commonplace of newspaper editorials. His disgust at the sheer number of Israelites corresponds with the fear of the Egyptians in Exod. 1:12b and it correlates with Balaam's admiration in 23:10b: 'Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?'<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the Book of Numbers, Israel's encounter with Balak is one of several encounters with foreign peoples, their kings and their armies. In the chapters before they have met the king of Edom (20:14-21), the king of Arad (21:1ff), the king of the Amorites (Sihon of Heshbon, 21:21-30), the king Og of Bashan (21:33) and now the king Balak of Moab (22:1). Num. 22-24 is, among other matters, a chapter about foreigners and their reaction to each other.

At the same time the story of Balaam is strange. The Balaam narrative is a considerable literary block in a book suspected of thematic and narrative disparities or even of being a collection of texts that do not fit together.<sup>4</sup> The material in Num. 22-24 itself is seen as disparate with the donkey episode on the one hand and the Balak episode on the other hand as two stories with different origins.<sup>5</sup> There are many synonyms, especially names for God, and other text-critical and redactional-critical issues. Leaving that aside, these chapters are full of narrative anomalies. We have a foreign YHWH-prophet—the only one in the Bible—who gives true prophecy and blessing (Douglas 1993: 412), a foreign king

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<sup>3</sup> In the Pentateuch there are many facets of xenophobia, for example it is the common fear that the 'foreigners' could become too numerous for 'us' (Exod. 1:9). On Israel's side there is xenophobia as well (e.g. Deut. 23 or Num. 11:4). In regard to numbers and the fear of enemies that makes him/them seem bigger, I see a connection between Num. 22:3 and Num. 13:33b: 'We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them'. This verse points out that foreignness/ strangeness/ being alien is a question of perspective and of perception.

<sup>4</sup> This is an opinion held since the first days of historical-critical of exegesis.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, I have not found any differing view.

who seemingly believes in YHWH but condemns his chosen people, a superhuman being with a fiery sword, a talking donkey and, consequently, interspecies conversation—and human discommunication.

What is also special about Numbers 22–24 is that it is one of the few stories in the Hebrew Bible that looks at Israel from a (fictitious) foreign perspective. At the same time the Balaam story is told by the characters of this (fictional) action. This has intriguing consequences now that the Bible is read not just by those who historically could be identified as Israel but also by Christians all over the world. The number and nature of the perspectives has changed once again, further complicating the nature of the Bible. For the Christian poor in the southern hemisphere, among others, the Bible is a formative and sometimes liberating text. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie and the mainstream in industrial countries use the Bible as a whole as a legitimatizing document for their repressive claim for hegemony over the rest of the world.

Turning to the story itself it soon points out that foreignness, strangeness and alienation are questions of perspectives in many ways: Balak and Pharaoh see negatively what is seen positively by Balaam although none of them actually seem to take a plain look at Israel (22:41; 23:13; 24:1). Balaam and Balak take figuratively and literally several points of view to curse Israel. Israel is perceived by Balaam as being harmonious, peaceful and full of bliss and blessing in a way that is not seen elsewhere in the Torah except in Exod. 19. Balaam tries several ways to see what he is to tell (23:1-3; 24:1-2). The angel takes several positions but only the donkey can see him (22:23, 25, 27, 33) until God opens Balaam's eyes (22:31; 24:3-4, 15-16). Balaam, with his opened eyes, can see some things clearly (24:3-4, 15-16) and others dimly (24:17).

What a story about foreignness! What a strange story! But this story is not only about 'foreigners'<sup>6</sup> and it is not only strange but it is hybrid. In using this term, I am referring to Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybrid-

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<sup>6</sup> Is it really possible for us now to discern biblical concepts like foreignness? I am sceptical here. The gap that separates us from biblical times includes at least the biological racism that was shaped in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and France and which still influences us today. In addition there is similarly constituted racial antisemitism and a bourgeois belief in autochthony. Are we really able to think beyond this?

ity', which can be put together with Gayatri Spivak's concept of the sub-altern.<sup>7</sup> Bhabha is seen, together with Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, as the main exponent of postcolonial theory. But what is postcolonial theory about?

### **Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism is a collective term for the theoretical quest of di scholarly disciplines such as history, literature, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, and social science. Generally, a shared aim of postcolonial studies is to define colonial times and colonial circumstances with all its implications and effects. Postcolonial studies try to understand colonial dominance and detect seemingly different aspects that share the same pattern and the same structures that have been constructed in colonial times and have an ongoing effect. So postcolonial studies necessarily involve questions of power and hegemony in the past and the present, for example, political, economical or cultural neo-imperialisms.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, postcolonial theory is suitable for biblical exegesis because it has developed a very useful idea of 'culture' which puts an end to the romantic dreams of clearly defined cultural entities and cultural purity that European historic thinking has endowed us with. It develops a notion of hybridity as an intrinsic feature of language and discourse, as well as in other cultural forms such as religion, art and economics.

Another characteristic that makes postcolonialism suitable for biblical exegesis is its sensitivity to the tension between metropolitan centres and the (ex/neo)colonial periphery.<sup>9</sup> Nearly all biblical texts have been written in an Israel which was at the periphery of an Egyptian,

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<sup>7</sup>) Exegetical works misleadingly include terms of hybridity as well: Blum 2002: 246, for example, sees the Pentateuch as a hybrid composition meaning that given texts and new created texts were put together by P into a discontinuous discourse with Persian authorisation.

<sup>8</sup>) See Hering (2002: 38).

<sup>9</sup>) Postcolonial approaches are interested in showing the marginal of the discourse: postcolonial studies mark 'the return of the repressed' (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 3) and the 'return of the marginal' (Jacoby 1995: 31).

Assyrian, Babylonian or Persian world-order. Liberation theology has shown in the last decades that within marginal Israel itself there are many marginalized persons and groups of whom God takes special notice as well.

In biblical scholarship so far postcolonialism has been used in different ways. Whereas the majority of publications deal with hermeneutical and general issues<sup>10</sup> there are, of course, many studies that work on the (dark) colonial past of Christian mission in other cultures.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, a growing number of exegetical approaches with postcolonial studies especially in regard to questions of political hegemony and Israel's answers.<sup>12</sup> I will give two examples concerning Israel and Assyria because this will be important here as well.

First, Marc Hamilton (1998) compares inscriptions of Hittite Sam'al in the early first millennium (KAI 24-25; 214-221) with Deut. 17:14-20 and other texts with the help of Said's thoughts on the function of history. He finds that whereas the Hittite inscriptions adopt the Assyrian perspective, the later Deuteronomy reverses this perspective showing that YHWH takes Israel under his protection: Assyria's military conquest is not a sign of divine absence but instead a sign of God's favour. Second, in an article about the divine command to kill all Canaanites, Amorites, Perezites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 7:1-3) Marc Brett (2004) takes on Lohfink's thesis (Lohfink 1995: 258-260) that the theology of the ban could be explained through Girard's theory of mimetic desire (Deut. 18:9; 20:17-18). Brett goes on to draw an analogy between Girard and Bhabha, who has developed the concept of colonial desire. This is how the hierarchy in the text can be focused: the remembrance of long vanished peoples on the one hand and the mimicry of Assyrian Vassal Treaties in Deuteronomy on the other. It is Israel's way to cope with its own indigenous identity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Sugirtharajah (2002) and most of his works; Liew and Yee (2002); Boer and West (2001); England (2004); Boer (2001) and many other publications.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Sugirtharajah (2005). See also Bhabha (1994a and 1994b).

<sup>12</sup> It is a pity that neither Smith-Christopher (2002), nor Dube (2002) deal extensively with the book of Numbers.

<sup>13</sup> We have to remember that reading Old Testament texts with our European eyes remains analytically focussed on the northern half of the globe. I do not and cannot answer the question of how to decolonize the south of the earth. It is at the most

## Hybridity

My contention is that the Balaam story can profitably be read with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, together with Gayatri Spivak's modification of this theory, to politicize Bhabha's psychological interpretations by substituting the idea of the subaltern for Bhabha's concept of the abject.<sup>14</sup> Bhabha's concept of hybridity seems to me in the first place to be a theory of communication together with concepts of power and hegemony (but in fact he works on discourse rather than on speech).<sup>15</sup> Bhabha shares with all postmodern theorists a post-Saussurian scholarship, which has the effect that nearly all of them argue in the framework of language, communication and power.<sup>16</sup> His concepts of hybridity is an enforced repetition on Renée Green's works<sup>17</sup> and draws attention to the marginalized and, from this point of view, to a new definition of culture as such.

In Bhabha's view there is no space that is without hegemony/dominion. Hegemony is, among other things, the power to classify and define in order to dominate. Gayatri Spivak (1988) wrote a famous article where she argued that the subaltern cannot speak, and correspondingly Mieke Bal has a narratological principle saying that 'the power to

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Europe that I may contribute to the decolonization of here, in as much as this can be achieved by becoming free from colonizing thoughts and thinking systems.

<sup>14</sup>) This perspective I learned from Hering (2002).

<sup>15</sup>) E.g. when he writes about the Derrida's treatise of presence: 'When the ocular metaphors of presence refer to the process by which contents is fixed as an "effect of the present", we encounter [...] the structured gaze of power whose objective is authority, whose 'subjects' are historical. The reality effect [...] is the moment when "under the false appearance of the present", the semantic seems to prevail over the syntactic, the signified over the signifier' (Bhabha 1994a: 109). By the way, here he meets Derrida's deconstruction itself: 'Le signifié y fonctionne toujours [...] comme un signifiant' (Derrida 1974: 16).

<sup>16</sup>) His thoughts are indebted to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Frantz Fanon among others.

<sup>17</sup>) Brown (1990), see Bhabha (1994b: 3). So Bhabha, who among others criticized Edward Said for repeating hegemonial discourse and the images of orient and occident, himself uses hegemony insofar as the theory of hybrid culture got famous under his name and not under Renée Green's. This shows how postcolonialism and every analytical tool work within a system and inevitably become involved in this analysed system itself.

speak is directly linked to the power to act' (1988: 243). Culture can only develop from translating (ap)perception into speech so every culture is translation and every culture is set up by the violence of language policy (Derrida 1997: 27). This all entails that language in the form of *parole* is essentially linked with social structure, with power and hegemony. The hegemon also tries to rule culture. He or she has the power to define and classify. He is the classifier, the ruled are the classified.

Hybridity read as a notion of interpersonal speech is exemplified in the encounter of a hegemon and a subaltern. So it is not a question of migration, migrants' problems or multi-culturalisms and is not linked to certain persons but is a feature of any culture or society as such.<sup>18</sup> Culture in itself is hybrid because there is no culture without power and hegemony. When the subaltern speaks there is a necessary ambivalence because, only being able to speak in the hegemon's language, subaltern speech confirms the hegemony. Yet at the same time there is a small break in his or her utterance that puts the hegemony into question. So hybridity can also be circumscribed as the ambivalence in every subaltern's speech towards authority (Hering 2002: 74-76). It both affirms and questions authority at the same time. The hegemon feels offended although in most instances this is not intended by the subaltern.<sup>19</sup>

The possible connection to the biblical story of Balaam is threefold: first, it is a story about prophecy and prophetic speech and authority is

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<sup>18</sup>) Bhabha 1994a: 111. Bhabha and his conception of hybridity are often mistaken as giving special attention to migrants' identities (i.e. personalizing hybridity). Another misunderstanding is seeing multi-culturalism as hybridity which can be found especially in upper-class/academic Europe.

<sup>19</sup>) It is an interesting question whether the speech of women to men can (generally) be seen as the constellation between the subaltern and the hegemon. The notion of *kyriarchat* stressed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would persuade us to differentiate. Spivak, of course, does so as well (1988: 294-308). This could exempt us from the question of whether there was a 'feminist' conscience in pre-modern times or not. Another aspect of hybridity, although not treated here, is the paradox that the dominated can imagine their liberation only in forms of the dominators and this can be observed in biblical texts as well. The fictive annihilation of Canaanites, Amorites, Perezites, Hivites, and Jebusites (possibly imitating Assyrian ideology) may be one example, and the often discussed imitation of other culture's laws concerning the rape of wives in Hos. 2:12; Jer. 13:22, 26; Exod. 16:36f; 23 may be another—although a doubtful one, see for a discussion Baumann (2003: 69-81).

an important feature of prophecy.<sup>20</sup> It is Balaam's prophetic authority that Balak wants to buy although at the same time Balak is the 'worldly' authority, the hegemon. The second connection is that hardly any text in the Old Testament deals so dominantly with problems of communication between a person of hegemony (Balak) and a subaltern, because hired, person (Balaam).<sup>21</sup> In addition, hardly any other text in the Old Testament shows so clearly that so many things are a question of perspective. Nowhere else in the Old Testament do we have so much cross-cultural, inner-cultural, inter-social and inter-species communication as here in Numbers 22–24. Additionally, prophecy is deeply connected with communication: a prophet is a channel of communication. He or she communicates with a numinous being and communicates what they have learned of this being to other humans. Thirdly, we see that classification and non-classificability is an issue of the text as well. Insofar as authority, communication and analysis, in the form of classifying behaviour as right or wrong and their items, are features of prophecy, one can assume that prophecy in itself is hybrid and can be understood with postcolonial perspectives.

### **The Balaam Story and Hybridity**

Balak is a xenophobic king. He is the hegemon. But to be exact, this is only his view. He gives an order and wants it to be carried out.<sup>22</sup> This is in his eyes a straightforward transaction; he pays a price and receives a service. This is why he talks about payment so frequently (22:17, 37; 24:11). In fact, it is the reward that establishes the relationship between Balak and Balaam as the relationship between a hegemon and a subaltern.

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<sup>20</sup>) Authority is at the same time its fundamental problem.

<sup>21</sup>) Of course, there are certain problems transferring theories from modern societies into ancient ones: for example, I use the notion of 'subaltern' as a relational word and not in Spivak's (and Gramsci's) sense of a group of persons underlying the hegemony of the ruling but having no consciousness of their own class-situation and therefore not able to act politically (Spivak 1988: 285f).

<sup>22</sup>) See his frustrated salutation of Balaam in 22:37.



Balak constructs and stresses their relationship as that of a hegemon (he who is paying) and a subaltern (Balaam who is to be paid). Balaam is the subaltern because he has to execute an order, although this will be complicated in the text in many ways. Balaam, however, is bound to his assignment yet he is also bound to a higher authority. He can only say what God allows him to say and he emphasizes this several times.

The relationship of Balak and Balaam is a process of failing communication between the hegemon and the subaltern. This is stressed in the story from the first direct dialogue between the two (22:37 contains the whole conflict). They repeat this conversation several times (22:17-18; 23:11-12, 25-26) and it is also the topic of their last dialogue (24:10-13). But God himself, not Balak, as he believes to be, is the real hegemon and Balak does not understand this. This is the source of their miscommunication. Balak is convinced that he is the hegemon and cannot comprehend that there is a greater hegemon than he. His inability to understand this is taken to the extreme when he stands beside all his bloody sacrifices (23:3, 6, 15, 17)<sup>23</sup> as Balaam recites his *meschalim* (23:6; 23:17) and still wonders why their contents are not as he has ordered. He also does not understand that YHWH cannot be bargained with even though Balaam tells him 'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?' (Num. 23:19). Balak seems to accept the fact that YHWH may be the decisive factor in blessing and cursing, but he still hopes to persuade Balaam of the opposite: 'Come on, let me take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God to let you curse them for me from there' (Num. 23:27). Even in his last sentence (24:11) he does not understand. From this perspective what is often presented as the unsatisfactory ending of the Balaam story is—read as many efforts of communication—a consequential ending because it represents the total failure of their communicative efforts.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>) This may be a ritual usage all over the Levant in order to assure its effect. See Weinfeld (1977: 186-187) for Mari examples; See also Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5.6.29; mTa'an 4:2; 1QM 2:3-5. See below for the communicational/perceptual problems this causes.

<sup>24</sup>) That the story is about the troubles of communication the reader has learned even

So Num. 22–24 is at this level a long story about the resistant abilities of monotheistic/monolatric prophecy as a mode of discourse and, at the same time, this constellation is used by the narrator to develop a theology against human hegemony.<sup>25</sup>

### **Balaam and His Donkey Misunderstanding Each Other**

If we read the text with regard to how it sets up hegemony and authority through the success and failure of communication, the episode of the donkey is an integral part of Balaam's story.<sup>26</sup> This story within the story is also about discommunication and hegemon. The donkey obeys not Balaam, but the stronger person/creature (22:23, 25, 27). Balaam learns in this story because here, he acts as the hegemon but yet there is a greater one—and he does not understand. Bartelmus identified how in this episode actors and events are hardly separable: 'Manche Aktionen werden von zwei oder drei Aktanten mehr oder minder identisch durchgeführt, nur zeitlich oder strukturell so verschoben, dass deutlich wird: Wenn zwei dasselbe tun, ist es nicht dasselbe' (Bartelmus 2005: 38). The most striking example is that God's wrath is inflamed (22:22) just as later Balaam's wrath is inflamed (22:27 in analogy with the near death of the donkey (22:27) and that of Balaam (22:33)).<sup>27</sup> What is more, the whole conflict is repeated three times, both in the case of

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since Num. 22:13, 14 where the messengers, as well as Balaam himself, do a bad job by not repeating correctly what they are told to tell (Weise 2003: 65-77; Douglas 1993: 419). This represents a literal contrast to the unmistakable message of God's messenger with the sword in his hand.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas (1993: esp. 425-427), interprets the Balaam story as a political satire with Balak as foreign ruler, Balaam as colonial governor and the donkey as the people of Israel.

<sup>26</sup> This does not say anything about the text's origin especially in view of possible sources or its independent tradition.

<sup>27</sup> Bartelmus (2005: 38, and see 2005: 32 for a lot more examples). God's wrath and the flaming sword are two items from which Kellenberger (1989: 69), concludes that this story is not funny nor does it ridicule Balaam: 'Mit dem gezückten Schwert des Jahwe-Engels (V.23, 31) lässt sich nicht spaßen, wie auch die weiteren Belege dieses Terminus zeigen (Josh. 5:13; 1Chron. 21:16)'. He also hints at Gen. 32:23-33 and Exod. 4:24-26 where no ridicule can be seen and where no literary-critical operations are made.

Balaam and his donkey, and then with Balak, Balaam and their sacrifices.

The learning process is made explicit in the text. In fact his eyes are opened in Num. 22:31. This is what he refers to in his *meshallim* (Num. 24:4, 16). Now he can see his visions, agitate and see himself as one who has understood (24:16). With the donkey-episode he perceived that God really is the hegemon and that the subaltern beast reacted to the greater hegemon as he himself has to do. He frequently answers that God is the one he has to obey, before and after the menace of his life.

What is the situation of a subaltern? Whatever the subaltern's behaviour or intentions, the impression of subversion is dangerous for the subaltern—Balaam nearly kills his donkey. And he learns from his own perspective in 22:22-35 that even if the subaltern obeys the hegemon his or her lack of understanding can lead to the (mis)understanding that the subaltern has set out to offend the hegemon.<sup>28</sup> When there is a conflict over whether a prophet is to obey God or the king, it is demonstrated that he is best to obey God.

YHWH is the origin of this process. Furthermore, there are three actions on YHWH's side that give a starting point for the consequences: it is YHWH who gets angry so that the adversary steps in Balaam's way (22:22), it is YHWH who opens the mouth of the donkey (22:28), and it is YHWH who opens the eyes of the prophet (22:31).<sup>29</sup> Balaam did not understand for a long time that he does not possess or control God, and that God may be predictable but never manipulatable because, for example, God can change his mind (22:22; against Balaam's confession in 23:19). This is exactly what Balak cannot understand either: God cannot be bought nor bribed. Balaam realises this in 22:34 contrary to Balak and confesses his mistake.

His learning process is symbolized in comparison with that of the donkey: As he is riding on his donkey in the beginning—a kind of naturally understood cultural hegemony—the donkey sits down before the angel, but still under Balaam (22:27). After Balaam has recognised the

<sup>28</sup>) As a biblical answer to Spivak, Balaam finally understood that the subaltern can speak—with the help of God. See also below.

<sup>29</sup>) Weise (2003: 78-90) found three sections within 22:21-35 starting in each case with YHWH's action.

angel he falls on his knees but in front of the angel (22:31). By reacting this way he finally lies lower than his donkey.<sup>30</sup> So the episode of the donkey represents the same conflict as that in the story of Balaam and the king and this provides this episode with a fixed and legitimate place in the overall story. It also demonstrates that God did not really change his mind in the course of events to hinder Balaam on his way, but rather to teach him and the reader a lesson. Consequently the reported result is the divine command to go to Balak and to follow God's word (22:35). Now, well prepared by a clear-cut constellation of hegemony (beast, human being, divine being), Balaam and the reader are ready for the more complex constellation of a king with power (= money = worldly power) and a prophet with power (= numinous abilities = wordly power).

### **The Relationship Between Balak, Balaam and God**

The relationship between Balak and Balaam is complicated because, although Balak is the hegemon, Balaam's prophetic authority is required and Balak clearly honours him by going out to meet him (22:36). This relationship gets more complicated when God steps into the scene and his influence is demonstrated in the blessing/cursing and in the offering. Balak thinks that it is Balaam who is doing the blessing (22:6) although—and this is said *expressis verbis* in the text in order to avoid receptive misunderstandings (22:12)—it is God himself who blesses.<sup>31</sup> Another misunderstanding occurs over the offering itself. Balaam instructs Balak to give the offering (23:1, 2a), then both of them sacrifice (23:2b) and then Balaam says to God that he (himself) gave the offering (23:4). We see misunderstandings concerning representation, proxy and 'origin' in this text. In addition, prophecy contains a dynamic effect in the social/power-related order of hegemony because, with the help

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<sup>30</sup>) Bartelmus (2005: 37f). Bartelmus even thinks of a temple admission formula: looking at the angel's movement, he/she/it forces Balaam and his ass into an ever-narrower space similar to the structure of an ancient Near East temple: from the width of a front court (22:22) to the hall of the temple (22:25) into the Cella where only proscynesis is possible (22:31).

<sup>31</sup>) See also 22:11, 17; 23:7, 8, 11, 13, 20, 25, 27; 24:1, 9, 10.

of God, his prophetic authority may mean that a prophet can change his position in this social order. That Balak and God are two (rival) hegemony can be seen from the structure of the text: both do not act in the same scene at the same time (Weise 2003: 27).

But there is a development in this complex relationship which marks a difference to the donkey episode. In his visions Balaam increasingly draws the constellation of hegemony between himself, Balak and God, towards God. This change is marked by God's love of Israel which is stressed even more by Balaam with every vision. This has an effect on the dialogues: while Balak's sentences grow more and more modest,<sup>32</sup> Balaam's sentences grow more and more confessional.<sup>33</sup> In the end Balak has absolutely no influence over Balaam and, miraculously, after delivering his messages Balaam returns home unharmed by Balak. Balak returns to his home too.

### The Hybridity of the Text

If this story is one of hybridity, and a hybrid story as well, then all those elements that cannot be classified in one layer are hybrid elements of the text, insofar as the text itself refuses to be ruled or be under the reader's hegemony, because this denial is what it teaches us: God is the only hegemon. Maybe this is why there are so many names for God in this text. God will not be classified or be ruled.

The story as a whole, and in its detail, is strongly monotheistic and is not about the concurrence of many Gods. Even Balak refers to YHWH: he accepts that this is the decisive God. He gives *olah*-offerings (Num. 23:3, 15, 30): three times as much as Job's friends (Job 42:8) which is three times the holy amount, although to use several altars for the same ritual is singular.<sup>34</sup> It is not even mentioned whether Balak has his own God. YHWH himself is not limited to his 'own' territory but in accordance with exilic and post-exilic theology is master over the

<sup>32</sup>) See the difference between 23:11 and 24:10 as most striking examples.

<sup>33</sup>) See the difference between 22:17 and 24:13 as most striking examples.

<sup>34</sup>) See Milgrom (1990: 194), but in fact no text for bloody sacrifices affords more than one large animal for the same ritual. *NumR* 20:8 states that the seven altars recall seven previous altars by Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

world (Lee 2004: 249). One could even suggest that God's freedom to act as the hegemon of the world sets into action in Num. 22–24 what outlined in Exod. 3:14.<sup>35</sup>

The donkey episode may also be more a plea for monotheism rather than a warning to distrust foreign prophets in the spirit of Isa. 1:3: 'The ox knows his master, the donkey knows his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.' The Balaam story can be read as a kind of critique of the Isaian text: Israel may not know his God, but neither do the prophets that had talked with God the night before.<sup>36</sup> No one sees and knows God and no one knows who God is.

The constellation of hybrid speech may be the reason why Balaam in the third (and fourth) vision says here 'the oracle of Balaam' (24:3b, 15b) instead of the standard 'oracle of YHWH'. He stresses both that YHWH/ Shaddai/El Elyon is the source of his vision and that he, Balaam, is author and speaker of the words. He cannot step away from his words as do the classical prophets in Israel and Judah because it is important here that he is the one who speaks: the foreigner and the most subaltern of all prophets.<sup>37</sup> This is different from the first two visions where the text says that God put the words in his mouth (23:5, 16). Here we have exactly prophecy's complexity: it all stems from God and it is important who it is who speaks the word. Balaam's prophetic authority, as well as the donkey's similarly miraculous abilities, show that God can liberate whomever he or she wants to change their position within the social order.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>) Bartelmus (2005: 39) does so quite convincingly.

<sup>36</sup>) What kind of a prophet is Balaam? The discussion about this is long and difficult. In a still intriguing article Donner (1994: 129) points out that the messengers brought fees for divination (Num. 22:7) which is also mentioned in Deut. 18:10, 14 although not specifically relating to an anti-God-Prophet (Balaam adopts the deuteronomistic notion by referring to it in 23:23!). But still we have to acknowledge that God comes to Balaam that night (22:9, 20), that no mantics are mentioned and that God as well as Balaam seem to know each other—they have a well-nigh intimate relationship.

<sup>37</sup>) Maybe this is even the reason why in the same vision he states that in 'falling down' his eyes are opened (24:4, 16): it is the "subalternation" that taught him monotheism. Bartelmus (2005: 41) draws a parallel between 24:3b, 15b and his kneeling and lying down in 22:31.

<sup>38</sup>) It must be left open whether God can/will change the order itself.

The reception history of the text could not deal with all the features that Balaam and the text hold. In fact, Bhabha found, 'The paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside' (Bhabha 1994a: 116). This is exactly what the text does to the reading/listening Judeans: a non-Israelite with such a deep faith, such a wonderful Yahwistic theology bought by a foreign king trying to kill all Israelites: no one knows any more who is inside or outside, who is self or who is other. In fact, who is not foreign in this story? What is not strange about it?

### **Hybridity and Literature: The Hybrid Story of Balaam**

The term hybridity does not, of course, appear in the Hebrew Bible. How anachronistic is Bhabha's concept when applied to the Balaam story? What Bhabha and Spivak's concept of hybridity can help us to understand is:

- Why Balaam consents to go to Balak and at the same time is responsible to YHWH.
- Bhabha's hybridity can clarify the ambivalence of authority. That is why Balak does not understand hybrid speech: the source of hybrid speech in this and other biblical texts is God.
- It can explain why the donkey episode is in the text and why it stands before the visions.
- It can explain the open ending.
- It can help to focus on power and speech and to pull together the story as a whole.

But Balaam's disturbance of Balak's hegemony is not a critique of hegemony itself as Bhabha defines the concept. In ancient times it is not possible to think anything without a divine hegemon. That means in modern times hybridity may question hegemony itself but in ancient times the question is always one of one hegemon, in this case God, undermining or overthrowing another, here Balak as the representative of earthly political power. Balak may be the worldly power but YHWH is the 'real', if we may put it like this, 'wordly' power.

## Hybridity and History: Num. 22–24 as an Answer to ‘Foreign’ Hegemony

In saying that in ancient times one hegemon (God) undermines another (worldly power) we may find a parallel in Deuteronomistic theology and in the transposition of Assyrian Vassal Treaties, especially Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty (EST).<sup>39</sup> The relationship between the Assyrians and their vassals are transposed to the relationship between YHWH and Israel, especially in deuteronomistic theology and literature. This notion has long been discussed and there are even redaction-historical parallels to be found in Deut. 28.<sup>40</sup> The similarities and differences are many.<sup>41</sup> For our context some parallels are particularly important: the claim of loyalty/love<sup>42</sup> and fear<sup>43</sup> to the sovereign/God as well as the exclusivity of this treaty. YHWH/Asarhaddon’s promise will be protection and blessing.

In fact in discussions of the source of political influence on Israel/Juda’s development towards monotheism, this treaty is the most often cited. Scholarly discussion of Assyrian influence on the Old Testament is mainly limited to Deuteronomy itself and not widened to consider texts and theologies which may be deuteronomistically influenced. Whether the Balaam story really can be proved to be influenced by deuteronomistic theology and therefore by the EST is doubtful. The verdict would require an answer to the question of how such an influence is imagined in scholarly discussion and what exactly we mean by ‘influence’. The only scholarly contribution I know which focuses on the theological consequences rather than on the redaction-historical ones is Jan Assmann’s theory of *Umbuchung*: Israelite/Judean literature and theology changed the political contract with one sovereign into a contract

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<sup>39</sup>) See the newer and better edition, compared to Wiseman’s edition VTE of 1958’ by Parpola and Watanabe: *Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty* (EST), no. 6 in Parpola and Watanabe (1988).

<sup>40</sup>) Steymans (1995a and 1995b). See also the works of Otto and his *Deuteronomium*.

<sup>41</sup>) See, for one of the most comprehensive summaries, Krebern timer (1995).

<sup>42</sup>) See e.g. EST §4: 51-54, §8; §24: 266-268; §26: 310; §34: 385-396. See Weinfeld (1983: 81f): political loyalty was widely expressed by the term ‘love’ which is therefore no term of affection here.

<sup>43</sup>) E.g. EST §34: 387, 393-396.



with God not built on offerings but on justice and love. This brings a theologization of political notions (Assmann 2000).

There are some theological issues that hint at the Balaam story being a story about Assmann's *Umbuchung* of political foreign hegemony or of Assyrian vassal treaties. The story of Balaam as we have it now in the Torah shows how one can serve two masters and how this can fail. But what alternative is there? Being true to God is more important than being a good ally (this is [post-]Josianic theology). The effect of this transposition/*Umbuchung* is that Israel can nominally serve any foreign nation because these power relationships are not important. In 'reality', theologically defined, they serve God as the real hegemon. The text is so monotheistic that even Balak has no God to curse Israel or to help him defeat Israel.

This transposition/*Umbuchung* bolsters monotheism and this implies YHWH's internationality: he has to have at least the same geographical influence as the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian rulers. The reader is obliged to remember that God and all his creation, even in the form of one small donkey, are on Israel's side and therefore every (true) prophet is as well. It is a significant point that the YHWH-specialist stems from the Euphrates.<sup>44</sup> Of course the Balaam story shows that blessing without God's will is not possible, it underlines that he and no worldly master is the real hegemon.<sup>45</sup> In the text, not only is Balaam's loyalty towards YHWH stressed in so many answers but also his loving, affectionate, description of Israel in harmony.

The story's theonomy and Israel's consequent autonomy was probably developed through deuteronomistic theology's imitation of EST. That can be an explanation why in the story Israel is always visible but

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<sup>44</sup>) Maybe it is also a suitable answer to Assyrian ideology that throughout the whole book of Numbers there is not a word about translation or foreign languages although there is discommunication in nearly every word in Num. 22-24. Cf. Uehlinger's exegesis of Gen. 11 as an answer to Sargon's II. building Dur-Sharrukin (Uehlinger 1990). The contrary example is 2Kgs 18-19.

<sup>45</sup>) Cf. e.g. EST: §35; Deut. 28; Num. 22:11 and 12; 23:7-10; 23:11-13, 20, 25; 24:1, 9. Interesting enough Weise (2003), who sees the main theme of the text in blessing and curse, points out that this is an exclusive link between Deut. 28 and Num. 22-24 in postexilic biblical texts. So are there even more connections between Deut. 28 and 22-24 than just theological ones?

distanced from all other peoples: Israel is alone with its God. This theological issue may be an explanation for the question why Num. 22–24 stands in the book of Numbers, and why exactly in this position. In ch. 21, it was demonstrated through interactions with a number of different kings and peoples that Israel would indeed stay alone.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps there simply had to be a text about the right behaviour of individuals towards other powers in the Torah, and this could have been shown only with the patriarchs and an interaction with a member of a foreign people.<sup>47</sup> Num. 22–24's addition to deuteronomistic theology is to demonstrate that staying true to YHWH in the way that the Deuteronomists advocate works even for a non-Israelite like Balaam—and so it must work better with Israel!

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<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, in Num. 25 the calamity is presented as following too intimate contacts with other peoples; this is a notion Zedekiah sensed in his own body because of his rebellious alliance, according to deuteronomistic theology (cf. Jer. 27). Having shown this in Num. 25, the new generation can be counted one by one, and they can move into the land, the land that is promised if they behave well (see Deut. 28).

<sup>47</sup> Arguments for a postexilic date of the story told in Num. 22–24 are the monotheism, the conviction that only God can bless and not humans, and many details of course. Rouillard (1985: 481-487), found that the oldest text-layer did not originate before 650 BCE, its canonical shape reaching far into the Persian period. Blum (2002: 116), sees Num. 22–24 as belonging to his KD-layer of the Pentateuch, dating from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

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