Seeing and hearing are ways of knowing in every culture, so one way of understanding how the Tanakh understands perceptual knowledge is to examine passages in which these three verbs appear together. This form of vocabulary collocation provides insight into both the subjects and objects of perception considered especially significant by the literature. When an object is seen and heard, one sense corroborates the testimony of the other; when a subject sees and hears, the perceptions of the observer are doubly emphasized. Texts of seeing, hearing, and knowing draw attention to the content of certain observables and to the identity of certain observers, and to the way this combination leads to perceptual knowledge of unusual emphasis. An investigation of the verses in which “see,” “hear,” and “know” appear together in the Tanakh shines an epistemic spotlight on what is observed and who observes, on what is known and who knows, throughout the corpus.

... 

What Balaam Knows

In Numbers 22, Balak summons Balaam for a mission against Israel. The Israelites are encamped on the plains of Moab and reaching the end of their sojourn in the desert. Balak King of Moab is concerned about this “multitude”\(^1\) of people come up from Egypt, for he has heard of their recent victories over a people (the Amorites) that had defeated his own, and believes that their herds will

\(^1\) Number 22:4.
decimate the sparse vegetation upon which his own depend. Conventional warfare is not likely to succeed against an overwhelming foe. The king opts for sorcery, and Balaam is the specialist of choice. As Balak states in the message conveyed by his courtiers when they request Balaam’s services, “I know the one you bless is blessed, the one you curse is cursed.” Balaam invites the king’s messengers to spend the night so that he might mantically inquire into the success of the king’s request. Balaam is not an Israelite himself, but he remarks that he will determine “what YHWH speaks to me.” With YHWH pre-eminently the God of Israel the reader is aware already that an imprecation against Israel from such a source is of doubtful efficacy, especially when Balaam in his inquiry reports Balak’s complaint that “a people has come out of Egypt.” The reader of the Tanakh is aware of the name of the agent of deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, and what has happened to the Egyptian ruler who attempted to thwart this people and their plenitude. The response of YHWH to Balaam’s inquiry is that he is not to travel to Balak. “You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

But Balaam does not accurately convey this message to the king’s courtiers. He informs them only that “YHWH has refused to let me go with you,” a statement which the courtiers transform in turn into the explanation that “Balaam refuses to come with us” when they report

---

2 Numbers 22:6b.

3 This could be understood as an editorial insertion (as it obviously is on at least one level), but the task conceived for the current project is to present an account of the texts on a first reading.

4 Numbers 22:8.

5 Numbers 22:12.


7 Numbers 22:14.
back to Balak. This statement Balak understands (perhaps correctly, in the end) as a negotiating
ploy on Balaam’s part, for Balak responds by sending a more prestigious delegation than before
and with promises of “great honor indeed” should Balaam accept the invitation. Balaam protests
that silver and gold have no meaning for him since he is able to do only that which YHWH
declares he should, but he does not explicitly disavow the “great honor” proffered. This may or
may not have to do with material gain, since Balaam’s reputation in being honored by the King of
Moab would anyway benefit and with it his future income as a sorcerer.8 This time Elohim tells
Balaam in the night inquiry that he may go with the delegation, but “only what I speak, that do.”9

This sets the stage for one of the more curious episodes in biblical narrative. The she-
donkey Balaam rides sees an angel with drawn sword on the road three times, and three times does
what it can to avoid it. Balaam does not see this angel. He becomes increasingly angry with what
seems to be an unreasonable and recalcitrant donkey, which in the end, the path blocked
completely by the angel, sits down beneath him. As Balaam strikes his mount YHWH “opens

[עשות] the mouth” of the donkey,10 who asks what she has done to deserve his blows. After a short
exchange YHWH “opens [ברוא] the eyes of Balaam” to see the angel and its sword.11 The angel
makes it known to Balaam that if the donkey had not turned aside the angel would have slain

8 This is so whether or not Balaam’s refusals of monetary payment are merely pro forma, and they may be.
Moore describes two “old women” in an Anatolian funerary ritual. “Take the silver and gold!” exclaims the
first, while the second replies three times “I will not take it!” before, presumably, taking it. Moore suggests
that such protestsation were routine. Michael S. Moore, The Balaam Traditions. Their Character and

9 Numbers 22:20, my translation.


Balaam, but let the donkey live. The angel stands in Balaam’s path because Balaam’s way is “reckless.” Yet when Balaam asks whether he should return home the angel replies that he should not, and reiterates the charge that Balaam should do only that which he is told.

This episode is of high interest for its distinctive features of observational epistemology. The placement of the angel seen by the donkey is given each time in great detail. The angel first stands “in the road” so that the donkey must turn “into the field” to avoid it. Then the angel stands “in a narrow path between vineyards with walls on either side” so that Balaam’s foot is crushed when the donkey squeezes by. Finally the angel stands ahead of the donkey in a narrow place “with no way to turn either to the right or to the left,” which is why the donkey sits down. These are rich details for a narrative that is otherwise quite austere (the two exchanges between Balak and Balaam’s courtiers occur in much less narrative space than that given to the donkey), and they place the angel directly into the spatio-temporal array of physical reality and its causality. Balaam’s foot is scraped against a wall. Why? Because his donkey has seen an angel. The result is physically obvious in a day of sandals and painful, and not easy to account for as a figment of Balaam’s imagination since the angel has not yet appeared to Balaam.

How would standard theoretical accounts of visionary experience account for this? Donkeys are not known for their false reification of mental images, their modes of poetic expression, or their vivid imaginations any more than they are known for their ability to speak.

---

12 Numbers 22:23.
13 Numbers 22:25.
The donkey’s speech strains modern credulity well beyond the point of breaking,\textsuperscript{15} yet the narrative sets even this out in a way that conforms to the requirements of ancient legal evidence. Just prior to Balaam’s departure the narrator remarks that Balaam is accompanied by two servants, and they with Balaam constitute the three witnesses generally considered unimpeachable in an ancient court of law. To describe this incident as fictional is (as in Daniel 2) to minimize the difficulties it presents for modern readers who seek not to impose their epistemic paradigms upon the biblical texts they read. Native Americans do not find it unreasonable for animals to talk to human beings.

The account of the journey to Balak the King reframes the epistemic prowess of Balaam the Seer (who cannot see even what his donkey sees\textsuperscript{16}) and draws attention to Balaam’s “reckless” character by showing his rough and injudicious treatment of his donkey.\textsuperscript{17} This contrasts to the calm behavior and reasonable discourse of the animal itself, whose actions in turning aside to shield Balaam from the angel’s sword suggest a donkey as superior to its master in word and deed as it is in vision. The sword-wielding angel’s warning that Balaam is to speak only the word given him may reflect an intimation that Balaam is not entirely to be trusted to do so, given that he provided only a partial report to Balak’s courtiers of the full version of YHWH’s word to him in his initial inquiry of YHWH. Balaam may be a seer of unusual capacities, implies the narrative, but his donkey is the morally superior being. It will heed the angel in order to save not its own life but

\textsuperscript{15} Sternberg points out that even then this is a case whose “very incongruous effects derives from a violation of the Bible’s rules of naturalism. ... Even here the ass owes her powers of speech and sight not to any convention of talking animals but to supernatural naturalism (‘the Lord opened the mouth of the ass’).” Sternberg, Poetics, 175.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Alter, Biblical Narrative, 105.

\textsuperscript{17} Numbers 22:29.
the life of its (ungrateful) master, while the angelic intervention suggests that Balaam is unlikely to carefully heed the angel’s words for any reason other than the avoidance of his own demise.

Balak prepares seven bulls and seven rams on seven altars to serve as offerings to precede what he thinks will be Balaam’s imprecations, which are to take place from a vantage point overlooking the Israelites in the plain below. The oracles do not go according to plan. In the first one Balaam declares that he “cannot curse when God (El) has not,”18 so Balak suggests that another location might be more propitious. But in this second oracle Balaam proclaims that “God (El) will not change his mind,”19 that a blessing has been granted to Israel and will not be revoked, that enchantment can have no effect on Israel, and that – rather ominously, if Balak would care to notice – “it is God (El) who brings out of Egypt.”20 Balak, in other words, is in the process of appealing to the same deity who has just delivered Israel from Egypt to curse Israel. Yet deities thought to operate in such contexts were sometimes capricious, and Balak persists in suggesting that another location might prove successful. This third oracle forcefully closes the door to further attempts at Balak’s proxy cursing, for in this oracle Elohim addresses the intentions of the king directly. For the first time the “spirit of Elohim” comes upon Balaam, who (also for the first time) has not sought divination to receive the oracle of YHWH. Perception is emphasized as Balaam is mentioned in the oracle as one who “hears the words of El” and “sees the vision of Shaddai.” The

18 Numbers 23:8.

19 While no act of divination can influence God in the Tanakh, though other narratives have the changing of God’s mind as a central theme (cf. Numbers 14, Joel 2). Thomas B. Dozeman, “The Book of Numbers,” David L. Petersen and John J. Collins, 2, The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 188. “In 1 Samuel 15:29, 35, one finds the notion that God’s standards are not capricious as are those of man – but not that He is not capable of changing His mind. For example, He may change His mind to punish men as a result of prophetic intercession (Exodus 32:9-14) or man’s repentance (Jonah 3:10).” Jacob Milgrom, Numbers (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 199.

20 Numbers 23:22.
oracle concluded that “the one blessing [Israel] is blessed, the one cursing [Israel] is cursed!”

Balak is furious, and dismisses Balaam outright. But Balaam also has grounds for complaint. He has reminded Balak repeatedly that he has no power to speak oracles on his own volition but can do so only when given them by YHWH. Unpaid, dishonored, and with nothing left to lose, the Balaam now deigns to let Balak know – without charge, as it were – “what this people will do to your people.”

The result is Balaam’s fourth oracle, an event the narrative does not lead us to expect. Three times the donkey sees the angel, three times Balaam strikes his beast, and three times (as Balak points out) Balaam has blessed when asked to curse. The reader expects Balaam to close the narrative circle at this point by returning home. His client has dismissed him and there is no further work to be done, nor any way of doing it (who would prepare the altars?). But Balaam’s apparent ire at being summarily dismissed combines with a form of oracular epistemology that does not depend upon ritual preparation to result in the voluntary declaration, gratis, of Balaam’s fourth and final oracle. At the epicenter of Balaam’s declamation we find, building upon the vocabulary of “seeing” and “hearing” that appeared already in the third oracle, the tripled vocabulary of perceptual knowledge as it now appears in one verse.

---

21 Numbers 24:9. This is the second narrative of epistemic significance that uses this language of blessing and cursing. As in the narrative of Genesis 25, the very fact that Balak is presented as attributing to Balaam the ability to bless and curse in this way (Numbers 22:6) suggests that behind Balaam may lie someone else. The blessing upon Abram in Genesis 12:3 is repeated in Numbers 24:9 almost verbatim.

22 This is Balaam’s first remark to Balak when they meet face-to-face in Numbers 22:38, and he repeats words to this effect in Numbers 23:3, 23:12, 23:26, and finally, as an introduction to his final oracle and hence in his farewell to Balak, in Numbers 24:13.

23 Numbers 24:14.
In his fourth oracle Balaam “hears the words of God (El), knows the knowledge of the Most High (Elion), and sees the vision of the Almighty (Shaddai).” Emphasis in this remarkable statement of epistemology proceeds by three degrees of intensification. First, the doubled lexeme ידוע נבון “know” of “know knowledge” (יודע ידוע) occurs in the middle term of this series. Second, this doubling may itself be understood as an emphatic insertion of the verb and noun of epistemology into the perceptual sequence of the third oracle, so that “know” now functions in the fourth oracle as an intensified middle term of the structurally and rhetorically intensified epistemic construction “hear-know-knowledge-see.” Third, this statement is the epistemic center of an oracle that is the mould-breaking culmination of a series of oracular and epistemic intensifications that have taken place throughout the Balaam narrative. The subject of this emphatic knowledge is the seer Balaam. The object of this knowledge is the words, knowledge, vision of El, Elion, Shaddai.

This fourth oracle breaks out of the concerns of the narrative so far, which have in the human realm dealt with the interactions of Balak, Moab, Balaam, and Israel. This story has appeared to come to a close with Balak’s dismissal of Balaam, and Balak’s invitation to Balaam is how the story began. The parameters of this narrative world seem already to have been conclusively addressed by Balaam’s third oracle, which explained to Balak that those who bless Israel are blessed

---

24 Numbers 24:16. Neither the text nor context suggests the Tanakh considers Balaam’s oracular selftribution to be wrong. The narrator agrees with Balak’s assessment that Balaam’s blessings and curses, undertaken in this episode as oracular pronouncements from YHWH himself, are singularly efficacious.

25 Milgrom suggests that this “completes the 3 + 1 pattern whereby the last of a triad is enhanced by the addition of a fourth member” as in Amos 1:3-206 and Proverbs 30:18-19, 29-31. Ibid., 206. But in these and other similar texts typical of wisdom literature there is no closure granted to the series following its third member, as there would be with Balak’s summary dismissal of Balaam. Also, the “3 + 1” structure is clear from the beginning of each of the short wisdom units. In Numbers 22-24 the Fourth Oracle comes at the unexpected end of a lengthy narrative, and is set apart from the other three in ways not present in the series cited by Milgrom.
and those curse are cursed, grounds appropriate to Balak’s peremptory dismissal of Balaam. We expect Balaam to return to his home disgruntled. When Balaam announces his fourth oracle, one without any remuneration or honor on the horizon, Balaam steps outside the expectations established by the narrative, and also outside the standard practices of kings and sorcerers in the ancient world.

The first words of the oracle confirm a reference that is not constrained to its immediate context, as Balaam declaims, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.”26 The pronoun refers to a “star marching forth from Jacob,” a “scepter rising from Israel.” That Moab will be crushed27 is congruent with Balaam’s intent to let Balak know “what this people will do to your people,” but the thought is expressed unusually in the context of the preceding three oracles. In these, the blessing and victory of Israel are proclaimed in a way that refers either to the present or the near future. The fourth oracle instead refers at its outset to an event “not now” and “not near” in time and (or) space, and Balaam goes on to provide additional statements in the oracle of the future dispositions of Amalek, Kain, and Asshur,28 none of which have had anything to do with the concerns of the narrative to this point. Balaam’s fourth oracle therefore breaks out of a narrative which has been shaped by the question of whether Balaam will curse Israel, into the broader domain of world history in the distant future. A star and a scepter appear from afar as other nations take the stage and oracles are pronounced concerning them.

26 Numbers 24:17.

27 Numbers 24:17.

Very unusual is the degree of knowledge of the biblical divinity granted in this oracle to a pagan seer. The multiple attestations of Balaam as one who knows the things divine occurs in context in which the ruach Elohim has fallen previously upon Balaam, in a narrative in which Balaam inquires frequently of YHWH, and in which Balaam is emphatically to do only that which YHWH directs. Such an attestation of knowing the knowledge of God is not provided anywhere to a prophet of Israel. Nowhere does the Tanakh suggest that Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elisha, Elijah, or Moses “hears, knows and sees” the matters of the Almighty, or “knows the knowledge” of the Most High. These attributions often occur singly (prophets hear words from YHWH and see visions), but never as a part of the epistemically emphatic grouping provided by this perceptual collocation. Zechariah states in his prophetic retrospective that the tora and words of YHWH that came to the earlier prophets did so by the ruach “spirit” of YHWH Sabaoth,29 but this places biblical prophecy phenomenologically in the same class as Balaam’s third oracle, in which the ruach of Elohim falls upon as seer who habitually inquires of YHWH. No other human individual in the Tanakh is credited with the epistemic corroboration granted Balaam in his fourth oracle regarding any object of knowledge, let alone an epistemic object of things divine. This emphatic knowing is attributed in the literature of Israel to a pagan seer who has been summoned to curse Israel, and is of dubious moral standing.

As Numbers 22-24 indicate in several ways, Balaam’s knowledge of the biblical God results from the epistemically enlivening activity of the biblical divinity with respect to Balaam. This is true of the early question as to whether Balaam should accept Balak’s invitation, it is true of his donkey’s ability to see the angel, and it is true of the opening of Balaam’s eyes that allows him to

29 Zechariah 7:12.
see the angel for himself. It is true all the more of the oracles proclaimed by Balaam under his tacit contract with Balak and that lead to the increasingly disgruntled state of mind of Balaam’s royal client, a circumstance that (with its inherent motivation to flatter) might also explain why Balaam has been warned so strongly, as he repeats frequently, that he can say only that which he has been given to say by God. There is little doubt in the context of Numbers 22-24 that when Balaam’s eyes are opened (ֶלָל) in Numbers 24:16 to see, hear, and know the knowledge of God, the agent of this opening is the same who opened (ֶלָל) Balaam’s eyes to see the angel in Numbers 22:31. The seer Balaam knows the knowledge of the biblical God (El, Elion, Shaddai) in the fourth oracle because his eyes have been opened by the biblical God (YHWH). The God of Israel is epistemically active beyond the geographical and ethnic borders of Israel, acting in a way that attests a degree of epistemic veracity to a pagan seer that exceeds even that attributed to Israel’s own prophets.

The Balaam narrative is thought by many30 to be among the earliest prophetic texts in the Tanakh, and it establishes an epistemic pathway in which a knower of emphatic authority is not a member of the people of Israel. Balaam, the seer of impeccable epistemic credentials in his fourth oracle with regard to his knowledge of the God of Israel, is a pagan seer. In the Torah, YHWH is pre-eminently the God of Israel and the God of the Exodus, yet Numbers 24:16 establishes an epistemic pathway which in its context is YHWH-centric, extra-Exodus, and extra-Israel. Balaam’s knowledge of the divine is especially striking in that Numbers itself is an integral part of the

---

30 Albright argues that the peoples mentioned in Numbers 24:21-24 indicate that the original composition of the oracles dates from before the 10th century BCE. “The Kenites of later times were scattered among the Israelites; it is only when we go back to the Mosaic age that we find them taking tangible shape as an autonomous people.” Albright concludes that the oracles of Numbers 22-24 were attributed to Balaam from a date as early as the twelfth century, and that there is “no reason why they may not be authentic, or may not at least reflect the atmosphere of the age.” W. F. Albright, “The Oracles of Balaam,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63 (1944): 227, 233.
Exodus tradition, in which wayfarers from Egypt are formed into the people of Israel by the God who sees, hears, and knows their sufferings, who on the way to the land of Canaan leads them through the desert to the plains of Moab where they become the unwitting subject of the hostile intent of a foreign king who summons a pagan seer to curse with a divine efficacy. This is reversed to blessing by the same God of Israel who opens Balaam’s eyes to convey to Balak and to the readers of the text what Balaam comes in his final oracle to see, hear, and know, of a rising star and a ruling scepter.

...