

Balaam the Grandson of Laban and Pharaoh's Counselor

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Balaam was the grandson of Laban according to Jewish tradition. Laban deceived Jacob ten times and sought to destroy him and his family.

The Zohar (mystical commentary on the Torah) states that Laban was an expert in sorcery (כַּשְׁפִּי) with which he sought to destroy Jacob. Therefore he said to Jacob, "I have learned by divination (i.e., שִׁנְיָ, from the same root as *nachash*, the "serpent" in Eden) that the LORD has blessed me because of you" (Gen. 30:27). Perhaps this explains why Rachel later stole her father's idols (i.e., "teraphim," תְּרָפִים) before the family fled back to the Promised Land (Gen. 31:19) -- she was attempting to break the power of his spells against her family...

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) states that Balaam became so famous as a magician that he later became a chief advisor to Pharaoh. It was Balaam who advised the new Pharaoh to enslave the Israelites and to afflict them with brutal taskmasters (Exod. 1:8-11). According to Midrash, at some point this new Pharaoh had a nightmare. In it he saw an old man standing before him as he sat on his throne. The man held a balancing scale. All the elite of Egypt were placed on one side of the scale, and only a small lamb on the other. When Pharaoh looked, behold, the lamb outweighed all the others!

When he awoke, Pharaoh called his wise men and asked them to interpret his dream, but they could not do so. Only Balaam had the explanation: "A child will be born to the Israelites who will destroy the land and kill all the people," he said. "Then he will lead the Israelites to freedom. You must stop this from happening!" Pharaoh's stargazers agreed with Balaam and informed Pharaoh that according to their calculations the child had been born on that very day! "But he is destined to die by water," they said, and Balaam then recommended that a decree be issued that all newborn Israelite boys be thrown into the Nile river. In other words, it was Laban's hatred of Jacob (imparted to his grandson Balaam) that was the underlying impetus for the persecution of the Jews in Egypt!

The Zohar says that Balaam became "a disciple of" Laban, so that for all practical purposes they functioned as the same person. "As great as Moses was in the realm of spirituality and purity, Balaam was his equal in the realm of witchcraft and impurity" (Tanna Eliyahu).

In Num. 23:21 the word translated "perversity" here is *amal* (עֲמַל), a word that can also mean "toil" or "labor." Israel was chosen by God's grace - not because of personal merit or "works." Indeed, "there is no enchantment (i.e., "*nachash*," שִׁנְיָ) against Jacob, no divination ("*kesem*," קְסָם) against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!' (Num. 23:23).