

WAS BALAAM A TRUE PROPHET?

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BY ROBERT CLOUSE

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PREFACE

The writer of this monograph has appreciated the faithful teaching of the Word of God which he has received from the faculty of Grace Theological Seminary. Special gratitude is due Professor John Rea, faculty advisor, for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

The strange, enigmatical character of Balaam has always interested those who read the account of his activities given in the Book of Numbers. The interest of the writer of this paper was aroused through a discussion of this man in an Old Testament survey class at Grace Seminary. The writer determined to settle the problem as to the character of Balaam and his prophetic activities.

Balaam's character in relation to his prophecies carries renewed interest when it is realized that many of the liberal commentators use Balaam to heap disrepute upon the whole prophetic ministry of the Old Testament. It is hoped that the solution offered to the paradox to this man's character and his prophecies may be to the eternal good of the reader.

According to Biblia Hebraica third edition, edited by Rudolf Kittel

וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכָיו אֶל-בְּלָצָר בֶּן-
 בְּעוֹר פִּתְחוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל-חֲנָקָה
 אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי-עַמּוֹן* לִקְרֹא-לוֹ לֵאמֹר
 חַנָּה עָם יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם חַנָּה כֶּסֶה
 אֶת-יָצִיךָ הָאֶרֶץ וְהוּא יָשָׁב מִסִּלָּה
 וְעַתָּה לִכְתוּבָא אֶרְחֶה לְךָ אֶת-הָעָם
 הַזֶּה כִּי-עָצוּם הוּא מִסָּפִי אִוֵּל
 אִוֵּכָל בַּכָּה-בּוֹ וְאֶגְרֹשְׁנוּ מִן-
 הָאֶרֶץ כִּי יִדְעַתָּה אֵת אֲשֶׁר-תַּעֲרֹךְ
 מִבִּרְךָ וְאֶשָּׁב תֵּאֵר יוֹאֵר :

The reading עַמּוֹן is found in fourteen manuscripts and the Vulgate, Syriac and Samaritan Pentateuch versions, according to the critical text.

King James Version, 1611

He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me:

Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people: for they are too mighty for me: Peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.

English Revised Version 1885, American Standard Version 1901 agree with this version in all particulars.

Rotherham's Emphasized Bible, 1897

So he sent messengers unto Balaam son of Beor to Pethor which was by the river of the land of the sons of his people to call him, - saying -

Lo! a people hath come forth out of Egypt

Lo! he hath covered the eye of the land,

Yea he is tarrying over against me.

Now therefore do come I pray thee curse me this people.

For stronger he is than I,

If peradventure I prevail we shall smite him,

That I may drive him out of the land,

For I know that he whom thou dost bless is to be blessed,

And he whom thou dost curse is to be cursed.

Moffatt's Bible, 1935

[He sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor on the Euphrates] in the land of the Ammonites, with this summons: 'Here is a people that has come from Egypt! They have been swarming over the face of the earth, and here they are now, settled opposite me! Pray come and curse this people for me (for they are stronger than I am); then maybe I shall have power to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.'

The American Bible, 1935

Balak, the son of Zippor, was king of Moab at that time; so he sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the Euphrates, to the land of the Ammonites, to summon him, saying, 'Here is a people come out of Egypt! They cover the whole face of the earth, and are settled opposite me. Now then, come and curse this people for me; for they are too strong for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.'

Revised Standard Version, 1952

"sent messengers to Balaam the son of Be'or at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of Amaw to call him, saying, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

Doanay-Challoner Bible, 1749-1752

He sent therefore messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, a soothsayer, who dwelt by the river of the land of the children of Ammon, to call him, and to say: Behold a people is come out of Egypt, that hath covered the face of the earth, sitting over against me. Come therefore, and curse this people, because it is mightier than I: if by any means I might beat them and drive them out of my land: for I know that he whom thou shalt bless is blessed, and he whom thou shalt curse is cursed.

THE ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND

The children of Israel were at last coming to the end of their years of wandering. They were moving toward the land of Canaan and had safely passed through the territory of the Moabites (Num. 21:11). Next, they came to the brook Arnon and the country of Sihon, one of the kings of the Amorites. Sihon would not allow the Israelites to enter his territory. Instead, he engaged them in battle. This battle which was fought at Jahaz resulted in the defeat of the Amorite forces (Num. 21:12-31). Following this, Og, king of Bashan, the ruler of the Amorite population in that area, attacked the Israelites. Og was a giant, a descendant of the Rephaim. This battle fought at Edrei resulted in another victory for the people of God.

From the heights of Abarim...they descended to the Jordan Valley, and encamped at their last station...before entering the land of promise, on the eastern bank of the Jordan opposite Jericho. Here occurred: (1) the episode of Balaam's prophecy (Num. 22-24); (2) the iniquity of Israel with the women of Moab, and a plague on the people as a result (Num. 25); (3) the numbering of Israel (Num. 26); (4) the campaigns against the Moabites and Midianites (Num. 31); (5) the allotment to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh (Num. 32); (6) the repetition of the law and the recapitulation of the journeys, in the book of Deuteronomy; (7) last of all, the ascent of Moses up the height of Nebo, his prophetic view of the Promised Land, and his lonely death (Deut. 34).¹

Balak was the ruler of the Moabites at this time. When Israel had first passed through his land he and his fellow Moabites

¹Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, A Bible Atlas (New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1951) p. 36.

had not fought them. The people of Moab had even sold the children of Israel bread and water as the Israelites journeyed (Deut. 2:29). The Moabites had undoubtedly thought that the great conqueror Sihon would be more than able to cope with the Israelites and would reduce them to subjects or cause them to flee back to Sinai. This, as we have seen, was not the case. The Israelites crushed not only Sihon but also Og, and they did such a thorough job of it that it filled the Moabite monarch with tremors of fear. The Israelites now occupied territory which the Moabites had formerly held before its conquest by the Amorites under Sihon. The children of Israel had been careful to spare the Moabites when they encountered them, and even now after smashing the military forces to the north of Moab, they did not sweep south to smash the people of Balak, but they turned their faces westward and moved on toward the Jordan and Canaan. Nevertheless, Balak was frightened. Balak realized that Moab in itself was no match for the arms and superhuman strength of the people of God. Hence he carefully sought alliance with the Midianites against the Israelites. He very forcefully appealed to the fright of the people of Midian with the words recorded by the sacred chronicles: "...Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field" (Num. 22:4). The elders of Midian must have advised Balak to send for Balaam. This can be inferred from the fact that the elders of the Midianites accompanied the elders of Moab to invite Balaam to come and curse Israel. Perhaps, as is suggested by the appearance of Midianite traders in Genesis 37 at the time of Joseph, the Midianites were out on a trading foray when they encountered Balaam.

Balaam was noted for his marvellous power to curse or bless. Those of us who live in another culture amid a time of much scientific advancement may look back upon Balak and his friends with a twinkle in our eyes. Yet we have information that illustrates the point that until a few years ago many oriental peoples believed in the efficacy of the curses of soothsayers. The following reference to the British fighting in Burma in the last century is interesting in connection with this thought:

The orientals in their wars, have always their magicians with them to curse their enemies, and to mutter incantations for their destruction. Sometimes they secretly convey a potent charm among the opposing troops, to cause their destruction. In our late war with the Burmese the generals had several magicians, who were much engaged in cursing our troops; but as they did not succeed, a number of witches were brought for the same purpose.²

After two visits to Balaam the messengers succeeded in enticing him to come and curse Israel as the Israelites were encamped on the Plain of Moab.

Balaam has attracted much attention from Jews, Mohammedans and Christians. Among the Jewish writers who mention Balaam we find Josephus. Josephus writes:

Now these Midianites knowing there was one Balaam, who lived by Euphrates, and was the greatest of the prophets at that time, and one that was in friendship with them, sent some of their princes along with the ambassadors of Balak, to entreat the prophet to come to them, that he might imprecate curses to the destruction of the Israelites.³

²James Comper Gray and George M. Adams, Gray and Adams Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House), I, 420.

³Flavius Josephus, The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company), pp. 122, 123.

Josephus proceeds to paraphrase the story of Balaam and states that although he was a great prophet, Balaam was weak-willed.

Ginzberg calls attention to other Jewish legends in connections with Balaam.

Balaam's course of life and his actions show convincingly why God withdrew from the heathen the gift of prophecy. For Balaam was the last of the heathen prophets. Shem had been the first whom God had commissioned to communicate his words to the heathens. This was after the flood when God said to Shem: 'Shem, had my Torah existed among the previous ten generations, I suppose I should not have destroyed the world by the flood. Go now announce to the nations of the earth My revelations, ask them if they will not accept My Torah.' Throughout four hundred years did Shem go about as a prophet, but the nations of the earth did not heed him. The prophets that labored after him among the heathens were Job and his four friends, Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad and Elihu, as well as Balaam, all of whom were descendants of Nahor, Abraham's brother from his union with Milcah. In order that the heathens might not say, 'Had we had a prophet like Moses, we should have received the Torah,' God gave them Balaam as a prophet, who in no way was inferior to Moses in wisdom or in the gift of prophecy. Moses indeed was the greatest prophet among the Israelites, but Balaam was his peer among the heathen.⁴

Philo describes Balaam as a magician in a very disparaging way, thus showing that Balaam has been a controversial figure among the Jews. Other Jewish traditions say that Balaam was a magician in Pharoah's court, the Elihu who figures in the book of Job, the friend of Jannes and Jambres who it is said were the ones who accompanied him on his journey to Moab (Num. 22:22). It has also been said that "...he was governor of a city in Ethiopia, and

⁴Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, trans. Paul Radin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911), III, 355, 356.

rebelled against Pharoah; Moses was sent against him at the head of an army, and stormed the city and put Balaam to flight..."⁵ Or it is thought that he is Laban "or the son of Beor, the son of Laban, so the grandson of Laban."⁶ The Haggidic Midrash states that Balaam was lame and blind in one eye. This is "deduced from the sing. 749 in 24:15."⁷ The Jewish accounts are on the whole fanciful, but they show a strangely quizzical fascination about Balaam which never seemed quite settled in the Jewish mind.

The Mohammedans have also indulged in much speculation about Balaam, son of Beor. They have advanced the opinion that he was one of the Anakim, that he learned about Yahweh by reading the books of Abraham, and that he was adept at predicting the future. Many of them identify Balaam with Luqman or Lokman. Luqman is the Aesop of the East and his fables are a familiar part of Arabic literature. The name of Lukman occurs in the Koran.

Lokman..., whose name, like Balaam's, means 'devourer', is described in Arabic writers as the son of Ba ura, i.e. Beor. The Hebrew book of Kenoch states that Balaam was called in Arabic Loknin, possibly a misreading for Lokman.⁸

Christians have always been divided on the question of Balaam. He is such an enigmatical character that many saints of early times such as Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine have believed

⁵William Henry Bennett and Leonard Elliott Elliott-Binns, "Balaam," Encyclopedia Britannica, (Chicago: 1955), II, 949.

⁶John Gill, An Exposition of the Old Testament (London: William Hill Collingridge,) I, 651.

⁷George Buchanan Gray, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 321.

⁸T. E. Espin and J. F. Thrupp, "Numbers", The Bible Commentary, ed. F. C. Cook (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890) I, 737.

him to be a soothsayer and idol worshipper who did not know Jehovah. Others, such as Tertullian and Jerome, have supposed him to be a true prophet who fell into sin because of the temptation of Balak's reward.

THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

The Major Problem

Was Balaam a true prophet of God?

The Minor Problem

What was the location of "Pethor"?

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Major Problem: Was Balaam a True Prophet of God?

There are two main answers to this question, so the writer will list these views and the support that is given for each of them.

Balaam a True Prophet View

Many New Testament commentators such as Lenski¹ and Strachan² seem to assume the correctness of this interpretation because of the reference to Balaam in 2 Pet. 2:16 where he is distinctly called a prophet. Pool³ and Benson⁴ also use this as the basis of their assumption that Balaam is a true prophet.

Benson⁵ and Roberts⁶ call attention to the points of the

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude (Columbus, O: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), p. 333.

²R. H. Strachan, "The Second General Epistle of Peter", The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., reprinted 1951), V, 140.

³Matthew Pool, Annotations upon the Holy Bible (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), p. 309.

⁴Joseph Benson, The Holy Bible (New York: Carlton and Porter), I, 440.

⁵Ibid.

⁶W. Roberts, ascribed by Joseph Exell, "Numbers," The Biblical Illustrator (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co.) pp. 235, 236.

scriptural account of Balaam which show his familiarity with God. Balaam uses, when speaking of God, the covenant name, Jehovah. (Num. 22:8,13,18,19; 23:3,8,12,21,26; 24:1,6,13.) Notice also that Balaam says, "Jehovah my God" (Num. 24:4) and "the Most High" (Num. 24:16). The use of these names and their variety implies a familiarity with the true God not possessed by the ordinary heathen. Balaam also showed a delay in going with the messengers of Balak which is to his credit. Then again Balaam was not afraid to confess before King Balak and the Moabite messengers that Jehovah put words in his mouth (Num. 23:5,12,16). Balaam apparently gives a heartfelt endorsement to the words of Jehovah as he voices the desire: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Num. 23:10). This verse eloquently expresses Balaam's desire to be identified with the people of God, Israel. Balaam, finding that Jehovah is pleased to bless Israel, leaves his enchantments and proceeds to bless Israel (Num. 24:1). Finally, when facing the angered Balak, Balaam is not afraid to say that he cannot go beyond the word of Jehovah even if the king would give him his house full of gold (Num. 24:13).

Butler,⁷ McClaren,⁸ Parker,⁹ and Whyte¹⁰ cite a passage in Micah to prove that Balaam is a man with real spiritual discernment.

O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me.

For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that ye may know the righteousness of the Lord.

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Mic. 6:5-8).

These able expositors all assume this passage to be a conversation between Balak and Balaam. Thus the eighth verse gives the noble answer of Balaam. Parker waxes eloquent on this passage:

Who can amend that speech? Who can refine that gold? Who dares touch that lily with his mean paint? Who taught Balaam that great speech? The Apostle Paul never uttered a nobler sentiment than is uttered by Balaam, as reported in the prophecies of Micah. This is the sermon on the Mount in anticipation.¹¹

⁷W. J. Deane (exposition) "Micah", The Pulpit Commentary, eds. H. D. M. Spence and Josephs Exell (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., reprinted 1950), XIV, 87.

⁸Alexander McClaren, The Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, Expositions of Holy Scripture (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1907), p. 368.

⁹Joseph Parker, Dwight Lyman Moody and T. Dewitt Talmadge, Bible Characters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House n. d.), p. 336.

¹⁰Alexander Whyte, Adam to Achan, Bible Characters (London: Oliphants, Ltd. n. d.), p. 266.

¹¹Joseph Parker, loc. cit.

Parker in another instance compares Balaam to Jacob in an attempt to explain Balaam's diverse characteristics.¹² Wordsworth compares Balaam to Laban.¹³

Balaam prophesied for pay, but it has been suggested that it was not an unusual thing for the true prophets to do this.

The ease with which, among ignorant and superstitious people, a prophet might become a hired soothsayer is apparent even from the case of Samuel (1 Sam. IX.6-8). That it should be thought proper to resort to the man of God for information about some lost property, and much more that it should be thought necessary to pay him a fee for the exercise of his supernatural powers, shows, not indeed that Samuel was a soothsayer, for he was a man of rare integrity and independence, but, that Samuel was little distinguished from a soothsayer in the popular estimation.¹⁴

McNeile, the writer on Numbers in The Cambridge Bible series, goes even farther along this line and states:

Balak wanted him to curse for money, but this doesn't necessarily imply avarice; it was a not uncommon feature of early Israelitish life, Samuel (1 Sam. 9:8), Ahijah (1 Ki. 14:3), Elisha (2 Ki. 8:8f) and Amos (Amos 7:12) were expected to do the same.¹⁵

He then proceeds in a footnote to say that Amos rose superior to the idea of payment for the prophetic function. After the time of

¹²Joseph Parker, The People's Bible (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co.), III, p. 312.

¹³Chr. Wordsworth, The Holy Bible with Notes and Introduction (London: Rivingtons, 1865), I, 155.

¹⁴R. Winterbotham, "Numbers", The Pulpit Commentary, eds. H. D. M. Spence and Josephs Exell (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., reprinted 1950), II, 291.

¹⁵A. H. McNeile, The Book of Numbers, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, ed. A. F. Kirkpatrick (Cambridge, Eng.: University Press, 1911), p. 124.

Amos the idea of a prophet taking money became offensive to the "better minds of the nation."¹⁶

The writers of the liberal persuasion divide the narrative in Numbers 22 - 24 between the J and E documents. This of course avoids all controversy in Balaam's acts and words. These men disagree very violently as to where to divide the text. Bennett and Elliott-Binns¹⁷ together with Gray¹⁸ agree that the writer of the E document presents Balaam in a more favorable light than the writer of J. Thus we may generalize that the passages which show Balaam's faults are regarded by the liberals as being in the J sections. The liberal view of this portion of Scripture also states that three of the prophetic sections in chapter twenty-four of Numbers are later additions. They add, following Wellhausen,¹⁹ that the later references to Balaam in the Old Testament belong to the priestly code which always presents Balaam in a bad light because of the prejudice of the later Jewish mind against Gentiles. The New Testament inherited this adverse attitude about Balaam from the Jewish prejudice and the priestly code according to the liberal thought.

Typical of this belief is the view of Cheyne as he writes:

To me, I confess, it seems more like a writer's uncharitable fiction. [The writer is here referring to the deductions about

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Bennett and Elliott-Binns, loc. cit.

¹⁸Gray, op. cit., pp. 309, 318

¹⁹Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena To The History of Israel, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885) p. 356.

Balaam's character because of his actions with regard to the women of Moab.] Had it really been the original tradition, I cannot think that the early narrators would have cared to idealise such a person.²⁰

The liberals have a low view of prophetism and thus a man like Balaam can fit into their classification of a prophet. "Taking the narratives as we now have them, Balaam is a companion figure to Jonah, the prophet who wanted to go where he was not sent, over against the prophet who ran away from the mission to which he was called."²¹

Marsh, in The Interpreter's Bible also favors this theory of dividing the Numbers' narrative with the statement: "The prose version itself shows clear marks of compilation, and it is some satisfaction to note that a number of inconsistencies discovered in the behaviour of Balaam disappear when a proper literary analysis is undertaken."²²

Some men of the evangelical persuasion believe that Balaam was a true prophet and that in the Old Testament times the gift of prophecy was a temporary phenomena. Whyte agrees with Calvin and quotes the great Genevan theologian on this point.²³ MacRae, writing in the New Bible Commentary, presents this idea also. He writes:

In the Bible this word (prophet) does not indicate a

²⁰T. K. Cheyne, The Two Religions of Israel (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911), p. 79.

²¹Bennett and Elliott-Binns, loc. cit.

²²John Marsh (exegesis), "Numbers," The Interpreter's Bible, ed. Nolan B. Harmon (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), II, 248.

²³Whyte, loc. cit.

permanent occupation or function, which, when it was once given to a man, always belongs to him. God may use one as a spokesman for a time and then lay him aside and use another one. The prophets were not inspired in everything they said.²⁴

Then Dr. MacRae proceeds to illustrate this by telling of Nathan and Nathan's false counsel to David to build the temple. He closes with the comment "...it is evident that Balaam was God's mouthpiece, and it would be absurd to call him anything but a true prophet."²⁵

Baur,²⁶ Leathes²⁷ and Baxter²⁸ all lend their support to the assertion that Balaam was a true prophet of God. Patrick also takes this same view.²⁹

²⁴A. A. MacRae, "Numbers," New Bible Commentary, ed. F. Davidson, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1953), p. 187.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶William Baur, "Balaam," The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., reprinted 1955), I, 379.

²⁷Stanley Leathes, Balaam," Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible, eds. H. B. Hackett and Ezra Abbot (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1885), II, 226.

²⁸J. Sidlow Baxter, Explore the Book (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1951), I, 200.
Mark These Men (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1949), p. 95.

²⁹Symon Patirck, A Commentary on the Historical Books of the Old Testament, A Critical Commentary and Paraphrase on the Old and New Testament (Philadelphia: Frederick Scofield and Co., 1877), I, 978.

Balaam Not a True Prophet View

The etymology of the name בְּלַעַם is construed by many as evidence of the character of the man. Gesenius³⁰ states that the name comes from the combination of the words לַעַם and בַּעַל meaning a foreigner. According to Leathes,³¹ Vitringa believed that the name was derived from לַעַם and בַּעַל. Simonis and Hengstenberg, according to Leathes³² also derived the name from לַעַם and בַּעַל with the deletion of the ayin. Thus the name would carry the idea of destroyer or devourer of the people. Furst and Dietrich states that the word is derived from

... לַעַם, with the terminal syllable בַּעַל, devourer, destroyer..., which would lead to the conclusion, that he bore the name as a dreaded wizard and conjurer; whether he received it at his birth, as a member of a family in which this occupation was hereditary, and then afterwards actually became in public opinion what the giving of the name expressed as an expectation and desire; or whether the name was given to him at a later period, according to oriental custom, when the fact indicated by the name had actually made its appearance (Hengstenberg).³³

This comment then concluded with the observation that the name would be very favorable since it would carry the idea that Balaam's curses had great efficacy.

Espin and Thrupp in support of the view that Balaam was not a true prophet of God call attention to a reference in Gen. 36:32 to Bela the son of Beor. The name of the father of Bela is the

³⁰William Gesenius, Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1954), p. 124.

³¹Leathes, loc. cit. ³²Ibid.

³³C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Vol. III Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1949), p. 165.

same as the father of Balaam. Also, except for the affirmative, the name of Balaam and the name of Bela are the same in the Hebrew consonantal text.

The coincidence seems too remarkable to be quite accidental, as Knober, Ewald, and others have hastily pronounced it. Does it point to a dynasty from Balaam's native country, on the banks of the great river, reigning in patriarchal times over tribes on the south-east of Canaan?³⁴

Balaam is plainly called a soothsayer נִיְוִן in Jos. 13:22, and he is never called a prophet נָבִי or a seer יִיְוִן. Keil and Delitzsch³⁵ call our attention to this fact, and Young³⁶ also agrees with this. The word "soothsayer" or "diviner" and the verb "to divine" in the Old Testament are used consistently in an evil sense. A look at the lexicons of Gesenius³⁷ and Brown, Driver and Briggs³⁸ will show us that soothsaying is not put in a good light in the Old Testament. The expression is used "of the diviners of the nations" such as Philistia (1 Sam. 6:2), Babylonia (Is. 44:15, Ez. 2:26), Canaan (1 Sam. 28:8) and Ammon (Ezek. 21:29). The word is also used of the false prophets of Israel (Mic. 3:6; Jer. 27:9). This practice was definitely prohibited for the Israelites (Deut. 18:10; 2 Ki. 17:17).

³⁴Espin and Thrupp, op. cit., p. 739.

³⁵Keil and Delitzsch, loc. cit.

³⁶Edward J. Young, My Servants the Prophets (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1955), p. 26.

³⁷Gesenius, op. cit., p. 736.

³⁸Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1906), p. 890.

The fact that Balaam is called a soothsayer causes Unger,³⁹ Elliott,⁴⁰ Gill,⁴¹ Jenks and Warne⁴² to put him out of the class of the true prophets.

Balaam manifested many of the marks of a true prophet, especially in the realm of receiving divine revelation, but he is still not a true prophet because of his desire to curse the people of God. This is substantially what Spurgeon,⁴³ Vos,⁴⁴ von Orelli⁴⁵ and Barth⁴⁶ say of Balaam.

³⁹Merrill F. Unger, Introductory Guide to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1951), pp. 306, 307.

⁴⁰C. J. Elliott, "Numbers," A Bible Commentary for English Readers, ed. Charles John Ellicott (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd.), I, 541.

⁴¹John Gill, An Exposition of the Old Testament, (London: William Hill Collingridge), I, 651.

⁴²William Jenks and Joseph Warne, The Comprehensive Commentary on the Whole Bible (Battleboro: Fessenden & Co., 1835), p. 515.

⁴³C. H. Spurgeon, Sermons Preached in 1883 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., n. d.), p. 377.

⁴⁴Geerhardus Vos, Biblical Theology Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1948), p. 243.

⁴⁵C. von Orelli, Old Testament Prophecy, trans. J. S. Banks (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885), XXII, 144, 145.

⁴⁶C. G. Barth, An Expository and Practical Commentary on the Books of Scripture (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1873), p. 261.

Henry,⁴⁷ Cowles⁴⁸ and Butler⁴⁹ all regard Balaam as a wicked man who although uttering prophecy was certainly not inspired. These men then proceed to cite cases where wicked men who were certainly not true prophets uttered prophecies. King Saul in the Old Testament and Caiaphas in the New are examples of this. Reference is made to the saying of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name have done many wonderful works? and then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:21-23).

Darby,⁵⁰ McIntosh,⁵¹ and Jaeger,⁵² call attention to the unfavorable way Balaam is presented in the New Testament.

Edward J. Young presents the best and most conclusive argument against the inclusion of Balaam within the circle of Israel's prophets when he writes:

The prophet whom the Lord will raise up is said to be 'from thy midst' and 'from thy brethren.' In other words he is to be an Israelite. One who does not meet these requirements cannot

⁴⁷Matthew Henry, A Commentary on the Holy Bible (New York: Funk & Wagnalls), I, 392.

⁴⁸Henry Cowles, The Pentateuch in its Progressive Revelation of God to Men (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1890), p. 566.

⁴⁹J. Glentworth Butler, The Bible-Work (New York: The Butler Bible-Work Co., 1892), II, 593.

⁵⁰J. N. Darby, Synopsis of the Books of the Bible (New York: Loizeaux Brothers), I, 273.

⁵¹C. H. McIntosh, Notes on Numbers (New York: Loizeaux Brothers), pp. 408, 409.

⁵²Harry Jaeger, Hidden Rocks (Boston: The Fellowship Press, 1949), p. 70.

be a prophet and it is this fact which excludes a man such as Balaam, who was not an Israelite and so did not occupy the prophetic office...Without enlarging farther upon the thought we may say that Balaam is represented in scripture as a heathen soothsayer, upon whom the spirit of God came to compel him to perform a specific task. For a time he possessed the prophetic gift, but not the prophetic office.⁵³

Dr. Kimball justly remarks that "the description now given of Balaam's residence, instead of being particular, agrees with any place in any country where there is a river; he is lived by Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people." But was Pethor then near the Nile in Egypt? or in Canaan near Jordan? or in Mesopotamia, near the Euphrates, and belonging to the Amorrhites?⁵⁴

Clark then proceeds to give his conclusion to the matter and he states that Pethor was near the Euphrates and in the territory of the Amorrhites. He states that the Samaritan text plus twelve of the Hebrew manuscripts read 7104 instead of 104.

Clark to substantiate his case he points to the readings of the Syriac and Arabic versions which also support the Ammon reading. Clark concludes:

Kimball properly contends for this reading and necessity for the propriety of adopting it. It should therefore stand thus: "By the river of the land of the children of Ammon;" and thus it agrees with Park, xiii, 4, 55

Kimball's Hebrew text lists the Ammon reading in a footnote stating that fourteen manuscripts have that reading, and that it is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch, Syriac and Arabic versions.

⁵³Adam Clarke, Sony Bible (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1837), p. 557.

⁵⁴Young, op. cit., pp. 26, 27.

⁵⁵Bible Handbook, ed. Rudolf Kittel (2nd ed., Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1937), p. 557.

Minor Problem: What Was The Location
of "Pethor"?

Ammon View

Adam Clarke writes:

Dr. Kinnicott justly remarks that "the description now given of Balaam's residence, instead of being particular, agrees with any place in any country where there is a river; for he lived by 'Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people.' But was Pethor then near the Nile in Egypt? or in Canaan near Jordan? or in Mesopotamia, near the Euphrates, and belonging to the Ammonites?"⁵⁴

Clarke then proceeds to give his conclusion to the matter and he believes that Pethor was near the Euphrates and in the territory of Ammon. He states that the Samaritan text plus twelve of the Hebrew manuscripts read 7104 instead of 104. Then to bolster his case he points to the readings of the Syriac and Vulgate versions which also support the Ammon reading. Clark continues:

Houbigant properly contends for this reading and necessity urges the propriety of adopting it. It should therefore stand thus: 'by the river of the land of the children of Ammon'; and thus it agrees with Deut. xxiii.4.⁵⁵

Kittel's Hebrew text lists the Ammon reading in a footnote stating that fourteen manuscripts have that reading, and that it is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch, Syriac and Vulgate versions.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Adam Clarke, Holy Bible (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1854), I, 687.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 688.

⁵⁶Rudolph, "Librum Numerorum," Biblia Hebraica, ed. Rudolf Kittel (3rd ed.; Stuttgart: Priv. Wurt. Bibelanstalt, 1937), p. 231.

John Marsh favors the Ammonite location, claiming a "contradiction" in the text because the Ammonites never claimed the territory to "the river" which in a positive way he claims to have been a reference to the Euphrates.⁵⁷ Others who support the Ammonite reading are McNeile,⁵⁸ Kitto⁵⁹ and Gray.⁶⁰

Midian View

Calvin believes that Balaam was a Midianite coming from the territory just east of Moab. His reason is simply:

I know not how it came into the mind of the Chaldee interpreter to suppose that Pethor was on the Banks of the Euphrates....Balaam was not brought from that far. His celebrity would not have spread that far.⁶¹

⁵⁷Marsh, op. cit., p. 249.

⁵⁸McNeile, op. cit., p. 125.

⁵⁹George Bush, Notes Critical and Practical on the Book of Numbers (New York: Ivison, Phinney and Co., 1863), p. 341.

⁶⁰Gray, op. cit., p. 326

⁶¹John Calvin, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, trans. Charles William Bingham (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., reprinted 1950), IV, 184.

North Arabia View

T. K. Cheyne states that Balaam's home was not Pethor, but Pathros.

This seems to be a literary corruption of Shophereth, which one may venture to identify with the southern Sarepheth (E. V. Zarepbath), where Elijah is said to have found a fellow worshipper of Yahweh. That Balaam practised the cult of Yahweh we know, and it is pardonable to be struck by the coincidence just mentioned. We know, too (at least the legend implies this), that Balak also revered Yahweh, and it is evident that no great distance can have separated the homes of Balaam and of Balak.⁶²

⁶²Cheyne, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Lower Mesopotamia View

Keil and Delitzsch⁶⁵ and Espin and Thrupp⁶⁴ both mention the view of Knobel. Knobel disagrees with the text that reads "Ammon" and favors a location in lower Mesopotamia. He indicates that Pethor is derived from 𐎢𐎣𐎥 which means to open or reveal and is used of the interpretation of dreams. An example of this use is Genesis 41:8. From the meaning of this word an assumption is drawn, that Pethor was the headquarters of a group of oriental magi. This place is probably Anah. Then reference is made to the magicians and wise men of Daniel's day (Dan. 2:2) and the wise men of the New Testament (Mt. 2:1). Keil and Delitzsch look with doubt upon Knobel's view, but Espin and Thrupp follow it so enthusiastically that they even append Knobel's description of the place. Anah was:

...situated partly on one side of the river, partly on the other, and partly on an island in the river, in a fertile and well-protected vale, which has certainly for ages been the seat of a very ancient heathen culture. No better center would be found for influencing alike the Arabian tribes on the east, and the Aramaic tribes on the west bank of the great river.⁶⁵

Bush⁶⁶ and Finegan⁶⁷ also suggest this location.

⁶⁵Keil and Delitzsch, op. cit., p. 165.

⁶⁴Espin and Thrupp, op. cit., p. 739.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Bush, loc. cit.

⁶⁷Jack Finegan, Light From the Ancient Past (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 133.

North Syria View

Albright presents this view:

At the last moment I find the obviously correct identification of 'Amau with the biblical land of 'MW in Num. 22:5, where the diviner Balaam...is said to come from 'PTR on the River in the land of the children...of 'MW'. Since the LXX, going back to a Hebrew prototype of the fourth century or even earlier, had the same consonantal text before them, it is quite unnecessary to emend 'MW to 'Ammon or (with me in 1915) 'Edom (where Pitru was situated in the ninth century B.C.). Since Balaam's contacts with Israel may safely be dated 1250 B.C., only about 200 years after Idrimi, the name of the land in question would be expected to persist. 'Amau would then be the region of the Sagur Valley between Aleppo and Carchemish.⁶⁸

Sir Leonard Wooley also agrees with this location for the Amau.⁶⁹ Bennett and Elliott-Binns,⁷⁰ and Emil G. Kraeling⁷¹ also agree in making Pethor equivalent to Pitru and placing it "...at the junction of the Sajur River, which rises in Syria and flows eastward, and the Euphrates."⁷²

⁶⁸W. F. Albright, "Some Important Recent Discoveries: Alphabetic Origins and the Idrimi Statue," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 118 (April, 1950), pp. 15, 16.

⁶⁹Leonard Wooley, A Forgotten Kingdom (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 120.

⁷⁰Bennett and Elliott-Binns, op. cit., p. 948.

⁷¹Emil G. Kraeling, Rand McNally Bible Atlas (New York: Rand McNally and Company, 1956), p. 125.

⁷²Ibid.

Minor Problem: What Was the Location of Pethor?

Ammon View

This view, you will recall, required the placing of 710y in the text for 10y, thus resulting in the reading, "Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of Ammon." This view has some support from the Hebrew manuscripts and the version, but it makes more problems than it solves. The great problem is that "the river" as a rule applies to the Euphrates or to Syria. Thus, you would have to suppose that the territory of the Ammonites stretched to these places, something it never did. Since there is no river in the land of Ammon to coincide with the account, the writer feels that the acceptance of the Ammon reading would make the Scriptures contradictory.

Midian and North Arabian views

The men who accepted these views did so without the aid of modern archeological discoveries. Calvin states Balaam had to be a Midianite, because if he had lived farther away his fame would not have spread to the Midianite and Moabite lords. Every year, archeologists find that trade and commerce, and general intercourse between the peoples of the Near East were far more widespread than was once supposed. Consequently, had Calvin lived in our day, knowing his erudite nature, he would never have made such a supposition.

Cheyne's North Arabian view is not too credible. He

apparently picked out a word that sounded something like Pethor (Shephereth) and decided that was the place referred to. Cheyne's supposition has no support contextually, archeologically, or from the variants in the text and versions.

Lower Mesopotamian View

The reasoning behind the view that Pethor refers to a location near Babylon is easily seen. There has never been a land like Babylon for having soothsayers and diviners. The sacred Scriptures, especially the book of Daniel, prove to us that the Babylonians brought such activities to a very high level of perfection. Our present day astrology, seen even in our newsstands in the form of dream books and fortune books, all owes its remote beginning to the land between the rivers. Yet this fact alone is not enough to prove that Pethor was located in lower Mesopotamia. Perhaps in Knobel's day, before the great archeological achievements of the last century, this was acceptable, but it is not today. Knobel appeals to the etymology of Pethor as meaning the place of dream interpretation. The intellectual leap from there to the geographical place name of Anah is indeed wondrous to behold. The etymologies of Hebrew words are at times quite doubtful; so to depend for an interpretation upon such an etymology is not very wise in the writer's opinion. Thus you will recall that the writer mentioned the etymology of Balaam's name as support for his view in the writer's interpretation section, but not in his own argument. This was done because it is not a dependable basis.

The idea of a colony of soothsayers in Mesopotamia is a fanciful story. It is not grounded on facts, but only legend and

the shaky business of etymology.

North Syria View

This is the view which the writer wishes to endorse. Syria has long been considered as a possibility for the location of Pethor. Merrill, writing in 1881, states:

In the first place, we have Balaam's own account of the place where he belonged. "The king of Moab hath brought me from Aram [Syria], out of the mountains of the east." Of the two other accounts, one states that he was at "Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people"; and the other that Balaam "was the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia" (Num. xxii., 5; xxiii., 7; Deut. xxiii., 4). 'Aram Naharaim', rendered Mesopotamia, was no doubt supposed, at the time the Septuagint translation was made, to refer to the country between the Tigris and Euphrates. "Syria of the two rivers" may, however, without any violence to the language, refer to the region about Damascus. Indeed, this region bore the name of Syria from the earliest times. When the fact is considered, namely, that the region about Damascus, and to the south and southwest as well, was called Syria, the statement of the Babylonian Talmud, Erubin 19a, becomes a significant commentary on the word "Naharaim," or 'rivers.' Speaking of the Garden of Eden, it is said: "If it is in the land of Israel, Bethshean is its gate; if it is in Arabia, Beth Gerem is its gate; if it is 'between the rivers', Damascus is its gate."¹

Merrill has the right idea in pointing to Syria, but admits his lack of light on the subject. "In view of these facts, may not some reasonable explanation be found which shall relieve the matter of the difficulties attending the opinion that Balaam came from the Euphrates"?²

Records have been found which mention a certain Amau or Amaw people in Northern Syria in the land which could properly be called Aram Naharaim at the proper time for the Balaam incident.

¹Selah Merrill, East of the Jordan (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1881), p. 267.

²Ibid.

These people had a city in their country called Pitru. Both of these names can be adopted without changing the Hebrew consonantal text. Pitru, as Kraeling³ pointed out, was at the confluence of the Sajur and the Euphrates rivers.

Thus the text should read, "Pitru, which is by the river in the land of the children of Amaw."

It is known that a trade route ran north and south, parallel to and east of the Jordan River. It is called "the king's highway" in Num. 21:22. This route extended into Syria and Asia Minor and also south to Egypt. It helped to make Palestine into the "cock-pit" of the Near East. Such a trade route would have made it entirely possible for the Midianitish trade caravans to have come into direct contact with Balaam in his own city of Pitru. When we know where the home of Balaam was, it is clear that he was not an Israelite.

³Kraeling, loc. cit.

Major Problem: Was Balaam a True Prophet of God

Balaam was a True Prophet View

The arguments given for this view seem quite convincing on the surface, but I am sure that a closer look at them will be sufficient to show their shallowness.

Balaam uttered prophecy, yet wicked men, as we have seen in the case of Caiaphas and Saul, have done this before; so the fact that he is called a prophet in the New Testament would not establish him as having held the prophetic office. Peter when referring to Balaam uses the phrase ἐκώλυεν

τὴν τοῦ προφήτου (2 Pet. 2:16). This would not make Balaam one of the Old Testament prophets, however. The word προφήτου carries the meaning of "one who speaks for another..." as Liddell and Scott⁴ and Thayer⁵ state. This Balaam did, and the One he spoke for was God, yet Balaam was an evil man and not a true prophet.

Balaam's speech cannot be appealed to as testimony that he is a true prophet. The acts he performed completely drowned out his words. All of the utterances of respect to Jehovah which Balaam made that are recorded in Numbers, chapters 22-24, could be explained as the remarks of a polytheist who was impressed by Jehovah and did not wish to offend Him. As to the passage in Mic. 6:5-8, this you will recall is supposed to represent a con-

⁴Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek and English Lexicon (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1889), p. 1332.

⁵Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951), p. 553.

versation between Balak and Balaam. In the writer's opinion this is not the case. A plain reading of the sixth chapter of Micah would show that the Lord is speaking to the people who are personified by the prophet. The Lord is taking them to task for their attitude toward Him. Verses four and five of this chapter remind the people of the great accomplishments of God for Israel in history. The attempted cursing of Balaam which turned into blessing for Israel is cited as a concrete example. Then, in verses six and seven the people question God. These questions are answered in verse eight by Micah the prophet, and also in the elaboration that follows throughout the remainder of the chapter.

The comparison with men like Jacob and Laban to prove the rightness of Balaam is useless. It is a sad commentary on the lives of the saints of God that down through the ages, one is often unable to discern between them and the unrighteous.

The prophets were never "hired" to prophecy. Balaam wanted to curse the people of God for hire. This is seen throughout the Numbers account. Peter refers to the fact that Balaam "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15).

No true prophet of God delivered a message from the Lord for pay. When Amos was told to go to "Judah and there eat bread and prophecy there" (Am. 7:12), he nevertheless stayed where he was and prophesied with no thought of remuneration. Mic. 3:11 finds the false prophets being condemned on a double charge. The first charge is the fact that they were divining and the second that they were doing this for silver.

It may have been the custom for people to give gifts to the

prophets of Old Testament times as ministers today receive love offerings, but there is never in the Old Testament a case where a true prophet delivered a message from God because of a bribe given to him. Balaam cannot be justified. The charge that the Apostle Peter levels against him remains true. "Balaam let himself be hired by a king, something no prophet of Israel could have ever contemplated."⁶

The true prophets were not temporarily endowed with the gift of prophecy. A man who was a prophet in the sense of holding the prophetic office was always a prophet. Not everything the prophet said was inspired, but he was always a prophet. Further discussion of the phenomena of prophetism will be found in a later section.

The multiple document theory offers the coward's way out of explaining the character of Balaam. The later Scriptures offer a clearer picture of Balaam and in the writer's opinion help greatly to explain his actions and words. Baxter gives us a good answer for those writers who divide the Numbers account to explain Balaam's activities:

This is undeniably one of the instances in which the more trained and educated intelligence of modern days has a distinct advantage over the simpler faith of the first ages. The compromise in Balaam between true religion and superstitious imposture, between an actual divine inspiration and the practice of heathen sorceries, between devotion to God and devotion to money, was an unintelligible puzzle to men of old. But to those who grasped the character of a Louis XI or an Oliver Cromwell (and shall we add, Hitler?) or have gauged the

⁶Geerhardus Vos, op. cit., p. 205.

mixture of the highest and lowest in some of the religious movements of modern history, the wonder is not that such an one should have been, but that such an one should have been so simply yet so skilfully depicted.⁷

The tale of the true prophets of God are the references to Balak than the account given in Numbers, chapters 22-24. Balak reads, "And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the water: and they were slain; namely, Bala, and Rekem, and Zur, and Dur, and Zibe, five kings of Midian: Balak also the son of Beor they slew with the sword." Notice also Joshua 10:22. "And also the son of Beor, the soothsayer, and the children of Beor, they slew with the sword among them that were slain by them." Balak was killed by the people of God.

This would not seem to be an unusual thing, for down to the centuries the people of Israel seemed to have a passion for killing prophets. As the Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Ye unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres" (Lk. 11:47, 48).

After Moses no true prophet of Israel was ever killed. Balak with the agency of Balaam and his death was one of those instances which has been aptly called a mass execution. That Balak was taking over the land, and God was using him to judge the people of the land. Thus Balak's death speaks all of his character.

7Baxter, Mark These Men, p. 103. The counsel ever given.

Argument for the View that Balaam Was Not a True Prophet

The very strongest support for the placing of Balaam outside the pale of the true prophets of God are the references to him other than the account given in Numbers, chapters 22-24.

Num. 31:8 reads, "And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain: namely, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword." Notice also Joshua 13:22,

"Balaam also the son of Beor, the soothsayer, did the children of Israel slay with the sword among them that were slain by them."

Balaam was killed by the people of God.

This would not seem to be an unusual thing, for down through the centuries the people of Israel seemed to have a special passion for killing prophets. As the Lord Jesus said to the Israelitish folk: "Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres" (Lk. 11:47, 48).

But under Moses no true prophet of Israel was ever killed. Balaam died with the enemies of God and his death was in one of those operations which has been aptly called a mass execution. That is, the Jews were taking over the land, and God was using them to execute judgment upon the people of the land. Thus Balaam's ignominious death speaks ill of his character.

Next, let us examine two passages which show that Balaam was the originator of some of the most evil counsel ever given. He

said in effect to Balak, "If you can't beat them, join them and drag them down to your abominable level." We read in Num. 31:16, "Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord." We note also Rev. 2:14, "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication."

These passages show that although Balaam had been thwarted in his plans to curse the people of God, he gave advice to Balak to tempt the Israelites with foreign women. This was so effective that God's people fell into great sin in this instance. Cowles suggests a reason for Balaam's enmity against Israel. He writes:

...it has been suggested that, failing to get the pay he expected from Balak, Balaam went to Moses and laid before him the contents of these chapters (Num. 22-24) with the hope of ample reward...but he failed here also so he went back to Moab and Midian and gave his terrible advise.⁸

Next, we notice that a number of Scripture passages present Balaam as explicitly desiring to curse the people of God:

Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.

Nevertheless the Lord thy God would not hearken unto Balaam; but the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee (Deut. 23:4, 5).

On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience

⁸Cowles, op. cit., p. 374.

of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;

Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. (Neh. 13:1, 2).

Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and warred against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you:

But I would not hearken unto Balaam; therefore he blessed you still: so I delivered you out of his hand (Josh. 24:9, 10).

No true prophet would desire to curse the people of God.

The New Testament references are especially valuable for ascertaining the character and office of Balaam. It is often said, "The New is in the Old contained, and the Old is by the New explained." Lot is an Old Testament believer who lived a wicked life. Our attitude toward Lot might be hazy if it were not for the New Testament. A casual reading of the Old Testament would seem to point to Lot as an ungodly man. This is cleared up by the statement of the Apostle Peter: "And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked" (2 Pet. 2:7).

The New Testament contains no such sweeping acquittal of Balaam. Instead, he is always represented in the worst possible contexts. The New Testament statements mentioning Balaam are 2 Pet. 2:15,16, Jude 11, and Rev. 2:14. The passage in Peter refers to the way of Balaam. The men who are travelling the way of Balaam are described in the context as the worst sort of ungodly men. They are false teachers who know the right way, but deliberately choose that which is wrong. The epistle of Jude, verse eleven reads: "Woe unto them! (the false brethren) for they have

gone in the way of Cain and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core." Thus again, Balaam is put in the class of false teachers. The Rev. 2:14 passage has been discussed above, and it has been noted that Balaam is put in an extremely bad light in this verse.

Balaam practised divination. This was prohibited for the people of God. Finegan points out: "Incidentally Balaam...seems to have been a typical Babylonian diviner, and has been shown from parallels in Mesopotamian ritual to have proceeded with what was at the time quite an approved ceremony of divination."⁹ Yet the writer in Lange's Commentary on the subject of Balaam tried rather futilely to show that דִּבְרֵי had in earlier times a better connotation. This view goes back to the belief of Melchizedek and extra-Biblical revelation of God. He argues:

In the primitive religion God is known through the signs, and these are rendered into the word by the interpreting mind, in the covenant religion the word precedes and is afterward confirmed and enforced by sacramental signs. Thus Joseph wears the aspect of a descendant of the primitive religion, and might even appear as a Kosem when he claims that he prophesied out of his cup.¹⁰

Proverbs 16:10 is used by some to show that דִּבְרֵי is connected with prophecy. We read this verse in the R.V.: "A divine sentence is in the lips of the king; His mouth shall not transgress in judgment." The word דִּבְרֵי is here rendered "divine sentence." From the parallelism we can see that the word

⁹Finegan, loc. cit.

¹⁰John Peter Lange, "Numbers," Trans. by Samuel T. Lowrie and A. Gosman, A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), III O.T., 121.

means judgment or pronouncement and this is in a favorable sense.

As far as the present writer is aware, this is the only such usage of the word in the Old Testament. However, even this one usage may be sufficient to establish the fact that sometimes the qesem was not superstition, but pronouncement. . . . Qesem is ranked among the superstitious and is condemned. That false prophets may often have engaged in the practice of qesem, is of course amply shown by the Old Testament. But the practice in itself had nothing to do with prophecy.¹¹

The final words on Balaam and his activity are found in Deut. 18:9-14. Here the practise of divination is soundly condemned and is marked as one of those activities which are abominable in the sight of God and unlawful for the children of Israel.

We imply from this that the whole pagan world of magic and divination is simply incompatible with the worship of Yahweh. He will make known his will when, where, and how he chooses. He cannot be tricked or coerced into revelation. He will make himself known, not by the hidden world of the occult, but by means which he himself chooses. His word will be heard directly, clearly, and understandable through his prophet whom he sends and to whom he has revealed his counsel.¹²

Inspiration and the prophets — The prophet spoke the Word of God to the people and was by necessity an Israelite (Deut. 18:18). A prophet was proven, not by signs and wonders, but by the efficacy of his prophecies. The prophetic office differed greatly from the priestly office. The prophets were not confined to any one family or tribe nor to any external institution. Many people still have the idea that prophecy is merely the foretelling of future events unknowable by human wisdom. Oehler well states the purpose of true prophecy:

¹¹Young, op. cit., p. 26.

¹²G. Ernest Wright, The Old Testament Against its Environment (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1950), pp. 86, 87.

In the first respect, the prophetic office while itself exercised within the unalterable ordinances of the law, was designed to prevent a mere lifeless transmission of legal injunctions, by proclaiming to the people the demands of the Divine will in a manner constantly adapted to the needs of the age, and in all the life and vigor of a message ever newly coming forth from God. In the second respect, it was to cast light on the future of the people, and to disclose to them the divine counsels, whether for their warning or comfort (comp. Amos iii.7), and thus to initiate them in the ways of divine government.¹³

The inception of the office of the prophet was with Moses, although Moses is greater than all the other prophets. Miriam is also called a prophet in Ex. 15:20. During the period of the judges we find few prophets. Deborah was one (Jud. 4:4) and during the Midianite oppression the Lord raises up another prophet (Jud. 11:7). Over the long centuries the prophets were active in Israel. The great writers of the Old Testament could almost all be named in the cataloging of the prophets.

"The prophetic order is thus an ideal unity, which is to find its focus point in the historic Christ. For the Spirit of Christ was in all the true prophets."¹⁴

The prophets helped to protect the people from the influence of the surrounding pagan peoples. Balaam certainly fell short of this.

According to 1 Samuel 9:9 the prophet was in earlier Israel commonly called a ro'eh, that is one who perceives that which does not lie in the realm of natural sight or hearing. Another early designation of similar etymology was a hozeh 'one who sees supernaturally' (2 Sam. 24:11).

¹³Gustave Friedrich Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament, Trans. George E. Day (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House), pp. 362, 363.

¹⁴Young, op. cit., p. 35.

Later the Hebrew seer was more commonly called a nabhi' (1 Sam. 9:9). This popular name is to be related to Accadian nabu, 'to call or announce', either passively, as Albright, 'one who is called' (by God), or actively with Koenig, 'an announcer' (for God), or preferably with Guillaume, who construes the term to mean that the prophet is the passive recipient of a message manifest in his condition as well as in his speech, and is 'one who is in the state of announcing a message which has been given to him (by God).'¹⁵

The religious rise of Israel was not in a vacuum. The nations round about Israel had their prophets and priests, but we must be careful to distinguish the prophets of Israel from those of the other nations. The prophets of Israel truly spoke the word of God as Deuteronomy states: "...and [I] will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." We regard with Unger that the pagan prophet or diviner was under the power of demons.¹⁶

Futhermore, the true prophet, as God's spokesman, was no soothsayer in possession of numerous ritual incantations which he could chant. He was possessed by God, and there existed between him and his Lord a fellowship of understanding and a conscious communion which lifted him above his environment. The responsible nature of his call might terrify him; yet the word of God came to him: 'Be not afraid, for I am with thee to deliver thee' (Jer. 1.8). The first requirement of the God of Israel was a holy fear or reverence; but the second was one of faith to believe in him, to accept his promises, to act obediently in love. The man who possessed such fear and faith had nothing in the world to be afraid of, except his own sin and the sin of his people. That faith was an extraordinary thing in the ancient world. It rested on a knowledge of the Divine nature and purpose which through Christ has become the basis of our own faith.¹⁷

The true prophets of God had their characters in line with God as

¹⁵Merrill F. Unger, Introductory Guide to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1951), pp. 306, 307.

¹⁶Ibid. ¹⁷Wright, op. cit., p. 93.

well as their prophetic utterances. The prophet was possessed by the Spirit of God. This was more than just a mere intellectual affirmation to the existence of God.

The prophet became another man, 1 Sam. x.6, and received another heart, verse 9. Thus prophecy was also an anticipation of the K9CYN KTL6C6 of the new covenant, - a circumstance which explains the saying of Moses, Num. xi. 29: 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!'¹⁸

Balaam would certainly not fall in the class of the true prophets, for he was possessed not by a new heart but by a desire to get the reward of Balak, which Peter so well calls "the wages of unrighteousness."

Much has been written on the method of prophetic revelation. We find that God could speak externally to the prophets as in the case of Is. 22:14 where one reads: "And it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of hosts,..." Then again, the speaking of God could be internally perceived.

The possibility of such a thing rests partly on the theological, partly on the physiological-psychological grounds. Theologically speaking, it is not impossible for God to convey to the soul directly sounds of words expressing a certain thought. God has control of the soul in its whole internal organization. And we must endeavor to realize that the conveying of sound to the soul ab extra through the ordinary process of air-vibration and nerve-conduction and brain-impression and soul-reaction is in itself a most wonderful, to us unintelligible, thing, so long as we believe in the difference between matter and soul. Hearing is a psychical, not a physical act. It has ordinarily certain physical prerequisites, but is not identical with these. What then should hinder God from producing the psychical experience of hearing in other ways than the ordinary one?¹⁹

¹⁸Oehler, op. cit., p. 363.

¹⁹Vos, op. cit., pp. 236, 237.

The speaking of God to Isaiah in chapter six of Isaiah's prophecy is an illustration of this mode of prophetic receptivity.

Then there was a third kind of revelation made to the prophets. This was the vision. This was the shutting of the prophet's senses to the outside world and the opening of his inner senses. Balaam is usually cited as the example for this kind of phenomena, although it is found in the other prophets to some degree. Vos,²⁰ Young,²¹ von Orelli²² and Barth²³ all comment in the same vein upon this activity of Balaam as a peculiar phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy. Balaam is seen first as having his physical eyes closed according to Num. 24:3 RV but in the next verse we see that he "seeth the vision of the Almighty, having his eye open." Thus he had an inner empirical experience while his physical eye was closed. Another characteristic that Balaam mentions is "falling down." This is also seen in the vision of Daniel and Ezekiel. "This was not a voluntary act of worship, but obviously an effect of the overpowering divine influence upon him."²⁴

Some may ask the question as to why so absolute a control is put upon the prophet. This probably was somewhat dependent upon the man involved. Balaam's case was certainly extraordinary. Here was a heathen soothsayer who needed to be guided very explicitly in

²⁰Ibid. p. 243.

²¹Young, op. cit., pp. 177, 178.

²²von Orelli, op. cit., pp. 144, 145.

²³Barth, op. cit., p. 261.

²⁴Vos, op. cit., p. 439.

just what to speak. This would suggest that the control would not always be the same in cases where the Lord had a more sympathetic instrument with which to deal. Nevertheless, we find suggestions in Scripture that even in the case of a great and good man like Isaiah there was a degree of bodily control. The frankness with which God spoke to Moses was not a characteristic of the way in which He dealt with all the other prophets.

Balaam would also measure up to the other prophets in receiving the Word of God spoken by the Lord externally and internally. We find God speaking externally to Balaam in Num. 22:20a. Then we have the statement in Num. 23:16: "And the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, Go again unto Balak, and say thus," which seems to suggest that Balaam had "heard" the Word of God without the use of his external senses. Under the divine impulse, Balaam prophesied of the coming Redeemer and the greatness of the future theocratic Kingdom. Yet Balaam was not a true prophet but a wicked man. Balaam, we have seen, showed all the marks of receiving prophetic knowledge. Thus we may be sure that he uttered true prophecy on the occasion mentioned in Numbers 22-24. Yet this in itself does not constitute him a true prophet of God.

The best explanation for the strange enigmatical character of Balaam is to suppose him to be a man whose character was in a state of flux. He could have gone on to a true knowledge of Jehovah, but instead he slipped back into his heathen practices. This opinion is amply supported by men such as Unger²⁵ and Kitto.²⁶

²⁵Unger, Biblical Demonology, p. 126.

²⁶John Kitto, Daily Bible Illustrations (New York: Hurst and Co.), II, 205.

Kitto quotes Hengstenberg in support of the opinion that, due to Balaam's apparent sympathy with some of his prophecies, he displays a mixture of base gain and higher moral sentiments in serving Jehovah. Balaam, in the writer's opinion, was a man who knew his own moral condition. This may have occasioned his interest in Jehovah. Balaam possessed the prophetic gift for a time but never the prophetic office, that is, that of a true prophet of Israel.

Kitto, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Hays and Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Hays and Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 37. All suggest this solution to the problem. Some suggest that Balaam was a descendant of Abraham. This view is necessary to explain Balaam's knowledge of the true God. At the time of the twilight ages of early Biblical revelation God did not reveal Himself to Balakimadai, it is a dangerous business to reveal large groups of people being recipients of divine revelation. God called out a people, Israel, to be the recipients of His revelation, and we have this recorded in the Bible, inspired Word of God. Let us seek no other.

The second and, to the writer of this paper, more plausible solution to the question, is that the work of the seer was limited to the knowledge of the future of the people of Israel. Hays suggests this view.

¹Kitto, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴Hays and Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁵Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

How Did Balaam Know about Jehovah
If he was not a True Prophet?

The view that we have adopted with respect to Balaam leaves two important questions to answer. The first question is suggested above. How shall we account for Balaam's knowledge of God? There are two chief opinions on this matter. One opinion is that Balaam's home was in a place where the primitive monotheistic revelation was still extant. Baxter,²⁷ Parker,²⁸ Whyte,²⁹ Gray and Adams,³⁰ Lange³¹ and Butler³² all suggest this solution to the problem. Some even suggest that Balaam was a descendent of Abraham. This view is not necessary to explain Balaam's knowledge of the true God. Although in the twilight times of early Biblical revelation God did choose to reveal Himself to Melchizedek, it is a dangerous business to postulate large groups of people being recipients of extra-Biblical revelation. God called out a people, Israel, to be the recipients of Divine revelation, and we have this recorded in the infallible, inspired Word of God. Let us seek no other.

The second and, to the writer of this paper, more plausible answer to the question, is that the news of the happenings in Sinai was disseminated over the entire mid-east. Unger suggests this view

²⁷Baxter, Mark These Men, p. 103

²⁸Parker, Bible Characters, p. 336.

²⁹Whyte, op. cit., p. 264.

³⁰Gray and Adams, op. cit., p. 420.

³¹Lange, op. cit., p. 121.

³²Butler, op. cit., p. 593.

as he writes: "He is plainly a heathen magician under the divine dealing, who, very probably, like Jethro (Ex. 18) and Rahab (Josh. 2), was conducted to acknowledge Jehovah by the overpowering influence of God's prowess manifested in Egypt and in the wilderness, which had made an indelible impression upon the neighboring nations (Ex. 15:14; Josh. 2:9-10; 5:1)."³³ Thus Balaam, because he was adept at soothsaying and wished to keep his position in that field, adopted a healthy respect for Jehovah. He undoubtedly looked into "...the past history and present hopes of this remarkable nation; and we find him accordingly using language which reflects that of the Jewish records."³⁴ Thus, "Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Num. 23:10) reminds us of "And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered" (Gen. 13:16), and "He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee" (Num. 24:9) harks back to "Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up (Gen. 49:9.) Probably as a polytheist he could add Jehovah to his list of gods without too much difficulty.

³³Unger, Biblical Demonology, p. 125.

³⁴Espin & Thrupp, op. cit., p. 737.

Why Did God Use Such a Man as Balaam?

Balaam said, "God is not a man that he should lie nor the son of man that he should repent" (Num. 23:19). "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his" (Num. 23:10). "...there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17).

Here is a man who had given to him divine knowledge and illumination. So much so, that although he was outside the circle of Israel's inspired prophets, he was the author of grand scriptural truth and prophetic forecast, such as hardly any prophet of the Old Testament was permitted to declare. Any anthology of the most beautiful and eloquent passages of the Bible would take in the eloquent and majestic utterances of the apostate prophet.³⁵

Why did God need such a man as Balaam to speak for Him?

Many men seem to follow the early Jewish tradition cited previously. They point out that Balaam seems to be an evidence of a wider revelation to turn people to the true God. Parker³⁶ and Whyte³⁷ both take this view.

Bennett and Elliott-Binns, representing the liberal critics, state the fact that the J and E documents recognize a non-Israelite as a prophet of Yahweh carrying us back to the time when Yahweh was the God of "a circle of connected tribes of which the Israelite tribes formed a part."³⁸

³⁵Clarence Edward McCartney, Sermons on Old Testament Heroes (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1935), p. 205.

³⁶Parker, op. cit., p. 335.

³⁷Whyte, loc. cit.

³⁸Bennet and Elliott-Binns, p. 949.

We have no intimation in Scripture that Balaam ever prophesied before or after the events recorded in Num. 22-24. A more acceptable view than either of the above is that Balaam was used by God to bless Israel at a crucial time in her history. The Children of Israel had been a captive people in Egypt. Finally the people of God had been released from this captivity, only to fail God and be punished by the wilderness wandering. Now at long last Israel was about to enter the promised land, their national home. At this critical time in the history of God's chosen ones we find a heathen king and a Gentile soothsayer being used to bless the Israelites. To be sure, Balak and Balaam wanted to curse the people of God, but the sovereign King of the universe had planned that they should bless and not curse His people.

Had Balaam been permitted to curse Israel it would probably have resulted in great discouragement for the nation. Conversely, the fact that Balaam did bless Israel before a great heathen king must have been a source of consolation and encouragement for the people of God when they heard it. The blessing by Balaam of Israel would also serve the purpose of striking terror into the hearts of the heathen inhabitants of Canaan. This would make it easier for Israel to defeat them. Barth suggests this interpretation as he writes:

...whatever in these states This refers to states of prophetic reception. he received was never his own real property, never became the object of distinct consciousness to himself, so that, like the true prophets, he could afterward have rehearsed it, or explained it in consistency with the other revelations of God. It affected only his sensuous, not his spiritual nature; and so it remained as something merely external, which was not in accordance with, but

rather opposed to, his inner man. In this mission, accordingly, as he resisted the promptings of the Divine Spirit, he served only as an outward instrument, and, so to speak, as a vessel into which God on this occasion poured the revelations of His Spirit in order that thence they might resound to the Moabites, and, indirectly, to His people. When the vessel, however, had performed its service, it was cast away as useless. A servant who knew his Lord's will, but did it not, a messenger who preached to others, but was himself a castaway...³⁹

This would help to account for the consistently bright picture which is given of the future of Israel in Balaam's utterances. Balaam "...saw before him not the empirical people whom he had to admonish and chide, but Israel - the people of God, the depository of revelation, in opposition to the heathen world."⁴⁰ God used Balaam to bless Israel for an encouragement to them as they embarked on the difficult task of invading the land. God can use wicked men to carry out His plans.

THE ENGLISH PARAPHRASE

Balaam, indeed, presents one of the saddest spectacles in all the Word of God. Balaam lost the reward of Balak and was killed by the people of God. His name has become synonymous with doctrinal deceit. Truly, he was the man who reached for two worlds and lost both.

³⁹Barth, op. cit., p. 261.

⁴⁰Von Orelli, op. cit., p. 145.

Balak, the heathen king of Moab, sent emissaries to Balaam, the son of Beor. Balaam was a noted heathen soothsayer who had added Jehovah to his pantheon of deities. Balaam was not an Israelite because his home was at Pitru which is at the junction of the Sajur and Euphrates rivers in the land of the children of Amaw (North Syria).

Balak sent this message to Balaam: "Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt. Behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me. Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me. Possibly I shall prevail that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed."

Balaam wanted to curse Israel, but Jehovah constrained him to bless rather than curse. Balaam was not a man of high moral standards as were the true prophets of Israel. Balaam loved the "hire of wrongdoing" (2 Pet. 2:15 R.V.), and thus he is pictured to us as a wicked, lost man.

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