

The Bible presents non-human matter that is active, engaged, and co-authoring a world ~~the~~that reveals God within itself. Rather than dismissing these examples as just poetic/literary imagery (which ~~it is~~they are) or metaphorical abstraction, new materialism asks how these scriptures might demonstrate a cosmos that is endlessly entangled. God pursues and is pursued by *all* creation. world. both is material and works through material. ~~By specially looking~~When we look closely at how God, humans, and these material beings form an interconnected web of actors, the story of the she-ass, Balaam, and of the messenger of YHWH illuminates that human rationality is ~~not the way~~to perceive divinity.

I will begin this journey by analyzing the grammatical genders used to describe the various actors in Numbers 22:22-35. Many languages often assign feminine grammatical gender rules to nouns that occupy “natural” substances. Hebrew is no exception, and this evident in the Numbers 22 passage. In my own translation work I have purposely referred to Balaam’s donkey as a the “she-ass” to emphasize the feminine use of this noun in English (English only sometimes assigns gender to nouns, and this animal could be easily translated as “it”). All the verb conjugations, as well as the noun and adjective endings, used in connection with the she-ass, are feminine. (The divine, however, is often conceived of in masculine grammar constructions. The God who consults with Balaam is always referred to with masculine conjugations and endings ~~and adjectives~~, and the same can be said of the divine messenger that stands in the road before him.

New materialism’s goal is not to change language *per se*, but rather *to* think about the ways that language shapes a traditional understanding of materiality and then complicate this understanding by demonstrating that the non-human is also an agent. Animals as narrative characters are not uncommon in the Bible, and there are other stories ~~where in which~~ animals speak and ~~directly~~act to benefit humans (prominent examples include the serpent in Genesis 2, and the ravens who feed Elijah in 1 Kings 17:2-16).¹ As a feminine non-human subject, the she-ass is expected to be passive and cooperative. In Numbers 22, however, the she-ass is one of the central agents and actors in the narrative, and she refuses to yield to Balaam’s direction three times (vv. 23, 25, 27). Far from being docile and domesticated, the she-ass displays resilient agency.

Recognizing the agency of the she-ass allows for a new understanding of the *leitwort* ~~לִּרְאוֹתָ~~ “to see” in this pericope.² The she-ass is the main “seer” or prophet throughout this passage. According to Robert Alter (as discussed ~~above~~), she is ~~literarily paralleled~~positioned as a literary ~~parallel~~ to Balaam in the following chapters. Many interpreters have recognized the irony that this situation presents,³ but I ~~want to claim~~would assert that this does more than create irony. It reshapes the reader to see the connection between her sight and seeing or perceiving the divine materially in the world. Prophetic sight and speech are not limited to humanity in Numbers 22:22-35. Until this point in the narrative, none of the characters has ~~se~~explicitly seen God. God

Commented [SE1]: Something might have gotten cut off here?

Commented [SE2]: Perhaps “not always the way” or “not the only way”?

Commented [SE3]: If you’re including the serpent as an example I might reconsider the word “benefit” (although there’s another whole paper in that!).

Commented [SE4]: I might say “From a human-male-centric perspective, the she-ass, a feminine non-human subject, might be expected to be passive and cooperative”

Commented [SE5]: Needs citation

¹ Laura Hobgood-Oster, “And Say the Animal Really Responded: Speaking Animals in the History of Christianity,” in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* ~~Divinanimality~~, ed. Stephen D. Moore (Fordham University Press, 2014), 212.

² Robert Alter defines a *leitwort* ~~this way as follows~~: “Through abundant repetition, the semantic range of the word-root is explored, different forms of the root are deployed, branching off at times into phonetic relatives (that is, word-play), synonymy, and antonymy; by virtue of its verbal status, the *leitwort*, refers ~~immedatly~~immediately to meaning and thus to theme as well.” Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 95. See also pp. 104–107 for a Alter’s development of ~~לִּרְאוֹתָ~~ as a leitmotif in the Balaam story.

³ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 144.

comes to Balaam, and Balaam hears and speaks to God in the preceding verses, but there are no mentions of divine sight. The she-ass discovers the messenger of the LORD₇ and acts to communicate to her rider. Three times she exhibits behavior ~~which that~~ goes against the will of her master. This is her way of articulating to Balaam that something is amiss.⁴ She declares this herself when God opens her mouth₅: “Am I not your she-ass that you have ridden upon me always and ever since this day have I ever shown a habit of doing thus to you?” (v. 30). The she-ass is an articulate non-human agent.⁵ Laura Hobgood-Oster invites readers to think of animals in the Bible (especially those who speak) as messengers. These animals do more than mediate; they vibrantly live out their own lives and invite humanity to imagine a world ~~where;in which~~ “all species have a life together.”⁶ ~~Her-The she-ass's~~ role in this story facilitates an encounter that leaves all three parties transformed and ~~their~~ relationships restored.

Employing Kirby's understanding that interactions and material relationships pre-exist their temporal encounters, this story can be viewed as the cosmos rediscovering and regenerating itself. Balaam₂, the donkey₂, and God all leave the encounter changed. The interconnected web of human, divine emissary, and animal lends to an interpretation that this narrative is revelatory. George Savran argues that this story drives home God's message to Balaam (repeated in vv. 20 and 35)₇, that Balaam is only to speak the words of God.⁷ While this is the goal, the outcome is much greater than this. Balaam's posture has been changed to that of a servant (bowing low before the messenger ~~in v.~~ 31) and worshiper, and his relationship to the she-ass has been transformed. Rather than being a piece of flesh that Balaam can control₂, she is the agent of his own salvation whom he is called to listen to and respect. The messenger and the she-ass confront his abusive behavior towards the she-ass (vv. 28, 30, 32-33). Balaam admits to sinning, but it is not made explicit by the narrator what his sin is. A new materialist critique might see Balaam's sin as the mistreatment of the material underneath him, and the encounter with the angel as a reorientation of Balaam's ~~relationship~~ with his animal.

God changes the course of the divine adversary and allows Balaam to pass on the promise that Balaam follow his command and speak only what God tells₂ him. Far from being outside of this web, ~~the narrative sees~~ God ~~is presented in this narrative~~ as intimately related to matter. The messenger participates in the material world by using it to his advantage. Each time he appears he seeks narrower and narrower spaces in which to stand. Even the walls of the road₇ act as ~~an~~-entangled agents₂, moving matter ever closer together. As a result of the encounter, God now has an assurance that Balaam will be obedient, and ~~the trust in~~ God's ~~trust in the~~ prophet ~~can be~~₂ restored.

⁴ ~~Laura~~ Hobgood-Oster, “And Say the Animal Really Responded: ~~Speaking Animals in the History of Christianity~~,” ~~In Divinanimality~~, 217.

⁵ Kirby, “All ~~A~~along₅,” 82.

⁶ Hobgood-Oster, “~~And Say the Animal Really Responded~~,” 221–222.

⁷ George Savran, “Seeing is Believing: On the Relative Priority of Visual and Verbal Perception of the Divine₂,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): ~~320–361~~₇, 334.