The Bila’am Narrative:
Biblical & Rabbinic Sources of the Medieval Commentators

I. Discussion of Bila’am in the Tanakh (apart from the main source for the Bila’am narrative, Parashat Balaq, Bamidbar 22-24) ¹

Numbers 31:8
(8) Along with their other victims, they slew the kings of Midian: Evi, Reqem, Zur, Hur, and Reva’, the five kings of Midian. They also put Bila’am son of Be’or to the sword.

Joshua 24:9-10
(9) Thereupon Balaq son of Zippor, the king of Moab, made ready to attack Israel. He sent for Bila’am son of Be’or to curse you, (10) but I refused to listen to Bila’am; he had to bless you, and thus I saved you from him.

Micah 6:5
(5) “My people, remember what Balaq king of Moab Plotted against you, and how Bila’am son of Be’or responded to him. [Recall your passage] From Shittim to Gilgal — and you will recognize The gracious acts of the LORD.”

Numbers 31:14-18
(14) Moshe became angry with the commanders of the army, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, who had come back from the military campaign. (15) Moshe said to them, “You have spared every female! (16) Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of

¹ Note: Tanakh is JPS trans.; Talmud is Soncino trans., slightly modified.
Bila‘am, induced the Israelites to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Pe‘or, so that the LORD’s community was struck by the plague. (17) Now, therefore, slay every male among the children, and slay also every woman who has known a man carnally; (18) but spare every young woman who has not had carnal relations with a man.

II. Discussion of Bila‘am in the Mishnah & Talmud

Pirqei Avot 5:6

(6) Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight. And these are they: The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach in Numbers 16:32]; and the mouth of the well [that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness in Numbers 21:17]; and the mouth of the donkey [that spoke to Bila‘am in Numbers 22:28–30]; and the rainbow [that served as a covenant after the flood in Genesis 9:13]; and the manna [that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus 16:4–21]; and the staff [of Moshe]; and the shamir [the worm that helped build the Temple without metal tools]; and the letters; and the writing; and the tablets [all of the latter three, of the Ten Commandments].

Pirqei Avot 5:19

(19) Anyone who has these three things is from the students of Abraham, our father, and [anyone who has] three other things is from the students of Bila‘am the evil-doer: [one who has] a good eye, a humble spirit and a small appetite -- is from the students of Abraham, our father.
[One who has] an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a broad appetite - is from the students of Bila'am the evildoer. What [difference] is there between the students of Abraham, our father, and the students of Bila'am the evildoer? The students of Abraham, our father, eat in this world and possess the next world, as it is stated (Proverbs 8:21), “There is what for those that love Me to inherit, and their treasuries will I fill.” **But the students of Bila’am the evildoer inherit Gehinnom and go down to the pit of destruction,** as it is stated (Psalms 55:24), “And You, God, will bring them down to the pit of destruction; the people of blood and deceit, they will not live out half their days; and I will trust in You.”

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<th>Bava Batra 14b</th>
<th>Bava Batra 60a</th>
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<td><strong>And who wrote the books of the Bible?</strong> Moshe wrote his own book, and the portion of Bila’am [in the Torah], and [the book of] Job. Joshua wrote his own book and eight verses in the Torah, [which describe the death of Moshe.] Samuel wrote his own book, [the book of] Judges, and [the book of] Ruth. David wrote the book of Psalms by means of ten elders [of previous generations, assembling a collection that included compositions of others along with his own. He included psalms authored] by Adam the first [man,] by Melchizedek [king of Salem,] and by Abraham, and by Moshe, and by Heman, and by Yedutun, and by Assaf...</td>
<td><strong>Gemara:</strong> From where are these matters, [i.e., that one may not open an entrance opposite another entrance, or a window...**</td>
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opposite another window, derived?] Rabbi Yoḥanan says that the verse states: “And Bilaʿam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe; [and the spirit of God came upon him” (Numbers 24:2). The Gemara explains: What was it that Bilaʿam saw [that so inspired him? He] saw that the entrances of their tents were not aligned with each other, [ensuring that each family enjoyed a measure of privacy. And he] said: [If this is the case,) these [people] are worthy of having the Divine Presence rest on them.

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<th>Sanhedrin 105a</th>
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| [The mishnah teaches that] four prominent commoners, Bilaʿam, Doʿeg, Ahitofel, and Geḥazi, [have no share in the World-to-Come. The Gemara elaborates: The name] Bilaʿam [is interpreted as a contraction of:] Without a people [be-lo ʿam], [or one who has no share in the World-to-Come with the Jewish people]. Alternatively, [the name] Bilaʿam [is interpreted as one] who wore down the [Jewish] people [bilah ʿam]. [He is the] son of Beʿor, [one] who engaged in bestiality [beʿir].

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<td>[It was] taught [in a baraita:] He is Beʿor, [father of Bilaʿam,] he is Kushan-Rishatayim, he is Lavan the Aramean. [He was called] Beʿor because he engaged in bestiality. ...</td>
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It is written: “Son of Beʿor” (Numbers 22:5), and it is written [elsewhere:] “His son Beʿor” (Numbers 24:3). Rabbi Yoḥanan says [in resolving the apparent contradiction: Bilaʿam's] father was his...
son in [terms of] prophecy, [as Balaam was a much greater prophet.]

**Berakhot 7a**

How much [time does] His anger [last? God’s anger lasts] a moment. And how [long] is a moment? One fifty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eighth of an hour, that is a moment. [The Gemara adds:] And no creature can [precisely determine that moment [when God becomes angry,] except for Bila’am the wicked, about whom it is written: “He who knows the knowledge of the Most High” (Numbers 24:16). ...

[This should not be understood to mean that Bila’am was a full-fledged prophet.] Now, [clearly, Bila’am] did not know the mind of his animal; and he did know the mind of the Most High? [If he could not understand the rebuke of his donkey, he was certainly unable to understand the mind of the Most High]. ...

Rather, this [verse from Numbers] teaches that [Bila’am] was able to [precisely determine the hour that the Holy One is angry. [At that moment, Bala’am would utter his curse and, through God’s anger, it would be fulfilled].

**Sotah 11a**

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says [that] Rabbi Simai says: Three [noteworthy people were consulted by Pharaoh] in that counsel [where Pharaoh questioned what should be done with the Jewish people. They were] Balaam, and Job, and Yitro. ...

[Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba teaches what
occurred to each of them: Balaam, who advised [Pharaoh to kill all sons born to the Jewish people,] was [punished by being] killed [in the war with Midian (see Numbers 31:8)].

Mar Zutra says: [Bila’am] was a diviner by [using] his penis. Mar, son of Ravina, says: He engaged in bestiality with his donkey.

Mar asked him:] Should I then attach [myself] to them [here in this world? Bila’am] said to him: You shall not seek their peace or their welfare all the days [(see Deuteronomy 23:7). Onqelos] said to him: What is the punishment of that man, [a euphemism for Bila’am himself, in the next world? Bila’am] said to him: [He is cooked] in boiling semen, [as he caused Israel to engage in licentious behavior with the daughters of Moab].

III. Notable discussion of Bila’am in the Midrash (there are numerous parallels passages)

And there shall not arise in Israel again a prophet such as Moshe”: But among the nations, there did arise. And who was he? Bila’am the son of Be’or. But there is a difference between the prophecy of Moshe and the prophecy of Bila’am. Moshe did not know who was
speaking to him, and Bila'am did know, as it says, “The speech of the hearer (Bila'am) of the words of the Almighty” [Bamidbar 24:16]. Moshe did not know when God would speak to him until God did so. Bila'am did know, as it says, “and the knower of the knowledge of the Most High.” Moshe did not speak with Him unless he was standing [Devarim 5:28] “And you, here, stand with Me.” And Bila'am spoke with Him when he was fallen (Bamidbar 24:4): “The vision of the Almighty shall he see, fallen and his eyes uncovered.”

*Parallel in Bamidbar Rabbah