

The Nature of Bilaam's Prophecy

Ilana Stein



The Torah Portion of Balak is dedicated by Carrol Cowan: *In memory of my father, who lived justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with his God.*

In the portion of Balak, the prophet Bilaam, hired by King Balak of Moab, sets out to curse the children of Israel, only to find himself proclaiming four blessings instead. Each blessing builds on the one before it, becoming more sophisticated and exalted. Bilaam begins with introducing his theme and mission in the first, replies to Balak's anger at not cursing the people as he promised in the second, and by the third launches into a praise song of Israel that is considered "neither vindication nor denunciation but pure prophecy."¹ Here the language itself becomes declamatory and filled with more symbolism; specifically more imagery taken from the natural world. In the first prophecy, only hills and rocks are mentioned, in the second, an ox and a lion, but in the third, both plants and animals are used to great effect. Let us examine one of the verses here.

The third blessing begins with Bilaam's most famous statement: "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, and your tabernacles, O Israel"² The verse following this is less well known: "Like the winding brooks, like gardens by the river's side, like aloes which the L-rd has planted, and cedar trees beside the waters." At first glance, this is a further description of the physical camp of Israel, and we can see it in our mind's eye, stretching into the distance in long rows like streams or tents standing on the flat ground like tall cedars jutting into the sky.

However, if we look closer at the imagery in the verse, it does not seem to follow any of the patterns used in Biblical poetry – for example A-B-A-C (staircase parallelism) or A-B-B-A (chiastic structure) – or even the style of the previous verse, where the first part of the verse is parallel in theme or figurative language to the second. Here we have one body of water followed by a list of three types of flora, one a desert plant and two of which 'happen' to be next to water. None of the usual structure patterns as mentioned above seem to fit.

Various commentators offer different explanations. Ibn Ezra sees trees implied in the first image of the river, as trees usually do grow next to winding rivers or brooks³. The Da'at Mikra commentary⁴ takes this one stage further: the word 'nahal' most often refers to a riverbed – as opposed to an actual flowing river – usually within an arid or desert ecosystem. Such riverbeds are sandy and dry, there is no surface water for most of the year, but they can be seen from afar, since greenery and even large trees grow next to them, marking them clearly within the vast expanse of arid land. In southern Africa it is these slivers of green that elephants head for in the dry season, and here they dig down into the desiccated sand with their front legs until brackish

¹ Nechama Leibowitz, (Israel, 20th cent.) Studies in Bamidbar, p.292

² Numbers/Bamidbar 24:5 Trans. The Jerusalem Bible. Koren Publishers Jerusalem LTD, Israel 1992. I have replaced 'thy' and 'thou' with 'you' and 'your' for clarity.

³ Ibn Ezra, Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1092 or 1093–1167), was one of the most distinguished Jewish men of letters and writers of the Middle Ages.

⁴ Ad loc. Da'at Mikra, Y.Z. Moslowitz, Mossad Harav Kook

water oozes out from the depths and they can drink.⁵

If we look then at the general ecosystems in which these plants or rivers are found, rather than the plants themselves, we find the verse in fact has an A-B-A-B structure:

A – ‘nahal’ – riverbed in a desert environment

B – ‘nahar’ – greenery next to a broad river

A – ‘ahalim’ – aloes (plants that usually live in semi-arid or arid areas)

B – ‘arazim alei mayim’ – cedars that stand next to water (tall trees that require great amounts of water to grow)

So this verse contains a repeated image of two kinds of biome or ecozone: desert with aloes and a river that flows only rarely, and a more temperate zone with a perennial river and cedar trees. This arrangement follows a typical stylistic device in Biblical poetry which, in Bilaam’s time, the people of Israel would have picked up almost instinctively. They knew the desert environment intimately, as well as the power of the Nile River to create ‘gardens’ on its banks. Later generations lived in Israel where both biomes were well-represented. But for us today, it’s not so easy.

In Bilaam’s prophecies, as with most others throughout the Bible, nature is used constantly in metaphor and symbolism. Its audience would understand it, needing no help to pick up the ideas the prophet was proclaiming. The people lived a life which was so bound up in nature, with such a strong connection to their natural environment, that the necessary connections might even have been made subconsciously. Nature’s beauty and teachings would have permeated their beings.

Today, we need to look beyond the specific meaning of the verse to learn from the use of nature imagery in the Bible in general: to find out the extent to which nature is part of our consciousness, of our beings. The answer for many of us is: not much.

Before the Industrial Revolution, the majority of humans lived an agrarian lifestyle, dependent upon, or close to the land. Even in 16th century urban London, Shakespeare’s nature imagery would have been understood by his audience. But, in the 21st century, with half the world’s population living in cities, it seems that we need botanists or ecologists to help us understand our Bible!⁶ We need to consider our exposure to nature: When last did I actually see a river or hear the rustle of trees on its banks? Walk on grass and smell a wild growing flower? Our language and metaphors reflect the reality we experience, consisting of the whirr of machinery and hum of computers, not the animals and plants that live with us on Earth. “Little we see in nature that is ours” – Wordsworth saw this separation already in the 19th century; how much more so today.

⁵ Wild Ways, Field Guide to the Behaviour of Southern African mammals by Apps, Peter, Southern Book Publishers, 1992, South Africa

⁶ According to the United Nations, DESA, Population Division *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision*, “In 2005, there were 3.2 billion urban residents in the world, nearly four times as many as in 1950. They represented 49 per cent of the global population. . . . With an annual urban growth rate of 1.8 per cent, nearly double that projected for the total population (1 per cent), the world’s urban population is expected to increase from 3.2 billion in 2005 to 4.9 billion in 2030, when 60 per cent of the global population is expected to live in urban areas.”

But the Torah is relevant for all time and every place, and thus the nature imagery in it becomes a cry to us to reconnect with the world in which G-d placed us. On both a poetic and philosophical level, the Torah teaches us to appreciate nature – and to react with praise of its Creator. G-d did not create such a spectacular world merely to provide food and industry – but also to bring us beauty. If one truly sees all Nature in its complexity, beauty and harmony, one's reaction should be the same spontaneous outburst of the Psalmist: "How diverse are Your works, Oh L-rd! You make them all with wisdom, the world is full of Your possessions."⁷

Practical tips:

- Take a walk in a park, or instead of taking time out of your routine, take the scenic route home once a week – past a pretty garden or tall, venerable tree.
- Visit a National Park or Reserve – even today most towns have a nature reserve within 2 or 3 hours' drive.
- If you have a small patch of land, plant vegetables or herbs; to eat something that you have watched grow from a seed reconnects you to the land (this is especially amazing to do with children).
- Enjoy the rain, remembering that while you may not grow from it, the flowers and grasses will.
- Learn the blessings to say after thunder and lightning, and those to say on all natural phenomena (p. 228 in Artsroll Siddur); by remembering to thank God, you are forced to stop and appreciate nature and the One Who created it.

Ilana Stein has a BA in English, a degree in Nature Conservation and is a registered Field Guide and passionate birdwatcher. She works as a writer for the ecotourism company and conservation organisation Wilderness Safaris and lectures in Tanach at the Emunah Women's Beit Midrash in Johannesburg, South Africa. She explores the wild places of southern Africa whenever she can.