

Divination Terms in the Balaam Episode (Num 22–24)

Peter Schmidt. Slightly adapted excerpt from the Article “Forbidden Religious Practices” in the Key Terms of the Old Testament Project (KTOT). 2021.

The story of Balak and Balaam in Num 22–24 includes some terms that concern divination and sorcery, to be precise: **נִחֵשׁ** *qesem* ‘divination’ occurs in Num 22:7, **נִחָשׂ** *naḥaš* ‘omen’ in 24:1, and both of them together in 23:23. These references pose some problems.

When reading and translating the story, it will be helpful to keep in mind Milgrom’s judgment (JPSTC, 1990):

Herein lies the major tension in the story. Balak hires Balaam as a sorcerer, but Balaam denies he has such power ... He can act only as a diviner not as a sorcerer ...

We begin with Num 22:7 (ESVUS16):

So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination [נִחֵשׁ] in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message.

The **exceptional use of נִחֵשׁ for fee for divination** is acknowledged by many scholars (see Ashley (NICOT, 1993); Budd (WBC, 1984.); cf. *Handbook* (UBS, 2016; but see Milgrom for different views). Regarding Balak’s reward for Balaam’s service, see also 22:17, 18, 37.

From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Balak and his envoys are not simply asking Balaam for insight into the future, but that he should inflict harm on Israel, see 22:6: “Curse this people for me.”

In Num 23:23, Balaam says (ESVUS16):

For there is no enchantment [נִחָשׂ] against Jacob, no divination [נִחֵשׁ] against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought!’

Here, **the preposition אַ can be understood in different ways** – either as in NJPS:

Lo, there is no augury [נִחָשׂ] in Jacob, / No divining [נִחֵשׁ] in Israel.

... or as in NRSV:

Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, / no divination against Israel.

While the *Handbook* takes the first view, the present writer prefers the second.¹

¹ The *Handbook* states:

The preposition **against** in the phrases **against Jacob** and **against Israel** is plausible in this context (so Ashley, page 474). ... However, the Hebrew has literally “in Jacob” and “in Israel”, just as in verse 21. With the preposition “in” the first half of this verse combines well with the second half (see the discussion and model below). ...

The adverb **now** is an appropriate translation of the Hebrew expression *ka’et*. A few translations have “at the right time”. In this verse “at once” (NJPSV) or “promptly” (Levine) makes very good sense. For this whole verse NJPSV provides a helpful model, saying “Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, No divination in Israel: Jacob is told at once, Yea Israel, what God has planned [or more accurately,

Of those versions who go the same way, some use "enchantment" (NRSV, ESVUS16) or "spell" (NET08) or "magic charm" (GNT) or "curse" (NLT07) for שִׁחַד (compare HALOT ad loc.: "magic curse"), and "witchcraft" (GNTD) or "magic" (NLT07) for כִּסְפָּא. **All these words go beyond the normal meanings of the nouns omen and divination, which are about interpretation and foretelling, and move into the other category of sorcery or magic. This is neither necessary nor justified.**

While it is true that Balak wants Balaam to curse Israel, there is no need to expand that and include any method of sorcery.² Someone who does כִּסְפָּא gives guidance (1Sa 6:2; 28:8), he is not a sorcerer. As to the verb שִׁחַד, it could theoretically include practicing sorcery in some places, but not everywhere, see 1Ki 20:33. The meaning of both roots should not be expanded unnecessarily.

What, then, is the meaning of Balaam's utterance? **The signs he perceives and the revelation he receives do not indicate anything negative about Israel.** There is thus no basis for uttering any curse against Israel. Put in a freer wording, Balaam concludes "I can see nothing that would allow me to curse Israel." A translation like the one in NASB is consistent with the use of the nouns elsewhere (both inside and outside this story), and does make sense in the context:

There is no omen against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel.

But there might be a degree of unnaturalness in the expression "divination against someone". This might have led to the feeling that words like divination or augury were deficient renderings in this place, and therefore replaced by terms of magic. Divination is the receiving of insight about someone, or the sharing of such insight with someone, so "divine against" is a bit strange.

The Hebrew word כִּסְפָּא can denote both the activity (Ezk 21:26 [English 21] mentions methods of divination), but also the content of what is received and passed on: in Jer 14:14, כִּסְפָּא occurs together with תְּזוּן 'vision', and נְבִיא 'prophecy'. This matches the parallel word here in Num 23:23, שִׁחַד 'sign/omen'.

Translation: Perhaps then, in English, instead of "divination against Israel", a phrase like "a bad/negative vision/revelation/prophecy/oracle about Israel" would

has done]." When we look at this verse as a whole, the main point seems to be that in the case of Israel God communicates directly, without the need for divination. Ashley [quoted without parentheses and footnotes]:

enchantment ... divination (naḥaš ... qesem) refer to two methods of seeking the divine will, the first by a general use of omens (e.g., Gen. 44:5, 15), and the second by the drawing of lots, such as arrows (Ezek. 21:26–27 [Eng. 21–22]). Although the terms do not necessarily refer to ways of working evil against someone, they may be. There are two interpretations of v. 23a, depending upon the translation of the inseparable preposition *be-* on the words *Jacob* and *Israel* (*beya 'āqōḥ ... beyiśrā 'ēl*). The first takes the preposition in its most common sense of "in" or "among," and interprets the verse to mean that omens and lots are not acceptable or necessary methods of discovering the divine will in Israel. Indeed, both were forbidden early in Israel's history, although they continued to be practiced. The other approach takes the less common meaning of "against". The meaning would then be that no omen or lot would be able to work any evil against Israel. Since Balak has been seeking to harm Israel by means of a curse, the latter alternative seems preferable.

² In the communication between the Lord and Balaam, there is speaking (22:8, 35 etc.), coming (22:19), seeing (22:31), meeting and showing (23:3), hearing, knowing and seeing visions (24:16), and the dialog with the donkey (22:28f.). We do not read of Balaam engaging in magic practices or spells.

What further speaks for seeing Balaam as a diviner is that he goes to the mountain tops (23:3, 14), which might indicate that he observes astronomical phenomena or the flight of birds. Lastly, in the Deir 'Alla inscription, too, Balaam is called a *hozeh*. (Milgrom, 472.)

be more appropriate. No English, German or French version could be found which attempts such a clarification except for NIV11R:

There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel.

The idea that should be conveyed is “There is nothing to be seen and nothing to be said against Israel.”

One other possible problem is that a wording like “there is no divination” could suggest that Balaam did not receive any vision and had nothing to tell about Israel. That would be misleading. He did hear from God, and had plenty to say.

We move on to Num 24:1 (ESVUS16), which says:

When Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens [שִׁחַז], but set his face toward the wilderness.

Milgrom (473) notes about Balaam that “casting divination aside, he rises to the level of prophecy”, and what Balaam says now is more predictive than before.

In this verse, שִׁחַז is the object of אָקַד 'meet'. **All the versions take the expression in the sense of “seek omens”, and this is right.** Surprisingly, Horsnell (NIDOTTE 3:949, s.v. אָקַד) has the gloss “sorcery” for this verse, and Gesenius¹⁸ (ad loc.) “auf Zaubereien ausgehen” (=seek/go for sorceries). The problem is the same as discussed for Num 23:23: neither is this demanded by the Hebrew wording, nor does it fit the preceding story.

Finally, Balaam is called a diviner [אָקַד, participle] also in Jos 13:22.