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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial.....	3
Liviu Warter	
Difference or Defect? Disability Considered in the Context of Transhumanism.....	5
Sana Loue, Harshita Kuna, Sean Eli McCormick	
Global Citizen 2.0: Transhumanism and Collective Identity	13
Thomas R. Brooks, Stephen Reysen, Iva Katzarska-Miller	
The Minimum Wage: A Barrier to Employment	29
Emmanuel Asprodites, Walter E. Block	
Modeling Political Instability: Political Culture, Governance, and Regional Relations in 161 Countries	45
Silviu-Petru Grecu	
The Fatal Flaw of Balaam: When Prophecy Meets Profit.....	61
Hershey H. Friedman, Linda W. Friedman	
The Geographic Religion of Contraceptives	69
Anastasia Vînağă	

THE FATAL FLAW OF BALAAM: WHEN PROPHECY MEETS PROFIT

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Abstract

This study explores the profound descent of Balaam, a figure potentially unrivaled in prophetic ability. It reveals how two critical flaws —hubris and avarice —led to his undoing. Balaam persisted in his misguided path despite divine intervention aimed at course correction, including the humbling experience of his donkey surpassing him in spiritual sight. His ultimate demise, befitting the unrighteous, serves as a cautionary tale. This narrative offers a compelling lesson for all individuals endowed with exceptional gifts or capabilities, highlighting the perils of unchecked ego and material desire. It also demonstrates how organizations with lofty mission statements may be led astray by the same two flaws.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible, Leadership, Capitalism, Balaam, Moses.

Introduction

Organizations are emerging to champion a more ethical form of capitalism. Groups like the Conscious Capitalism Organization, JUST Capital, and the Coalition for Inclusive Capitalism are promoting business practices that consider broader societal impacts. They envision a future where capitalism, when harnessed responsibly, can drive a more equitable and sustainable world.

Investors are also increasingly scrutinizing companies through the lens of ESG metrics, which evaluate environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and governance practices. This framework assesses a company's impact on various stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and governments. The Big Four accounting firms are developing standardized ESG reporting guidelines for corporate annual reports. Furthermore, Gallup, in partnership with Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose, is creating analytical tools to help companies measure and improve their societal impact (Friedman & Pham, 2023).

There are over 8,200 B Corporations, firms certified by the non-profit B Lab as committed to a higher purpose. They balance financial success with positive social and environmental impact. By adhering to exacting standards of transparency, accountability, performance, and transparency, these organizations demonstrate that business can be a force for good, benefiting both shareholders and society.

Many organizations are demanding from their leaders a broader perspective that extends beyond profit-centric models. Contemporary leaders are increasingly expected to address pressing societal issues, including environmental sustainability, economic inequality,

and social equity (De Jong, 2023). This will be no easy feat, as many CEOs were raised on the principles of maximizing profit and maximizing shareholder value.

The Bible is a source of immense wisdom, offering deep insights into life, ethics, and the human experience. In fact, Kass (2003) claims that it represents the "beginning of wisdom." This paper will employ a biblical example to demonstrate the dangers inherent in an excessive focus on profit rather than a higher purpose. From Abraham to Solomon, biblical figures have long captivated scholars and leaders alike. Researchers like Friedman (2024a), Friedman and Fischer (2021), Maxwell (2002), and Wildavsky (1984) have mined these timeless tales for invaluable leadership lessons. With billions of copies in circulation, the Bible's enduring influence makes it an ideal source of inspiration and insight.

Balaam

Balaam (also spelled Bilaam) is one of the more enigmatic figures in the Bible. The Torah (Numbers 22) describes him as an individual with a preternatural ability to curse individuals and nations effectively. Balak, king of Moab, said to Balaam (Numbers 22:6), "For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." This phrase brings to mind what God said to Abraham (Genesis 12:3): "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you." The reader expects Balaam to do the task he was paid for and curse the Israelites as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Instead, God forces Balaam to bless the Jewish people; he blesses them three times.

Balaam is also referred to as a practitioner of divination and magic. The elders of Moab and Midian came to him with "the fees for divination in their hands" (Numbers 22:7). In Joshua 13:22, Balaam is referred to as a soothsayer (*kosem*), not a prophet. Was he a prophet or a sorcerer? This paper will attempt to shed light on this question.

Balaam was a Sorcerer and Astrologer

Abraham Ibn Ezra, c.1092–1167 (on Numbers 22:28), asserts that Balaam was an expert astrologer and a charlatan. He would observe the stars associated with individuals, and upon noticing signs of disaster that were supposed to occur, he would curse them. When misfortune happened to the cursed individual, observers would attribute it to Balaam's power. This interpretation is reinforced by Balaam's shrewdness with Balak's officials. He first (Numbers 22:18) claimed an inability to curse Israel, only to later suggest that he might be able to after all.

Similarly, Chaim Ibn Attar, 1696–1743, known as the Ohr HaChaim, believes that Balaam only had the ability to curse, but his blessings were as ineffective as those from a donkey (see his commentary on Numbers 22:6:4). His method involved examining an individual's horoscope for signs of future success and then crafting a blessing to align with these astrological predictions. When the foretold success materialized, Balaam would falsely take credit, presenting his blessing as the cause rather than acknowledging the astrological influences he had observed. This deceptive practice was exemplified in his interaction with Balak. After reading Balak's horoscope and observing a regal future, Balaam blessed him and predicted his ascension to the throne. He then misled Balak into believing that this blessing was the cause for his becoming the monarch rather than merely a prediction based on astrological observations.

Thus, there are opinions that Balaam was not a prophet but merely a talented astrologer who exploited his talent for his own ends. The problem with this approach is that the verse states explicitly that God spoke to Balaam (Numbers 22:20, 23:4, 23:16). Moreover, Balaam also delivered several prophecies about the future, one of which has been interpreted

as a Messianic prophecy (Numbers 24:15–24). One of his prophecies stands out and is an insightful description of the Jewish nation more than 3000 years later.

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?
 How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?
 From the tops of the rocks I see them,
 And from the hills I watch them;
 A people that dwells alone,
 Not reckoning itself among the nations (Numbers 23:8-9).

According to Rabbi Sacks (2024), the description of the Israelites as "a people that dwells alone, not reckoning itself among nations" emphasizes several key aspects of their uniqueness. He reviews the opinions of several commentators and suggests it refers to their enduring nature and unbreakable spirit. This phrase also implies a firm resolve to preserve their distinct identity and resist cultural absorption. It underscores their commitment to a unique set of values, beliefs, and an unwavering moral compass.

Interestingly, Rabbi Sacks argues that this distinct identity wasn't rooted in land or political power but in their shared history (and, of course, the Torah) and a deep sense of community. This powerful bond has allowed the Jewish people to persevere through periods of exile without a physical homeland. True Jewish strength, Rabbi Sacks emphasizes, lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on fairness, social justice, love of the stranger, and the inherent dignity of every person. Friedman (2024b) argues that the Torah was a groundbreaking document that reshaped the trajectory of history, and the Jews spread its values throughout the pagan world.

Sacks cites the work of the Catholic writer Paul Johnson, who maintains the following about the Jewish people:

[Jews are] exemplars and epitomizers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form... It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatize these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral (cited in Sacks, 2024, para. 18).

Balaam did have a vaunted reputation as a seer and soothsayer. In fact, the Deir Alla inscription mentions Balaam, son of Beor (Sanders, 2024), referring to him as a great prophet (see <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/deir-alla-inscription/>).

Balaam was a Prophet

The Babylonian Talmud (Bava Basra 15b) lists Balaam among the prophets who prophesied to the world's nations—and says that he was a greater prophet than his father, Beor (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a). The Midrash (Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:4) states in the name of Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachman that "All that Israel eats (i.e., enjoys) in this world comes from the power of the blessings that wicked Balaam blessed them." The blessings they received from their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are kept for the future.

The following Midrash makes matters even more complicated by asserting that Moses and Balaam's prophecies differed and that there were ways that Balaam was superior to Moses.

"And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him" – it is taught: "There has not arisen another prophet in Israel like Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:10) – in Israel one has not arisen, but among the nations of the world he has arisen, so that there will not be recourse for

the nations of the world to say: Had we had a prophet like Moses, we would have worshipped the Holy One blessed be He. What prophet did they have like Moses? This was Balaam son of Beor. However, there is a disparity between Moses' prophecy and Balaam's prophecy.

There were three qualities that existed in Moses that did not exist in Balaam. Moses would speak with Him standing, as it is stated: "But you, stand here with Me and I will speak to you..." (Deuteronomy 5:28). With Balaam, He would speak to him only when he was fallen, as it is stated: "Fallen with uncovered eyes" (Numbers 24:4). Moses, He would speak to him mouth to mouth, as it is stated: "Mouth to mouth I will speak to him" (Numbers 12:8), but regarding Balaam, "the words of one who hears the sayings of God" (Numbers 24:4), as he would not speak to him mouth to mouth. Moses, He would speak to him face-to-face, as it is stated: "The Lord would speak to Moses face-to-face" (Exodus 33:11), but with Balaam, he would speak in parables, just as it says: "He proclaimed his parable and said..." (Numbers 23:7).

There were three qualities that existed in Balaam that did not exist in Moses. Moses would not know who was speaking with him; Balaam would know who was speaking with him, as it is stated: "The words of one who hears the sayings of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty" (Numbers 24:4). Moses did not know when the Holy One blessed be He would speak with him, but Balaam would know when the Holy One blessed be He would speak with him, as it is stated: "He knows the knowledge of the Most High" (Numbers 24:16). They stated a parable: It is analogous to the king's slaughterer, who knew what the king would offer on his table and knew how many expenditures the king would outlay for his table. So, Balaam would know what the Holy One blessed be He was destined to speak with him.

Balaam, He would speak with him whenever he wished, as it is stated: "Fallen with uncovered eyes" (Numbers 24:4). He would fall on his face and immediately, he was open-eyed regarding what he asked. But Moses, He would not speak with him whenever he wished. Rabbi Shimon says: To Moses, too, He would speak whenever he wished, as it is stated: "And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him," immediately, "he heard the Voice speaking with him." (Midrash Numbers Rabbah 14:20; based on the translation by Sefaria.org. The Midrash Sifrei Deuteronomy 357 is very similar).

Balaam as an Asinine Fool

There is no question that the Torah mocks Balaam and makes him appear even dumber than his ass. The following are some examples of how Balaam is made to appear as a fool.

God is omniscient, so He knew Balak intended to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. So, this was not merely a social call. God asked Balaam (Numbers 22:9): "Who are these people with you?" This was obviously a rhetorical question. Balaam foolishly replied and told God it was "Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab." Balaam should have known better, given that he described himself as one who (Numbers 24:16) "hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty."

A prophet who understands God this well knows when a question is rhetorical. Presumably, one of the first lessons a prophet learns is that God is omniscient. The Midrash

(Genesis Rabbah 19) maintains that four individuals, Adam, Cain, Balaam, and Hezekiah, were tested by God using this type of rhetorical question, and all failed the test. The Midrash uses an interesting expression: God "tapped on their jug" to test them and found that the "jugs were filled with urine." Ezekiel, on the other hand, passed the test. When he was asked, "Son of man, will these bones come to life?" he responded, "Lord, God, You know." (Ezekiel 37:3).

It seems clear that Balaam's donkey possessed superior reasoning abilities to those of its master. When miraculously granted speech, the donkey didn't utter simple pleas as one would expect of a beast of burden. Instead, God gave it a voice that resonated with intelligence and clear thought. Just compare Balaam's way of speaking to his donkey's. The donkey's first utterance was a rhetorical question that cleverly exposed the absurdity of the situation (Numbers 22:28): "What have I done to deserve being beaten three times?" Balaam's response, however, was fueled by anger and violence. He threatened the donkey, saying, "Because you've made a fool of me! If only I had a sword, I'd kill you right now!" The donkey countered with a logical argument, reminding Balaam of their history: "Haven't I been your faithful donkey, carrying you all your life? Have I ever acted like this before?" (Friedman & Friedman, 2014, p. 85).

The donkey's question in Numbers 22:28 cleverly plays on words: "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times (*shalosh regalim*)?" Here, the Hebrew word "*regalim*" is used uniquely to mean "times," while typically, "*p'amim*" is used in the Torah for this purpose. Interestingly, in Exodus 23:14, "*regalim*" refers to the three major festivals. This linguistic choice creates a wordplay. The Hebrew Bible employs humor, including wordplay, sarcasm, and irony, to enrich and amplify its messages, captivating readers and ensuring their retention (Friedman & Friedman, 2014). The power of wordplays lies in their ability to convey numerous levels of meaning simultaneously (pp. 189-209).

According to Rashi, citing Midrash Tanchuma (Exodus 9), the donkey subtly hints to Balaam that he is targeting a nation with destruction that celebrates three annual festivals. There is also irony in the fact that Balaam, who claimed to have the power to annihilate a nation with his words, needed a sword to kill his stubborn donkey (Rashi, citing the Midrash Tanchuma 9).

Balaam claimed to be the prophet who (24:16) "hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty." God derided him by only allowing the ass to see the angel of God in the path of the vineyards with a drawn sword (Numbers 22:23). The donkey turned away from the road to save Balaam's life. Balaam mistakenly assumed that his donkey was mocking him because he did not see the angel standing on the road. Actually, God was mocking Balaam and finally allowed him to see the angel. Balaam actually says to God's angel (22:34), "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road."

When Balaam said (Numbers 24:3), "The words of Balaam son of Beor, the words of the man with the open eye," he was unknowingly making fun of himself. The man with the "open eye" could not even see what his donkey saw. Additionally, because the name "*Beor*" is similar to the word *be'ir*, which means cattle or beast, he verified to the reader that he was not better than an animal (Friedman & Friedman, 2014, p. 85). Balaam ends up blessing (coerced by God) the Israelites three times but still finds a way to get paid.

The reader finds out later (Numbers 31:16) that it was Balaam who counseled Balak to employ the women of his nation to seduce the Israelites, knowing that God condemns immorality. Instead of guiding the people towards righteousness, a prophet's primary task, Balaam, encouraged them to defy God and His laws. The Israelites sinned in Shittim with Moabite and Midianite women, even embracing the pagan deity Baal-Peor. This is when Zimri, a leader from the tribe of Shimon, took Cozbi, the daughter of Zur, into his tent, and Phineas took a spear and entered the tent (*kubbah*), where he pierced both of them (Numbers 25:8).

What is noteworthy about this verse is the use of the word "*kubbah*" to mean tent, a term used uniquely in this context here. The more traditional Hebrew word for tent is "*ohel*." This

linguistic play connects "*kubbah*" with a related word, "*kabbah*" (to curse), which appears several times concerning Balaam, who claimed the power to curse people effectively. It is also notable that "*kubbah*" is similar to the word used in Numbers 25:8 to describe where Cozbi was stabbed, "*kavvasah*" (stomach).

In Numbers 24:5, Balaam praised the Israelites by saying, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob," using the word "*ohel*" to describe their dwellings. Tents are symbols of harmony and goodness when families live in unity without succumbing to the allure of pagan practices or immoral behavior.

Cozbi's name is similar to the Hebrew word, which means deceive or lie (Alter, 2004, p. 820). Cozbi's full name was Cozbi *bas* (daughter of) Tzur. Tzur was a Midianite leader. After the incident, God tells Moses (Numbers 25:17): "Harass (*tzaror*) the Midianites and smite them." The word *tzaror* is a pun and connects to the name Tzur. Cozbi's name in Hebrew means "false one" and may relate to the verse in Balaam said earlier (Numbers 23:19): "God is not a man, that he should lie (*vechazeb*)" (Sykes, 2014, p. 516).

In Numbers 23:10, Balaam expresses a desire for a righteous death ("Let me die the death of the righteous"), hinting at his belief in an afterlife. However, his actions contradict this wish. Despite being a prophet, he attempts to profit by manipulating God's will. Through his prophetic abilities, he likely knew that God wouldn't allow an attack on Moab; only Midian was to be punished (Numbers 25:16–18). Yet, he entertained Balak's request to curse Israel, hoping for personal gain rather than informing him not to be worried about his country being invaded. This ultimately led to his demise, as he was killed alongside the Midianites for their role in the Baal Peor incident (Numbers 31:8). He was killed with a sword, together with the five evil kings of Midian.

It is evident that Balaam prioritized wealth over his prophetic duty and even his own stated belief in an afterlife for the righteous.

What was Balaam? Soothsayer, Prophet, or Fool?

It appears that Balaam was an authentic prophet with great potential. One of the essential messages of the Torah is the idea of free choice. Humanity is told (Deuteronomy 30:19) that God has placed life and death before us and to "choose life!" People can achieve greatness or have a tragic downfall. The Torah even suggests what contributed to Balaam's ruin: arrogance and greed. The sages (Avot 5:19) state that one with an evil eye (selfish nature), a haughty spirit, and a greedy soul is a disciple of Balaam. A disciple of Abraham has a good eye (generous nature), a humble spirit, and a modest desire.

The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) presents a thought-provoking perspective on Balaam's transformation. Balaam initially stood as an authentic prophet—a conduit for divine messages to help people elevate themselves. He changed and then eventually became merely a sorcerer. This explanation makes sense. Balaam's apparent willingness to curse people for money suggests a bottomless greed that would thwart his ability to act as a genuine prophet.

Furthermore, advising the king to turn their women into prostitutes to lead the Israelites astray and also worship false gods is incompatible with the mission of a true prophet. Balaam acknowledges a source of Israel's strength as a young nation: their rejection of magical practices. This is reflected in his words from Numbers 23:23: "For there is no divination in Jacob and no sorcery in Israel." The Torah (Deuteronomy 18:10–14) forbids all kinds of sorcery, consulting with the dead, and divination.

Balaam's love for money shines through in this narrative. Known as a prophet with the power to bless or curse, he readily accepted payment for his pronouncements. According to the Midrash, Sichon, King of the Amorites, hired him to curse the Moabites before he successfully fought them (Yalkut Shimoni 275:14). At first, God told Balaam not to go with

Balak's dignitaries and not to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:12). Later, God allowed him to go when another delegation with emissaries of a higher rank approached him (Numbers 22:20). The reason God was angry with him (Numbers 22:22) and sent an angel to oppose him was that there was no reason for Balaam to go if God explicitly instructed him that he would not be allowed to curse the Israelites. He only went because he hoped to find somehow a way to curse the Israelites and profit from this (see commentary by Daat Zekeinim, Rashbam, Chizkuni, and Bechor Shor). Rabbi Nachman remarks that "audaciousness prevails even against Heavenly opposition." Balaam should not have made the request again (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a).

The Torah (Deuteronomy 23:5) explicitly states that the Moabites hired him to curse the Israelites. Balaam had prostituted the job of a prophet; this was an apparent misuse of his gift. Balak recognized Balaam's hunger for wealth and offered him "great honor" (Numbers 22:17), interpreted as a substantial sum of money by scholars such as Ibn Ezra. All he had to do was curse the Israelites. Rashi, citing the Midrash Tanuchuma 6, interprets this to mean paying him more than he received in the past. This suggests he was not beholden to any particular cause but worked for whoever could afford him.

Rashi's comment on the next verse (22:18), where Balaam states, "If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I am unable to do anything great or small to transgress the word of the Lord my God," as further proof that he was greedy (Midrash Tanchuma 6). The commentaries do not see this as hyperbole but as an amount he felt he was genuinely worth because he claimed that he would be saving Balak the cost of hiring many soldiers to fight the Israelites.

According to the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a), Balaam's presence in Midian during the Israelite attack was linked to financial matters. He came to collect payment for his role in the events that led to the deaths of 24,000 Israelites. This tragedy occurred when a divine plague struck those who had engaged in illicit relations with pagan women and participated in the worship of Baal Peor.

In Numbers 24:16, Balaam's arrogance becomes evident as he declares himself as one who "hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty." This self-aggrandizing boast stands in stark contrast to Moses' immense humility. Interestingly, it occurs even after God taught Balaam an essential lesson in how to act by giving his donkey superior sight. Nowhere does Moses boast like this. Balaam made this claim even after God attempted to teach him humility by showing him that his own donkey could see more than he could—a reminder that prophecy comes from God and can be taken away. Intriguingly, Moses references a "donkey," especially considering this animal's significant role in the Balaam story.

Conclusion

A major takeaway from the story of Balaam is how greed and arrogance can destroy even a great prophet. Moses was humble and had simple needs. He could unequivocally state to God (Numbers 16:15), "I have not taken one donkey from them [Dathan and Aviram], nor have I hurt one of them." Moses made sure not to profit from his position of power. Moses made mistakes as a leader, but his legacy of justice, compassion, courage, and concern for the disadvantaged reverberates through history and continues to inspire people across cultures and faiths. Balaam's legacy underscores how arrogance and greed can destroy the greatest of talents. His "Faustian bargain" for wealth, power, and fame ultimately killed him.

This biblical wisdom is not exclusive to prophets; it applies to anyone with unique talents—whether in religion, medicine, math, science, politics, or business. The guiding principle remains constant: use your gifts to uplift humanity. And always keep humility and

modest aspirations at the forefront—they ensure your abilities serve the greater good rather than inflate your ego. Moreover, no good comes from avarice.

Many companies with mission statements expressing the loftiest ideals (e.g., bettering the situation of humankind) were easily corrupted once greed prevailed. Think of firms like Enron, Wells Fargo, Facebook, Johnson & Johnson, and Purdue Pharma. After all the problems related to safety with the 737 MAX aircraft at Boeing, does anyone believe that the firm's leaders embraced their mission and values? Friedman and Clarke (2022) call attention to how corporate greed has resulted in the death of millions of innocent people.

The timeless lessons from the biblical account of Balaam resonate today, serving as a warning. When prophets yield to greed and power, it highlights the susceptibility of ordinary people. Likewise, CEOs who yield to the temptations of greed and power compromise the long-term prospects of their organizations.

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