

Heed Your Steeds: Achilles' Horses and Balaam's Donkey

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ABSTRACT

Two very distinctive accounts from the ancient world relate how animals warn their riders of impending danger by speaking to them, and the humans appear to be not very surprised by the talking animals. According to Iliad, Book 19,395-424, the horses of Achilles spoke to him a word of warning before his entry into battle, and in Num 22:21-34 Balaam's donkey complained of the unfair beating he received from Balaam when trying to avoid the threatening angel of the Lord (Num 22:21-34). The stories are not similar enough to declare that the biblical author used the Greek narrative for a template. However, both are unusual narratives that bear some particular similarities with each other. It would appear to me that as the biblical author crafted his or her story, the author consciously reacted against some of the underlying themes in the Homeric narrative.

Keywords: Achilles, Balaam, Homer, Iliad, donkey, angel of the Lord

INTRODUCTION

Tales are told in the ancient world about talking animals, and in some instances the animals attempt to provide warning to their riders. Two slightly similar accounts tell of how the horses of Achilles spoke to him before his entrance into battle (Iliad, Book 19,395-424) and how Balaam's donkey complained of the unfair beating he received from Balaam when trying to avoid the invisible angel of the Lord who stood in Balaam's way (Num 22:21-34). We turn first to the story of Achilles.

Iliad, Book 19,395-424 (translation is from Murray and Wyatt)

Then terribly he called aloud to the horses of his father: "Xanthus and Balius, far-famed children of Podarge, in some other way take thought to bring your charioteer back safe to the army of the Danaans when we have had our fill of war; and do not leave him there dead, as you did Patroclus."

Then from beneath the yoke spoke to him the horse Xanthus of the swift-glancing feet; suddenly he bowed his head, and all his mane streamed from beneath the yoke pad beside the yoke and touched the ground; and the goddess, white-armed Hera, gave him speech; "Yes indeed, still for this time will we save you

mighty Achilles, though the day of doom is near you, nor will we be the cause of it, but a mighty god and overpowering Fate. For it was not through sloth or slackness of ours that the Trojans were able to strip the armor from the shoulders of Patroclus, but one, far the best of gods, he whom fair-haired Leto bore, slew him among the foremost fighters and gave glory to Hector. But for us two, we could run swift as the West Wind's blast, which, men say, is of all winds the fleetest; but for you yourself it is fated to be vanquished in fight by a god and a mortal."

When he had thus spoken, the Erinyes checked his voice. Then, in great agitation, spoke to him swift-footed Achilles: "Xanthus, why do you prophesy my death? You need not at all. Well I know even of myself that it is my fate to perish here, far from my dear father and my mother; but even so I will not cease until I have driven the Trojans to their fill of war."

He spoke, and with a cry drove among the foremost his single-hoofed horses.

As we reflect upon this account, certain key elements may be observed: 1) The hero is ready to move forward toward his mission. 2) His mission is to kill or destroy a people, the Trojans. 3) He is using an animal for

transportation. 4) The goddess Hera enables the animal, Xanthus, to speak. 5) The animal defends himself from an unjust accusation of causing the death of Patroclus. 6) The horse warns of the hero's death, if he goes forward. 7) The hero moves forward despite the warning. 8) There is role reversal in that an animal displays intelligence and the great Achilles has to listen and respond to his steeds, who would normally follow his commands. 9) Presumably in battle the heroic steeds will perform in a manner so as to protect the great warrior, Achilles.

With these categories in mind we turn the text of Balaam and his donkey in Num 22:22-34. Commentators have sensed that this story has been inserted into its present literary context. One may observe that in Num 22:21 God tells Balaam to go on his mission, but to say only what God tells him to say. Then in Num 22:23 the text declares that God became angry with Balaam for simply going. In Num 22:33 the angel of the Lord admits to being ready to kill Balaam with a sword. In Num 22:34 Balaam says "I will return home." But then in Num 22:35 the angel of the Lord tells Balaam to continue the journey. Threatening to kill Balaam for moving forward as well as for beating his donkey and then telling him to continue the journey are divine messages seriously in tension with each other. In Num 22:21 we read that Moabite officials accompany Balaam, but they are absent in the account of Balaam and the donkey. To me this makes it so obvious that this delightful account of Balaam and his donkey has been stuck into the greater Balaam narrative (Noth 178-80; Budd 272; Barre 260; Levine 139, 154-55).

Some scholars have expressly stated their belief that this narrative is a late addition to the Balaam traditions. In general, Numbers 22-24 portrays Balaam rather positively, but later narratives portray him rather negatively (Num 25:1-16; 31:8, 16 [P texts]; Deut 23:5-6; Jos 13:22; 24:9-10, 2 Pet 2:15-16; Jude 11), and since Balaam and the donkey vignette portray Balaam as rather obtuse, one could assume this story to be a late insertion into Balaam traditions (Barre 255; Levine 139, 154). Commentators often suggest the late pre-exilic era (Rouillard; Seebass; Way 58-59). Some scholars explicitly view the story as a post exilic addition (Schmitt; Levine 237; Sals).

Balaam's experience with his donkey bears some resemblance to the narrative of Achilles and his horse Xanthus. 1) The hero is moving

toward his mission: Num 22:22b, "Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him." 2) From the prior narrative we know that Balaam is supposed to curse the Israelites, as Achilles was seeking to destroy the Trojans. 3) He used an animal for transportation: Num 22:22b, "Now he was riding on the donkey." 4) The deity enables the animal to speak: Num 22:28a, "Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam." 5) The animal defends himself from the unjust beating he has received: Num 22:28a, "What I have done to you, that you struck me these three times?" and Num 22:30b, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" (This is truly comic, picture the donkey whipping Balaam!) 6) The donkey really warned Balaam of his impending potential death by his refusal to move: Num 22:31a, 33, "Then 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; . . . 'The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live.'" 7) The hero continues his journey: Num 22:35, "The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak." I would suggest that this final verse is not part of the original tale of Balaam and the donkey, but it has been added to facilitate the insertion of the narrative by transitioning from Balaam's desire to return home and the greater plot-line of Balaam serving Balak. 8) The theme of role reversal in this story is most significant, for the otherwise simple donkey can see the otherworldly angel of the Lord and speak, while the supposedly clairvoyant prophet must listen to his donkey and only subsequently see the vision of the angel of the Lord. 9) As Achilles' steeds will serve him well in battle, Balaam's little donkey saved his life by stopping, for otherwise the angel of the Lord would have killed Balaam (Gray 335).

One cannot say that the Balaam and his donkey account is a serious form-critical parallel to the story of Achilles and Xanthus, for there are too many differences. Achilles gives an initial speech to the horses to bring him back alive and subsequently tells the horses that he was aware of his impending death at Troy. Balaam says nothing comparable to this. In the Balaam account much attention is given to the angel of

the Lord who appears to the donkey alone in the beginning but ultimately speaks to Balaam. Also, there is the humorous activity of the donkey avoiding the angel, squeezing past the angel, and stooping down before the angel, stubbornly refusing to move, while Balaam unfairly beats the donkey, which makes the reader emotionally side with the intelligent donkey over against the stupid prophet—a complete role reversal. There is nothing comparable with Achilles and his horses. These differences comprise much of the narrative in the two accounts, so any formal comparison is unrealistic.

Furthermore, nine points of comparison may provide interesting similarities, but I would like to see far more similarities between the two accounts before I hazard the theory that the biblical author was directly reworking this tale from the Iliad. I would like to see numerous form-critical similarities that involve the bulk of both narratives before I seriously suggest any real form-critical dependence.

Having said that, I am struck by how the biblical narrative might appear to be an ironic spoof on the Greek narrative in the Iliad. Consider the following ironic twists provided by the biblical narrative in contrast to the story about Achilles: 1) Instead of a great warrior, the almost semi-divine Achilles, the biblical figure is the dark prophetic personage, Balaam. In this particular narrative Balaam is portrayed as a buffoon who unwittingly beats his poor donkey who is actually trying to save his life. Notice that Balaam never did apologize to the donkey. In effect, we have the story of an ass riding a donkey. 2) The donkey is simply a little beast of burden, not the noble steed of Achilles, Xanthus, who was sired by a noble line of horses, in particular, Podarge. 3) When the animals speak, Balaam's donkey is a little whiner, who complains about his treatment, whereas Xanthus speaks with grand nobility, as do all the characters in the Iliad. 4) One could finally say that the biblical story is about little folk, a cranky old prophet and his grumpy little donkey, whereas the Iliad is about grand characters, people and animals alike, who are divine or semi-divine in their status. 5) Perhaps the last observation leads us to a significant theological observation. In the biblical account the one true persona who stands out as noble is the angel of the Lord, which may be a circumlocution for God (Noth 179). People, like Balaam, are humble human figures before God, not like the great Greek heroes. They are what

they are by the grace of God. The great prophet, Balaam, is humbled when the theophany of the angel of the Lord initially comes to his lowly donkey and not to him. The visionary cannot see the vision, but the little donkey can. The donkey can “see” and can “speak” while Balaam cannot “see” and is silent. The great clairvoyant is mocked (Ashley 457-59; Barre 261; Levine 139, 154). Not only Balaam, but all diviners are ridiculed, for this is a “picaresque fable mocking the reputed clairvoyance of diviners” (Levine 138). This puts in clear perspective that it is not the prophet or seer who obtains a vision or a revelatory message from God, but rather it is God who provides the revelation to the prophet. From his humbling experience Balaam learns that Yahweh is the sole supreme deity (Sals 324-26). Ulrike Sals further opines that in its present form the total Balaam account, with the donkey narrative included, does not say that God changes his or her mind, but rather God wishes to teach Balaam a lesson. Balaam will go on his journey, but only on God's terms, for God is the hegemon, not Balak, and Balaam will take orders only from God (Sals 326). In sum, it is the majesty of God that is dramatically affirmed by the biblical narrative.

As a final point I might observe that while talking animals occur with frequency in Greek literature, there are only two such examples in biblical literature, Balaam's donkey and the talking snake in Genesis 3. Since there is similarity between the accounts of Achilles and Balaam, that makes me suspect some Greek influence with the tale of the talking donkey. At this point we may appeal to critical observations made by Andrew Knapp about cross-cultural comparisons of genres. He noted that a text need not be identical in form-critical structure to a parallel text to be worthy of genre comparison. If the two texts address the same issues with the same content and intentionality in respect to their social-historical contexts, they are worthy of comparison and consideration as being similar in genre. He speaks of such texts as being part of a common “rhetorical genre” (Knapp 2013; 2015: 31-35). The image of talking animals warning their owner of imminent danger as he moves forward with his mission might be such an example, for indeed both stories are unusual and distinctive accounts.

Thus, if our biblical author was familiar with the Iliad and this story in particular, we can see a theological message in the element of spoof. The biblical author disavows the grandeur of the

great Greek epic with its many gods and divinely generated human characters. In the biblical worldview there is God, and simple finite humanity under that God. One might sense a biblical critique of the hybris found in the portrayal of the great Greek heroes. The Iliad most likely takes shape in the sixth century BCE, at the latest. If one dates the biblical text to the sixth century BCE Yahwist, as many scholars now do, it is possible that the biblical author knew the Iliad. If we suggest that the story of Balaam and his donkey is a later insertion into the Yahwist narrative, which would date it perhaps to the fifth century BCE or later, then the possibility increases that the biblical author knew this great piece of epic Greek literature. If it is possible that the biblical author was familiar with this literature, it certainly would be probable that the biblical author would not miss the opportunity to spoof the hybris of the great heroes in the greatest Greek epic. What I am seriously suggesting is that biblical literature is generated by highly educated people, scribal intelligentsia, who would be familiar with the great literature of their world, and who can interact with this literature in various ways. Sometimes they appropriate a Greek story and change its message, and sometimes they simply respond to images and ideas from a Greek narrative. I believe the author of Balaam and the donkey is looking at the story of Achilles and his horses out of the corner of his eye.

This article has significance for greater issues in the biblical scholarship by suggesting that the biblical author was familiar with classic Greek literature. It implies a late date for at least some of the Pentateuchal text, placing the creation of narratives into the Persian or the Hellenistic period. The epics of Homer emerged in the seventh or sixth centuries BCE, and one might assume that the Judahite scribal tradition would not become familiar with them until the fifth or the fourth centuries BCE. This evaluation reinforces the arguments of those scholars who have assigned the emergence of the biblical narratives to the Persian and Hellenistic eras (Lemche 1993; 2001; Bolin 1996; Thompson 1999a; 1999b). I would suggest that both the Pentateuch and the Deuteromistic History underwent a long process of supplementation extending down into the Hellenistic era, and the evidence of Greek influence upon some biblical narratives testifies to that. I have proposed this

argument in previous writings (Gnuse 1998; 2007).

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