**בלעם והנחשים**

**אבנר רמו**

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**The Balaam son of Beo’r inscription in Deir ‘Alla. c. 840-760 BC**

Early in the narrative about Balaam, we are told that Balak, the King of Moab:

**וישלח מלאכים אל-בלעם בן-בער, פתורה אשר על-הנהר ארץ בני-עמו-לקרא-לו:**

“**And he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, to Pethor, which is by the River,** [to the] **land of the children of his people, to call him**” (Num 22:5).

However, it is suggested that here **ארץ בני-עמו** is a letter-deletion error of: **ארץ בני-עמון** - “the land of the children of Amon” (e.g. Deu 2:19, 37; Jos 13:25; Jud 11:15; 2 Sam 10:2; 2 Ch 19:2; 20:1),

In the Book of Samuel we read about: **נחש מלך בני-עמון** - “**Nahash the king of the children of Ammon**” (1 Sam 12:12; see also: 1 Sam 11:1,2; 2 Ch 10:2).

The fact that the name of the Ammonites’ king was **נחש** (*nakhash*) - “snake” (e.g. Gen 3:1; 49:17; Ex 4:3; Num 21:9; Deu 8:15), suggests that in their culture snakes were not considered detestable but rather revered animals.



**The neurotoxic effect of certain snake bite**

We read in the Book of Proverbs:

**אחריתו כנחש ישך; וכצפעני יפרש.
עיניך יראו זרות; ולבך ידבר תהפכות.
והיית כשכב בלב-ים; וכשכב בראש חבל.
הכוני בל-חליתי-הלמוני בל-ידעתי: מתי אקיץ;**

“**His upcoming is like he who was bitten by a snake, and like one who was stung by a basilisk.**

**Your eyes shall see strange things, and your heart shall utter confused things.****And you shall be as he that lies down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lies with injured head.****I was struck and I felt it not, they have beaten me, and I knew it not; when shall I awake?**” (Pro 23:32-35)

These verses are a clinical-like description of a person that was bitten by one of certain venomous snakes. Particular venomous neurotoxins can cause incoherence, confusion and toxic delirium.

Balaam knew that when he was in snake-induced semi-stupor he could not control his words, and he therefore tells the messengers of King Balak:

**ויען בלעם ויאמר אל-עבדי בלק, אם-יתן-לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב-לא אוכל לעבר את-פי יהוה אלהי, לעשות קטנה או גדולה.**

“**And Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak: If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of *YHWH* my God, to do anything, small or great**” (Num 22:18; see also: Num 22:38; 23:12, 26; 24:12-13).

In the Book of Numbers we read that Balaam attempted to communicate with God on three different occasions.

We find in the description of the third attempt:

**ויאמר בלעם אל-בלק, בנה-לי בזה שבעה מזבחת; והכן לי בזה שבעה פרים ושבעה אילם.**

**ויעש בלק כאשר אמר בלעם; ויעל פר ואיל, במזבח.**

**וירא בלעם כי טוב בעיני יהוה לברך את-ישראל, ולא-הלך כפעם-בפעם לקראת נחשים;**

“**And Balaam said to Balak: Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams.**

**And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered up a bullock and a ram on every altar.**

**And when Balaam saw that it pleased *YHWH* to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments**” (Num 23:29-24:1).

It is not certain what is the meaning of: “**to meet with enchantments**”. The Greek translator wrote here “to meet omens”, but the literal meaning of the Hebrew word: **לקראת נחשים** (*liqrath nekhshim*) is “toward snakes” (e.g. Num 21:6; Jer 8:17), which suggests that in the previous two attempts to communicate with the God, Balaam was looking for snakes.

The accounts about Balaam’s visions includes:

**נאם-שמע אמרי-אל: אשר מחזה שדי יחזה, נפל וגלוי עינים.**

“**The saying of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen down, yet with opened eyes**” (Num 24:4; 16).

This description could indicate that after “meeting the snakes” Balaam indeed achieved altered consciousness. It is possible that Balaam was a shaman who knew which type (and size) of snake to look for, for obtaining the desired mental state change, without killing the recipient.

In the Book of Genesis we read:

**יהי-דן נחש עלי-דרך, שפיפן עלי-ארח-הנשך עקבי-סוס, ויפל רכבו אחור.**

“**Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path, that bits the horse's heels, so that his rider falls backward**” (Gen 49:17).

It is not known how the English translator determined that the Hapax legomenon **שפיפן** (*shephiphon*) means “**a horned**” snake, and this understanding is not shared by the Greek translators.

In the first attempt to gain a divine vision we read:

**ויאמר בלעם לבלק, התיצב על-עלתך, ואלכה אולי יקרה יהוה לקראתי, ודבר מה-יראני והגדתי לך; וילך שפי.**

“**And Balaam said to Balak: Stand by your burnt-offering, and I will go; peradventure *YHWH* will come to meet me; and whatsoever He shows me I will tell you. And he went to a bare height**” (Nu 23:3).

It is not known how the English translator determined that the Hapax legomenon **שפי** (*shephu*) means “**to a bare height**.” The Greek translator wrote here: “straight ahead”, but it is suggested that **שפי** (*shephu*) is a letter-deletion error of **שפיפן** (*shephiphon*) - an unknown type of venomous snake.

We read that before the first attempt to gain divine vision:

**ויאמר בלעם אל-בלק, בנה-לי בזה שבעה מזבחת; והכן לי בזה שבעה פרים ושבעה אילים.**

**ויעש בלק כאשר דבר בלעם; ויעל בלק ובלעם פר ואיל במזבח.**

“**And Balaam said to Balak: Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams.**

**And Balak did as Balaam had spoken; and Balak and Balaam offered on every altar a bullock and a ram**” (Num 23:1-2).

However, the comparison with verses Num 23:29-30 suggests that here the word **ובלעם** - “**and Balaam**” is superfluous.

We also read that in the second attempt to gain a divine vision:

**ויבן** [] **שבעה מזבחת, ויעל פר ואיל במזבח.**

**ויאמר** [] **אל-בלק, התיצב כה על-עלתך; ואנכי אקרה כה.**

“**And he built seven altars, and offered up a bullock and a ram on every altar.**

**And he said to Balak: Stand here by your burnt-offering, while I** [go toward] **a meeting yonder**” (Num 23:14-15).

The English translator inserted the word “he” twice into these verses. The content of verses Num 23:13-14 indicates that the first “he” is Balak, while the second “he” is Balaam, and indeed in the Greek translation of verse Num 23:15 we read: “And Balaam said to Balak.”

It is not clear how the English translator determined that **ואנכי אקרה כה** means “**while I** [go toward] **a meeting yonder**” and this understanding is not shared by the Greek translator. It is suggested **ואנכי אקרה כה** is a letter-substitution error of **ואנכי אחכה פה** - “and I will wait here.”

The description of the second attempt to gain divine vision continues with:

**ויקר יהוה אל-בלעם, וישם דבר בפיו; ויאמר שוב אל-בלק וכה תדבר.**

**ויבא אליו, והנו נצב על-עלתו ושרי מואב, אתו; ויאמר לו בלק, מה-דבר יהוה.**

“**And *YHWH* met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said: Return to Balak, and thus shalt you speak.**

**And he came to him, and, lo, he stood by his burnt-offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him: What had *YHWH* spoken?**” (Num 23:16-17).

Now we return to the first attempt of Balaam to gain a divine vision:

**ויקר אלהים אל-בלעם; ויאמר אליו, את-שבעת המזבחת ערכתי, ואעל פר ואיל, במזבח.**

**וישם יהוה דבר בפי בלעם; ויאמר שוב אל-בלק וכה תדבר.**

**וישב אליו, והנה נצב על-עלתו-הוא וכל-שרי מואב.**

“**And God met Balaam; and he said to Him: I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered up a bullock and a ram on every altar.**

**And *YHWH* put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said: Return to Balak, and thus you shalt speak.**

**And he returned to him, and, lo, he stood by his burnt-offering, he, and all the princes of Moab**” (Num 23: 3-6).

It seems that the marked words were erroneously been placed here, and that they rather should have followed verse Num 23:14.

In the Book of Joshua we read: **בלעם בן-בעור הקוסם** - “**Balaam the son of Beor, the soothsayer**” (Jos 13:22). Yet in the Book of Numbers we hear Balaam saying:

**כי לא-נחש ביעקב, ולא-קסם בישראל; כעת יאמר ליעקב ולישראל, מה-פעל אל.**

“**For there is no enchantment in Jacob, neither is there** [any] **divination in Israel. now is it said to Jacob and of Israel: What had God wrought**” (Num 23:23).

However, if here again the word **נחש** means “snake” and not “enchantment”, then we may comprehend the words of Balaam the Ammonite as saying, that unlike the Ammonites, the Israelites do not employ divinators who use snakes to communicate with God, but that God has His own ways of communicating with the Israelites.