

**Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania**

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The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development by Michael S. Moore

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MOORE, *THE BALAAM TRADITIONS* \*

In at least two respects, Moore has taken a fresh approach to the intriguing and puzzling Balaam traditions. In the first place, he focuses on the role of Balaam as a religious practitioner, employing insights from role theory to understand the various portrayals of Balaam in the Bible and Deir ʿAllā texts. In the second place, Moore presents a more extensive and systematic analysis of ancient Near Eastern religious specialists as a backdrop for interpreting Balaam than has so far been attempted, surveying in detail the evidence from Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Syria-Palestine. Since these two particular interests about the Balaam traditions dominate the book, a more precise title for what the reader actually finds in it would be “The Role of Balaam in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting.”

A fundamental task for understanding Balaam’s role at Deir ʿAllā and in the Bible is the kind of broad survey of ancient Near Eastern religious specialists which Moore provides in Chapter 1, the lengthiest chapter in the book. Much useful data is collected and sorted here, although the sorting process itself—the ordering of data into role categories and the selection of designations for these categories—raises certain questions. Sometimes the reason for distinguishing particular roles from others is unclear. For example, “government adviser” first appears as a distinct role among Syro-Palestinian “seers” (pp. 59–60), even though this role is at one time or another the function of almost all of the ancient Near Eastern religions specialists previously surveyed, although they are not attributed this role. At points, role designations take on a fluidity which raises questions about their definition at any one time and their usefulness as categories for analysis. This is particularly true of the role of “exorcist,” which in some places is carefully distinguished from such other roles as sorcerer, purification priest, healer, and incantation reciter, while in other places it is used as a general designation of which these other roles become subcategories. This tension is highlighted in Moore’s analysis of the Mesopotamian *āšipu* when exorcist becomes a subcategory of itself (pp. 33–35). Finally, the question might be raised whether “magic” and “religion” are appropriate umbrella terms under which to subsume all the roles described here, and whether a continuum with “magic = exorcism” at one end and “religion = divination” at the other on balance clarifies more than it obscures.

When all of this comparative data is brought to bear on biblical literature later in the book, it has several effects. The most laudable is Moore’s ability to recognize and set in their proper context as legitimate aspects of Israelite religion certain activities which later tradents found unacceptable. These include such kinds of divination as *nhš* and *qsm* which the old epic sources (*J/E*) describe matter-of-factly as acceptable religious behavior but are later condemned by the Deuteronomic historian and others. Furthermore, it may well be, as Moore concludes in the final chapter, that the varying portraits of Balaam in biblical tradition depend to some extent on the association of Balaam by different authors with different roles.

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\*Michael S. Moore. *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*. SBL Dissertation Series, 113. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990. Pp. xxi + 157.

At the same time, this comparative data, under the aegis of the “magic-religious” role continuum described above, runs the danger at points of overwhelming Israel’s own particular treatment of Balaam, especially in Numbers 22–24. To begin Chapter 3, on Balaam in the Bible, with the claim that “the most important theme underlying the narrative in Numbers 22–24 is the terrifying fear of the Netherworld” (p. 97) may resonate with some comparative data but is not part of this biblical narrative at all, where chthonic powers or demons are nowhere mentioned or active. Or to claim that <sup>2</sup>*Elohim* should be read as a plural here because neighboring cultures, including that of Deir ‘Allā, were polytheistic disregards the biblical epic narrative context in which the name <sup>2</sup>*Elohim* is used of Israel’s single deity as the writer/s certainly intended in this case. Finally, Moore’s view that Balak was unsuccessful in getting Balaam to do what he wanted because, as a rustic unsophisticate, Balak thought Balaam was an exorcist (specifically sorcerer) while in reality Balaam specialized only in divination, hardly touches the narrative in which Balaam protests not that he doesn’t specialize in cursing (the sorcerer’s role) but that God told him to bless instead of to curse.

Moore’s treatment of Deir ‘Allā texts, in light of the comparative data and the categories into which he divides it, results in a whole set of suggestions for interpretation which reflect the roles of religious specialists. The validity of these suggestions is difficult to assess, however, because they are never integrated into an overall translation and interpretation of the Deir ‘Allā texts. Moore’s simple reference to the violent behavior of birds in Combination I, for example, is deemed sufficient grounds for positing Balaam as a specialist in bird omens. These lines about birds have been interpreted quite differently, and the reader is at a loss to assess the likelihood of Moore’s claim without an accompanying translation of the text which supports it.

In the end, the broad comparative data and the interest in role theory in this book hold potential for throwing light on the Balaam traditions. Substantial refinement in their application, however, is necessary before this potential is fully achieved.

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