

BALAAM AND HIS GOD YAHWEH

by

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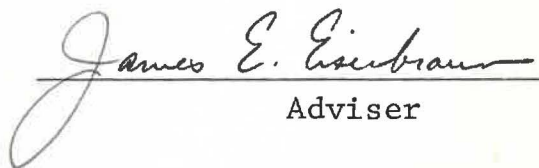
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Inarguably Balaam was a sinner. But the Scriptures also present strong statements of faith in the prophet. The exact relationship of Balaam to Yahweh, whom he calls "My God", is difficult to ascertain. The historical narrative of Numbers 22-24 presents Balaam in a safe position of obedience. The supplemental Old Testament passages explain his vile counsel to king Balak which caused Israel to sin against the Lord, and the New Testament passages that mention Balaam do so as examples of unrighteousness.

The examination of the Old Testament passages outside the Balaam story reveal a single act of sin that in no way negates the obedience of faith demonstrated earlier. New Testament citations portray this sin and the greedy disposition from which it sprang in the midst of warnings to Christians who were experiencing or in danger of experiencing similar acts of unrighteousness.

Balaam was no "saint" in the popular sense of the word. But the consensus of Scripture, without direct statement, implies that in the technical sense he may indeed claim this title.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no more enigmatic figure in Scripture than Balaam. Blessed with visions of God and used to voice some of the greatest prophecies of the Old Testament, he nevertheless is repeatedly condemned for his actions in the New Testament. Coats remarks on the plainness of the Scriptural evaluation of Balaam, "Balaam was a sinner. Biblical tradition leaves no doubt about the severity of his violations."<sup>1</sup>

Many critics have solved the tension of these two opposite characteristics of the Balaam story by fragmenting the text<sup>2</sup> into two or even three traditions. This is most clearly seen in the treatment of Walter Lock.

We have to face the fact that there are not only three different traditions, but that the compiler of JE combined the first two so closely that they are almost inextricable, and that the ultimate compiler of the Hexateuch, perhaps with a deeper insight into human nature than some of his modern interpreters, has had no scruple in combining the three treating them all as features of one and the same character.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>George W. Coats, "Balaam: Sinner or Saint?" *Biblical Research* 18 (1973), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (2nd edition, London: Soncino Press, 1968), p. 688.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Lock, "Balaam" *Journal of Theological Studies* 2 (1901), 163-64.

Such an explanation avoids interpretive difficulties and assumes the results of liberal criticism. It will not be the purpose of this paper to defend the integrity of the text or the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Rather, it is the burden of this thesis to investigate the chief interpretive problem of the Balaam account, which is theological in nature. That problem is Balaam's personal relationship to Yahweh. There are commentators who view Balaam as a prophet of Satan, a heathen of the worst sort with no redeeming qualities.<sup>1</sup> Such is essentially the conclusion of Clouse.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand there are those who see deep piety and solid character in Balaam. Coats speaks of the man's virtue.

It [the narrative] presents Balaam, not as a sinner whose plan for cursing Israel Yahweh failed by direct intervention, but to the contrary as a saint who intended from the beginning to do nothing other than obey Yahweh's word. . . .

The story as it now stands in Num 22-24 does not emphasize God's mighty acts. It emphasizes the virtue of a man, his contribution to Israel's well being, indeed the well being of all nations.<sup>3</sup>

The depth of the problem is equal to the depth of depravity of the human mind and as complex as man's personality. For if we as believers, blessed with the completed revelation of Christ and indwelt by the Divine Comforter freely admit to the effects of sin in our own life, how much

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<sup>1</sup>Sammuel Cox, *Balaam: An Exposition and a Study* (London: Psul Trench & Co., 1884), pp. 18-20.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Clouse, "Was Balaam a True Prophet?" (B.D. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1957), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup>Coats, "Balaam", pp. 22, 29.

more did the power of Satan have opportunity in the life of those who had no written revelation of God, to whom the Spirit of Holiness was not promised. To this we add the heathen environment which we in modern western cultures have no conception of. As Unger points out, "He knew the Lord, Jehovah of the Israelites, but his knowledge was dimmed and distorted by heathenistic corruptions."<sup>1</sup>

Even in the time of Monarchy when the prophetic office in Israel was firmly established there were temptations upon the people.

The situation was simply one form or another of what is technically called syncretism. This was the effort to include the worship of other gods, the Baals and the rest, with the worship of Yahweh. . . . The prophetic reaction to this was always the same: total rejection. The true prophet was Yahweh's man, and his alone.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand we see the orthodoxy of Balaam expressed continuously (Num 22-24) and yet he sided with the heathen Balak against Israel, whom God had blessed, and by his counsel caused the Israelites to worship false gods. Surely if Balaam was aware of the judgment that would befall him for going beyond the word of the Lord he would also be aware of the judgment of God for his part in Israel's sin. It may well be that the prophet was unaware of God's omniscience, or perhaps as Wenham has said, Balaam along with

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<sup>1</sup>Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis J. McCarthy, *Kings and Prophets* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co.), p. 76.

Balak was stupid and stubborn.<sup>1</sup>

The above mentioned essay of Coats notwithstanding, there has been little research in the past on the specific problem of Balaam's relationship to Yahweh. There are two questions that this paper will not examine. (1) Was Balaam a "true or false" prophet? This question has been researched by Clouse<sup>2</sup> earlier. The present writer feels that this is not a proper question. Balaam certainly prophesied, and so prophesied truth. But he was totally outside the realm of the early prophetic office of Israel and is not to be judged as a Hebrew prophet. (2) The question (frequently asked), "Was Balaam a regenerate man?" awaits us all in eternity. The Scriptures are silent on this point.

The author will demonstrate that Balaam indeed did have a personal relationship with God and was such that Balaam worshipped Yahweh to the same degree of exclusiveness that Israel did. The conclusion will be that there is no indication in Scripture that Balaam was not a saved individual and by his own mouth indication that he may indeed be.

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers, An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 164.

<sup>2</sup>Clouse, "Balaam."

## CHAPTER II

### THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: NUMBERS 22-25

#### The Call of Balaam

##### The Military Situation

Israel had just won victories against Sihon and Og, the respective kings of Heshbon and Bashan (Num 21:21-35) and were now camped on the Arabboth, or lowlands, of Moab opposite Jericho. Balak, King of Moab, had observed these events and was naturally afraid of a similar fate. It is not known if Balak was aware of the envoy of peace that had been sent to Sihon (Num 21:21-22) and doubtful if he had any inkling of God's provision for Moab (Deut 2:9).<sup>1</sup>

Balak's fears for his kingdom were made great enough by the close proximity of such a prominent force as Israel. Numbers 22:2,3 say of Balak בָּלָק וְיִנְנִי and בָּלָק וְיִנְנִי. Greed too was reason enough to take the offensive against Israel, for the lands that the Hebrews had taken from the Amorites were until recently occupied by Moab and were certainly desirable grazing lands in the cooler months.<sup>2</sup> Edersheim suggests also

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<sup>1</sup>This passage must be dated later than the events of Numbers 22-25 as to its recording, but is in references to a revelation given to Israel earlier, probably after passing through Seir.

<sup>2</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History*, Seven volumes in one (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), III:12.

that Balak had fear for his national deities and religion should further progress by the God of the Hebrews be made.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient people put great trust in the ability of certain men of power to demand the gods they worshipped to bless or curse their enemies.<sup>2</sup> The common practice of calling such a magician was then resorted to by Balak and his allies whom he had called the Midianites.

### Balaam's Reputation

Why did Balak send for Balaam? Were there not wizards in his own court to call upon?<sup>3</sup> Balaam's homeland of Pethor has been identified by Albright as ancient Pitue in Amav.<sup>4</sup> This location on the banks of the Euphrates is approximately 400-450 miles Northeast of the Moab plains.<sup>5</sup> Seraphim has established that the two round trips by Balak's messengers, traveling by the tough eastern ass would require roughly 28-32 days if speed was important.<sup>6</sup> It must be

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<sup>1</sup>Edersheim, *Old Testament History*, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Julius H. Greenstone, *Numbers with Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1939), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>"The king is surrounded by men who are blessed with special blessing, i.e. to assist with counsel." Johs. Pedersen, *Israel*, Vol. 1-2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 183.

<sup>4</sup>William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (London: The Athlone Press, 1968), p. 15n.

<sup>5</sup>Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*, (revised edition, New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1968), map 127.

<sup>6</sup>Seraphim, Bishop of Ostrojsk, *The Soothsayer Balaam* (London: Rivingtons, 1900), p. 32-35.



remembered that battle had not been joined. Israel had no intention of attacking Moab, and Balak was in no hurry to fight without every advantage he could muster.

The reputation of Balaam had to be sufficient to cause Balak to go to the inconvenience of summoning not once, but twice the far-distant prophet. Balak had confidence in Balaam as expressed in Numbers 22:6. פִּי יְדַעְתִּי אֵת  
אֲשֶׁר-תִּבְרַךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תָּאָר יוֹאָר

Further proof of Balak's conviction for his need of Balaam is evident by the sending of a second deputation party (Num 22:15).

Various opinions have been posited to explain the reputation which Balaam enjoyed and the urgency with which Balak desired his help. It has been suggested that Balaam's conversion to Yahweh was well known and that Balak chose him for the job based on this intelligence.<sup>1</sup> Having Israel cursed by their own God whom they worshipped would insure His lack of support. It was the common belief in the ancient near east that men of Balaam's ability could invoke a curse irresistible in nature and largely independent of deity.<sup>2</sup> In effect, this would place the prophet above the god in authority. It must be noted that Balak does not ask Balaam to curse Israel by Yahweh's power, implying that he cared not

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<sup>1</sup>J. H. Kurtz, *History of the Old Covenant*, trans. James Martin, 2nd edition, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), III:339.

<sup>2</sup>Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, (The Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), I:173.

for the means, only the result. However, such is an argument from silence. Others have attributed Balaam's reputation to his achievement in his craft, which they see to be a family business.

In its true meaning, the name is related to that of his father, Beor. בֵּעוֹר from בָּעַר, to burn, eat off, destroy: so called on account of the destructive power attributed to his curses (*Hengstenberg*). It is very probable, therefore, that Balaam belonged to a family in which the mantic character, or magical art was hereditary.<sup>1</sup>

The only facts revealed by the Numbers account are that Balak made Balaam an offer, based upon sufficient credentials for such an offer, and Balaam ultimately accepted, showing confidence in his ability to be equal to the task.

Amazing light is shed upon this question of Balaam's reputation as a prophet from recent archeological studies. In 1967 at Tell Deir 'Alla in Jordan an excavation under the direction of H. J. Franken uncovered fragments of plaster with Aramaic writing. The fragments were dated in the 7th century, approximately 800 years after Balaam. These were deciphered by J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij and subsequently published in 1976.<sup>2</sup> Translated, the text of the fragments composing "combination I" reads:

- (1) (These are the visions of Balaam the son of Beor) the man who was seer of the gods. As to him (?) the gods came to him in the night (.....)--

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, vol. 3 trans. James Martin in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 159.

<sup>2</sup>J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij. *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 179-80.

- (2) (..... and Shgr spoke to Balaa)m the son of Beor  
thus: a blazing fire (?) *never dying out* I want to  
kindle, a fire which will not (?) (.....)--
- (3) (.....) ----- (.....)-----  
(.....) ----- (.....  
.....) ---- and in these
- (4) mountainous regions (?) and they will (?) say to (...  
.....) -----  
(.....)
- (5) And Balaam stood up the next morning (.....  
..... *why does*  
*the see)r*
- (6) weep and his paternal uncle Eliqa came (.....  
..... *wh)y*  
do you weep and he
- (7) spoke to them: sit down I will tell you what Sh(r?  
.....) and come see the works of  
the gods. The *Shadday* goddesses gathered
- (8) The shadday gods gathered in an assembly and spoke  
to Sh(gr? ..... let not) the abundant  
rain (?) (*br*)eak the bolts of heaven. In your cloud  
there is darkness and *complete* absence
- (9) of light. Please do not spread the dread of you,  
the fear (.....)  
--darkness. Will never say: The *swift* has reviled
- (10) the eagle. The voice of the vultures will resound  
--- (.....) --- distress and trouble.  
The young ones of the cormorant (?), the swallow (?),  
the birds of prey from
- (11) the marsh and the sparrow (.....) ---  
----- (.....) the Rod (i.e. punish-  
ment). In the place fit for breeding ewes the Staff  
(i.e. punishment) will bring hares. Eat
- (12) (*fe*)ar you seekers (*for* .....  
.....) drink wrath. Oh aggrievors  
(?) listen to the exhortation, Oh adversaries of  
Sh(gr) (?)
- (13) (.....  
.....) he will not pay heed to the wise ones.  
She who transmits divine messages, she who makes (holy)  
perfume with myrh and the female priest
- (14) (.....  
.....) for (?) the chieftain a loincloth (?).  
Oh adversaries consider, consider; consider, con(sider
- (15) (oh .....  
.....) the deaf ones hear from afar
- (16) (.....  
.....) and all suffered oppression. Shgr  
and Ashtar-
- (17) (.....  
..... *as*) a panther (*makes*) a little pig (*flee*), so  
she (?) made flee the sons of (?)
- (18) (.....  
.....)----- and an eye (?)

(19) (.....).....1.....  
 .....)------1

On this Kitchen has remarked:

It is evident that Balaam had remained a prominent figure in local religious tradition and, as Hoftijzer remarks, it is quite possible that former oracles of his (or deemed to be his) were kept at the Deir Alla shrine and recopied as religious literature— as happened to the Old Testament Prophets of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

If such is the case it can easily be seen that the extent of Balaam's influence was quite great. Since the book of Numbers indicates that Balaam did not live long after the incident with Israel, then if the above account is based upon historical fact, it had to antedate the Biblical narrative giving us strong evidence that Balaam had a far-reaching reputation as a prophet prior to his call by Balak.

#### Balaam's Name

Balaam's name has been the subject of much speculative etymologizing by commentators. As Martin<sup>3</sup> has pointed

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<sup>1</sup>Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*. The editors note on p. 179:

Because of the state the text is in and of the many reading and interpretational difficulties the proposed translation can on many points be only tentative or at least more or less uncertain. Those translations (and those restorations) that are completely uncertain are printed in *italics*.

After those translations which are not completely uncertain but where still a considerable amount of uncertainty remains I have put a question mark. The presence of parts of the text which in my opinion are untranslatable I have indicated by dashes.

<sup>2</sup>K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>David Adams Martin, "The Balaam Oracles, An Exegesis and Exposition of Numbers 22-24" (Th. M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1950), p. 15.

out, the meaning of  $\text{בַּלְעַם}$  has not been ascertained. Various etymologies have been proposed. Gesenius has proposed  $\text{בַּלְעַם}$  to be derived from  $\text{לַעַם}$  and  $\text{בַּל}$ , "not a people," and Hengstenberg makes a good case for the derivation being from  $\text{עַלְעַם}$  and  $\text{בַּל}$ .<sup>1</sup> Here the second  $\text{ע}$  is dropped. The meaning therefore would be "destroyer of the people." If such is the case and the name was characteristic of the man then Balak was well advised in his choice of Balaam. Koehler has suggested that the final  $\text{בַּ}$  is merely a terminal syllable which would reduce the meaning to simply "destroyer or devourer."<sup>2</sup> This latter derivation, also preferred by Keil and Delitzsch, is the most probable.<sup>3</sup>

Albright has compared  $\text{בַּלְעַם}$  with the thirteenth century B.C. Amorite proper name *Yabil-ammu*,<sup>4</sup> "the (divine) uncle brings forth." Based upon Albright's work Allen has conjectured that  $\text{בַּלְעַם}$  may have denoted honor in Balaam's homeland but was deliberately transformed by the writer of our text to indicate a perjurious view of the diviner.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, *A Dissertation on the History and Prophecies of Balaam*, trans. by J. E. Ryland, bound (and so catalogued) with *Dissertations on the Genuineness of Daniel and the Integrity of Zechariah*, trans. by B. P. Pratten (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1848), pp. 352-53.

<sup>2</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>William F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63 (1944):232.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald B. Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles." (Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973), p. 144.

### Balaam and Yahweh

From whence came Balaam's knowledge of Yahweh? In the first sentence from his mouth Balaam speaks of Yahweh as the one whom he must consult and throughout the entire narrative he mentions no other god. Two basic suppositions have been advanced to explain Balaam's knowledge of Yahweh. The first is that this knowledge was not entirely foreign to Balaam's homeland.

Aram or Harran, the place of residence of Balaam, was particularly well situated for the preservation of the religion of monotheism; it was the home of Laban, a worshipper of the true God; and the prolonged stay there of the patriarch Jacob, a faithful follower of the God of his fathers, was probably not without influence in enlightening the inhabitants of Harran as to the knowledge of the personality of the almighty God of Abraham. Jacob doubtlessly related more than once to his relations, neighbors, and household the wonderful revelations of God and the acts of protection shown by the Lord to Abraham and Isaac. These events were too wonderful, too much out of the ordinary, to be passed over in silence and forgotten, and must have been handed down from one generation to the second, to the third, and so on, so that these revelations were probably known to many of the Harranites, and their tradition preserved for whole centuries, even up to Balaam's time.<sup>1</sup>

The preservation of such traditions as quoted above is without a doubt within the realm of probability, for the plaster texts from Deir 'Alla concerning Balaam date from approximately 700 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

The other source of Balaam's knowledge of Yahweh has been suggested mainly by those who take a mostly negative view of the prophet. Balaam, as a wizard for hire, was well

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<sup>1</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>2</sup>Kitchen, *Bible World*, p. 88.

aware of the events that had transpired among the Hebrews by the power of their God. He therefore, in order to maintain the latest "stock" of his trade added Yahweh to the Pantheon which he worshipped and worked through. Hence they see in Balaam a polytheist or at best a henotheist.

Thus Balaam, because he was adept at soothsaying and wished to keep his position in that field, adopted a healthy respect for Jehovah. . . . Probably as a polytheist he could add Jehovah to his lists of gods without too much difficulty. Viewed as a mantic prophet of *bārû* type, the problem of the origin of Balaam's knowledge of Yahweh diminishes. As a professional trafficker with the gods, a craftsman in the supernatural, Balaam must have kept abreast of new developments in theology. So from his point of view, news of the wonders of Yahweh for his people was important professional information.<sup>1</sup>

Balaam must have known something concerning the nature of Israel's God and he began his attempt to relate this new addition to his pantheon. How very little he really knew of Yahweh was to be demonstrated when he began to curse the people of that God.<sup>2</sup>

Of these two suggested sources of Balaam's knowledge of Yahweh, the former is to be preferred. The existence of the worship of the true God in monotheistic form, in the geographic area of Balaam's home, has been clearly stated by no less authority than the Scriptures. That Balaam says in 22:18, בָּלַק אִם-יִסֹּן-לִי בָלַק מְלֹא בֵּיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אֶנְכִּל לְעֹבֵר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה בָּלַק אִם-יִסֹּן-לִי בָלַק מְלֹא בֵּיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אֶנְכִּל לְעֹבֵר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה is the apparent statement of a monotheist, not a mercenary polytheist as described in the latter of these two views. It should be remembered that Balaam never seeks to curse Israel by another god, which surely he would be able to do (i.e., *appear* to do) and thereby earn Balak's

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, "Theology of Balaam", p. 196.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 197.



reward. The second view ignores this and is much more imaginative.

## The Confrontations

### The First Deputation

Having first decided to hire Balaam to curse Israel Balak sends an embassy to Pethor with a message to this effect. With the message the elders of Moab and Midian also carried וְיִקְסְמוּ בְּיָדָם. Much has been made concerning this "price of divination in their hand,"<sup>1</sup> implying that Balaam was greedy because of their offer. But as Greenstone points out:

The custom of bringing a fee to a prophet or a soothsayer is often referred to in the Bible (I Sam 9:8; I Kings 14:3; II Kings 8:8), hence it does not imply a reproach on Balaam's character, although the later prophets denounced

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<sup>1</sup>Such is the generally accepted meaning of the word. Robert Alden in his article on דָּבָר in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), vol. II; p. 805, says; "Another interesting use of *qesem* is at Num 22:7 where the word seems to indicate a 'reward' or 'fee' for 'divination' . . ." Keil and Delitzsch agree with this meaning and compares וְשֹׁמְרֵי הַלֵּל "wages of glad tidings" in 2 Sam 4:10 to וְשֹׁמְרֵי הַלֵּל "soothsayer's wages" (p. 166). However, there has also been offered the meaning "instruments of divination" in *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs; eds. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 89. Vermes calls this "The simplest explanation" in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* by Geza Vermes, 2nd edition, revised (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 130. But such simplicity seems to be based upon preconceptions of Balaam's methods. Compare the above article in *TWOT* as to what these "instruments" would be. Of course no instruments are mentioned in the text, but pay for services is a recurring theme.

The suggestion of W. Gunther Plaut, *Numbers*, vol. 4 in *The Torah a Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979), p. 222, "versed in divination" is without support and based upon a notion foreign to the text that the elders of Moab and Midian were "colleagues."



this practice (Micah 3:5, 11; Ezek 13:19).<sup>1</sup>

In the recurring offer of Balak to reward Balaam for a curse there are two details which should be noted.

(1) Balaam never asks for nor receives from Balak any reward (at least not recorded). (2) Balak never tries to coerce Balaam by any other means than financial gain. Important as this curse is to the king he uses no threat of retribution nor does he appear to have any favor owed him by the prophet. By all appearances the intercourse between Balaam and Balak is purely of a business nature.

#### The First Response

At first examination the initial response of Balaam to Balak's call appears very strange. This reply of Balaam is paraphrased in the minds of many as "Let me go and ask the God of Israel if I can curse His chosen people for the advantage of a heathen nation." This may be the reality of the situation but it is perhaps to assume, as Keil and Delitzsch<sup>1</sup> have, that Balaam was aware of the implications of the events that surrounded him.

. . . such a point of view is founded on a supposition which remains unproved concerning the means and conditions of Balaam's acquaintance with the history of the Israelites. Meantime, it is beyond doubt that Balaam could hardly have rightly understood the meaning of Jehovah's relations to the chosen people. Israel, from Balaam's point of view, may have appeared quite different than to us; for if the sons of Jacob represent for us the sole chosen people of that time, it does not therefore follow that they appeared

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<sup>1</sup>Greenstone, *Numbers*; p. 242.

<sup>2</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, p. 166.

so to Balaam.<sup>1</sup>

It must be admitted that if he succeeded in cursing Israel Balaam would have much to gain even beyond financial reward. But for him to entertain the thought that he could go against the will of the God whom he worshipped in doing so seems too difficult for this writer. Ignorance on Balaam's part is far more likely.

Balaam's action of seeking God at night is not unique in Scripture (1 Sam 15:11-19) and the reply of Yahweh is the expected one. The wording of Yahweh's message is most significant: (22:12) *לֹא תֵלֶךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָדָר אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בָרֻךְ הוּא*

There are two negative commands given, "do not go" and "do not curse." Added to the second of these prohibitions is the causal conjunction *כִּי* with the explanation that the people are already blessed. On this basis Balaam would know that it would be henceforth impossible to curse the people by the power of Yahweh. Nowhere does he claim to be able to do so, begging the perplexing question of why he later went to Balak if he was prohibited and therefore unable to perform the task required for reward.

In transmitting Yahweh's answer to the king's embassy Balaam did not convey the entire context<sup>2</sup> of this

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<sup>1</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, p. 120n.

<sup>2</sup>This is assuming the completeness of Balaam's answer in the text. It cannot be supposed that the entire dialogue of Balaam and the several elders sent by Balak was restricted to the few words recorded in Scripture, but only that the Scripture accurately records the important mission the Midian and Moabite elders would be very persistent, to which Balaam may then have become more emphatic and detailed.

answer but merely said "Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you." (22:13). Of this statement Martin expresses a common interpretation:

This is only a half-truth for God had not only forbidden him to go but also to curse the people. He thus makes it appear that he would really like to go with them if he could. If he were a real prophet of God, he would have warned the messengers to desist from their plans to curse God's people, since he knew clearly the will of God in this matter. Balaam did not want to destroy all of their hope and left the way open for further intreaties and larger gifts.<sup>1</sup>

It can certainly be granted that if Balaam was a mature prophet of Yahweh with not only firm convictions but the commission of Yahweh he would have not only informed Balak of Israel's predestination to victory but also Israel's command to avoid instigating a confrontation with Moab. It may well appear that his own will was to go with the messengers, but the desire for larger gifts and honor does not stand out in the narrative in any place. The result of his answer to the elders and their delivery of the message to Balak was that the king was not persuaded that Balaam could yet come and fulfill his request.

### The Second Deputation

It has been suggested by Pedersen<sup>2</sup> that Balak thought that Balaam refused for lack of honor in his first

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<sup>1</sup>Martin, "Balaam", p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Johs Pederson, *Israel* (London: Oxford Unviersity Press, 1926), I:236.

offer.<sup>1</sup> The second offer certainly was great enough for any man of high position (22:17). פִּי-כַבֵּד אֶכְבֶּדְךָ מָאד וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמַר אֵלַי אֶעֱשֶׂה

As open-ended as this offer is, it constitutes a substantial enticement to Balaam; yet, Balaam's answer is equal<sup>2</sup> to the offer (22:18). אֲמַיִתְּוֹ-לִי בָּלַק מְלֹא בִירוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קִטְצָה אוֹ גְדוּלָּה

At this point it would be useless for Balaam to hold out for a greater reward. If his intentions were to ignore Yahweh entirely, or simply to try to fool Balak he would leave without hesitation; instead, he again consults Yahweh (22:19).

### The Second Response

The question of why Balaam, knowing already that God had denied him permission to go,<sup>3</sup> would seek a second audience with Yahweh on behalf of Balak is indeed a valid question. Cox appears to have a sound understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup>Martin, "Balaam", p. 40. ". . . to enter the presence of any distinguished person without a *nuzzur* or present, is simply to insult him." It may have been the assumption of Balak that he underestimated Balaam's position.

<sup>2</sup>Martin, "Balaam Oracles", p. 25, attempts to discredit this noblest of statements by Balaam. "Even the statement itself is only a half-truth for though Balaam knew that he could do nothing unless God let him, he was hoping that some way might be worked out so that he could bend the will of God to his own and thus secure the presents from Balak"

<sup>3</sup>On the strength of the prohibition expressed by the imperfect + אֵל see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, edited by E. Kautzsch, 2nd English edition, revised by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), sections 107o, 152.

implications of this question.

Even if we grant that he wanted to change the will of God and bend it to his purpose, must we necessarily condemn him for that? Did not Paul "thrice beseech the Lord to take the thorn from his flesh?" Did not Abraham six times plead with God for the Cities of the Plain, and even venture to beat down the terms of the Almighty from the fifty righteous persons whose presence within those cities was to save them from their doom to forty and five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten? . . .<sup>1</sup> we run the risk of doing him a grave injustice if we assume that this only motive was a mercenary or selfish one.<sup>2</sup>

Martin is without doubt that "Balaam should have rebuked the emissaries in a sharp and pointed way as Peter rebuked Simon Magas"<sup>3</sup> but to expect a relatively ignorant (of God) prophet as Balaam to behave as the seasoned (and often rebuked) apostle of Christ did is ludicrous. In lieu of such expectation Hengstenberg recognizes that Balaam was "little advanced in the life of God"<sup>4</sup> and seduced by covetousness.

It is here that the *crux interpretum* of the entire narrative lies. Yahweh indeed gives permission for Balaam to go to Balak, save that he speaks only as Yahweh speaks to him (22:20). אִם-לִקְרָא לֶךְ בָּאֵר הַאֲנֹשִׁים קוּם לֶךְ אִתָּם וְאָמַר אֲחִי-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אֶתְּבַר אֵלַיךְ אֲחִי תַעֲשֶׂה

Those who hold to the unity of the text see no contradiction in the two seeming contradictory answers of God.

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<sup>1</sup>What would we say of *Christ*, who prayed that "if Thou art willing, remove this cup from me"? Christ knew, with the greatest of assurance, the will of the Father and its immutability.

<sup>2</sup>Cox, *Balaam*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>3</sup>Martin, "Balaam," p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Hengstenberg, *Balaam*, p. 344.

The conditional clause introduced by  $\text{ὅτι}$ <sup>1</sup> places the decision for permission not on Balaam, but upon the men making the call. Yet some make the persistence of Balaam (by reason of his second petition) the pivotal issue. Martin has done so and explained the tension between the denial and the grant of permission in terms of two different "God's wills."

This is an illustration of the permissive will of God. . . . Verse twelve shows the directive will of God. . . . If when God's directive will is made clear, one continues to try and make him change his mind rather than willingly acquiescing to the will of God, the Lord may permit a course of action which is not best for the person involved.<sup>2</sup>

Keil and Delitzsch see the change to be for pedagogic reasons.<sup>3</sup> Greenstone believes that it was the purpose of God that Balaam go in order that he may be used to bless Israel.<sup>4</sup> This latter reason is insufficient since Israel was already blessed. The present writer believes that none of these reasons are evident from the text of Scripture. The conditional clause of v 20 places the responsibility of God's apparent mellowing toward Balak upon the persistence of the king. It should be remembered that Balak had now waited for at least three weeks and probably a considerable time longer for a response, and as yet had no need for military help.

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<sup>1</sup>The LXX translates εἰ καλέσαι σε παρέσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι οὗτοι as a condition first class: the force of  $\text{ὅτι}$  is best taken here as a hypothetical particle rather than interrogative.

<sup>2</sup>Martin, "Balaam," pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup>Greenstone, *Numbers*, p. 245.

### The Journey

The story of Balaam is most remembered for the rather comical episode of the talking ass. Of course some expositors do not believe that the ass actually spoke.<sup>1</sup> Those interested in the debate should consult Kurtz, *History of the Old Covenant*. The text says the ass spoke; the importance lies in what and why she spoke. The almost universally accepted reason for this event may be traced to the Midrash. "The Midrash sees in the miracle a lesson to teach Balaam that the power of speech is under God's control."<sup>2</sup>

Having beat his animal three times, Balaam, apparently due to his state of anger, is not surprised at the animal's rebuke. It is the presence of the angel of the Lord (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה) which causes him fear. Balaam falls down before the angry figure in humble submission. It is the words which the Lord here speaks, compared with those of v 12, that commentators of the liberal persuasion reconcile by fragmentation of the narrative into 2 separate accounts which were later combined.<sup>3</sup> הִנֵּה אֲנִכִּי יִצְאָתִי לְשֹׁטֵן כִּי-יָרַם הַדֶּרֶךְ לְנִגְדִּי

The text rendered above in Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous as to what is referred to by הַדֶּרֶךְ. Most interpreters translate the passage "Behold! I come as an

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice A. Canney, "Numbers xxii. 21-31." *The Expository Times*, 27(1916):12, p. 568.

<sup>2</sup>Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup>M. G. Segal, *The Pentateuch: Its Composition and Authorship and Other Biblical Studies* (Jerusalem: At the Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1967), p. 69.

adversary because *your way* (i.e. manner, habit)<sup>1</sup> is contrary to me." Yet the noun is without a suffix and the genitive must be supplied by context. The LXX has done this by translating "καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἐξῆλθον εἰς διαβολὴν σου, ὅτι οὐκ ἄσπελα ἡ ὁδὸς σου ἐναντίου μου," thus removing the ambiguity of the Hebrew. The other translations, possible on both lexical grounds and to a lesser degree context, would read "Behold! I come as an adversary because *the way* is contrary to me," "*the way*" being literally the road leading to Moab which Balaam is traveling upon, or "the journey" which Balaam is taking.

The first of these two is extremely doubtful; a road cannot be "contrary" to Yahweh! The second, "the journey," presents a real contradiction to v 12 and indeed to itself, since the Angel of Yahweh allows the continuation of Balaam's journey. The problem that the Angel of Yahweh must deal with is the manner in which Balaam went. The two possible areas of sin in which Balaam might fall into on this assignment are wrong actions, i.e., cursing an innocent and blessed people, or wrong motives, i.e., for personal gain in wealth or fame. Concerning the former, God had already given Balaam instruction. The second had not been discussed and in light of Balak's offer was indeed a strong temptation. It is possible that Balaam may have desired to undertake the journey hoping for a suitable fee regardless of the outcome of his pronouncements.

There is no inconsistency with God in allowing

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Lexicon*, pp. 202-4.



Balaam to take the journey to meet with Balak and His confrontation in wrath along the way.

. . . the 20th verse only contains a permission which does not exclude the just and chastising relation of God to unrighteous intentions. All the history of salvation or the education of mankind in God consists on the one hand in the permission given to man to use his liberty as he likes, and on the other in the simultaneously chastising and instructing relation of God to reasonable being.<sup>1</sup>

As pointed out from the Midrash (*supra*) a comparison frequently has been made between the speaking of the ass and the oracles given by Balaam. The general pattern is as follows: the ass has no natural ability to speak, but the supernatural intervention of God caused her to do so. Likewise Balaam, who had no natural inclination to bless Israel did so because God by supernatural force took control of Balaam's mouth. This interpretation is based upon a predisposition to find fault in Balaam, for the Scriptures do not say that God forced Balaam to bless Israel, but rather He *told* Balaam to bless Israel. If Yahweh had plans to use Balaam against his will, why did He confront the traveler upon the road and once again warn him to do something (speak the word told him, v 35) that Balaam would have neither choice nor control over?

Although this common interpretation seems to spring forth naturally from the text at this point, the balance of the narrative portrays Balaam as a prophet speaking as one who is truly consulting God on his own initiative, not under force. This is especially clear from 24:1-2. Balaam does not go to "seek omens" having set his face toward the

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<sup>1</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, p. 135.

wilderness "the Spirit of God came upon him." This difference that can be seen between the first two discourses and the third show that Yahweh did not forcefully cause Balaam to speak contrary to the prophet's own will.

This writer sees another possible parallel in the persistent calling of Balaam by Balak even though it was not in his best interest and the persistence of Balaam to have his ass advance on the road which held danger for her rider. In the case of Balaam his submission, אָשַׁרְתִּי, saved him from death. In the case of Moab, failure to discern by the oracles delivered by Balaam to Balak that Israel was blessed to the point of invincibility caused the destruction of that nation.

There are at least three possible turning points in the life of Balaam recorded in the narrative, of which this is the first. (The others are his initial remarks to Balak, the change in approach to God before the third oracle, and the time of reception of the third oracle from Yahweh.) Hirsch chooses this first event as most significant.

v. 34 וְעַתָּה אֵם לֵעַ לְגִרִי it was unwittingly that I sinned, now at last he comes to submissive, unassuming way of thinking which was befitting for him to have towards God from the beginning, and which was necessary for the mission he was not to accomplish.<sup>1</sup>

The writer agrees to the importance of Balaam's admission here but is not willing to see complete realization of God's purpose in the mind of Balaam at this point.

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<sup>1</sup>Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. by Isaal Levy, 2nd edition, revised (Gateshead, England: Judaica Press, 1964), pp. 403-4.

## Arrival in Moab

Upon his arrival in Moab Balak is most perplexed at Balaam's delay but is so eager to have the prophet's counsel that he meets him at the border town of Armon. It is evident that Balaam was not considered to be a mere hireling of low esteem, for the king himself left his business to go out and meet and, furthermore, host a sacrificial feast for his guest. This was the custom of the day (I Sam 9:12; 16:2). It is in Balaam's reply to this fanfare that the second significant statement is made indicating a sincere heart toward God (Num 22:38). וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל-בָּלָק הִנֵּה-בָאתִי נִלְיָה עִמָּךְ הִיכּוֹל אוֹכֵל דָּבַר מְאוֹמָה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר יְשִׁים אֱלֹהִים בְּפִי אֲחִי אֲדַבֵּר

Balaam's statement contains both a negative and positive aspect. The negative הִנֵּה בָאתִי נִלְיָה מְאוֹמָה "Am I able to speak anything?" infers, contrary to what Balak may have thought, that as a prophet of Yahweh it was not he that made use of God, but that God used him. מְאוֹמָה carries with it a negative connotation,

Used thirty-two times, usually in negative sentences. Ecclesiastes 7:14 has God setting prosperity along side adversity so that men can find nothing apart from himself (cf. 3:11), Balaam protests in Num 22:38 that he has no power to do anything apart from the word of God. Often *m'uma* is a euphemism for something bad, such as the thing Abraham was about to do to Isaac (Gen 22:12, "Do not do anything to the lad,") as the thing Ammon waited to do to Tamar (II Sam 13:2, "He thought it difficult to do anything to her").<sup>1</sup>

In the positive direction Balaam asserts that the

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<sup>1</sup>Walter C. Kaiser "מְאוֹמָה" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), I:487-88.

message that God "puts in my mouth" he must speak.<sup>1</sup> This statement of personal inability and dependence on God apparently had no adverse effect on Balak, for he went on with his feast plans. The question of Balaam's expectation of what he would speak naturally arises. Could it be that he was aware of the nature of the words that Yahweh would grant him? Numbers 24:1 seems to indicate not. Though he had been told earlier that Israel was blessed and that he was not to curse them Balaam may have imagined some middle ground that would satisfy Balak.

In view of this situation it could be conjectured that Balaam already laid his plan to assist Moab and Midian by instructing them how to weaken Israel through sin as described in Numbers 25 (cf. Rev 2:14). This would answer the perplexing question of why Balaam would go through the rituals of divination, knowing already the will of God in the matter he sought. The seeking of cursings and deliverance of blessing therefore would have been a mere game that Balaam was playing with Balak, though perhaps he was sincere toward God. In other words Balaam could have been playing both sides of the street, being a devoted prophet of Yahweh when he went to seek Him and yet a money-hungry adviser to an evil king when he imagined God was not present. Such a scheme, while merely conjecture, is not without the realm of possibility. Given the level of theological revelation which Balaam had available there is no reason to assume that he understood

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<sup>1</sup>אָנְכֵר - lcs pi'el imperfect

the doctrine of omniscience and its implications.

### The First Oracle: Numbers 22:41-23:12

In the morning following his arrival Balak escorts Balaam to the top of Baal Bamoth (literally "the high places of Baal") to see part of the people of Israel (Num 23:41). Here Balaam instructs Balak to build seven<sup>1</sup> altars and to sacrifice a bull and a ram upon each. Sacrifice upon high places runs throughout the religions of the ancient near east, but the indication of Numbers 23:13, 27-28<sup>2</sup> is that the purpose of the high elevations was to enable Balaam to actually see the people of Israel and thereby facilitate the cursing.

. . . what was required here, as in hypnotic phenomena, was that nothing, except air, should intervene between the exorciser and the object of his conjurations. The pronouncing of the curse, as a peculiar action of the will, affects its victim spiritually only when there is no other person or object standing in the direct line of the movement of this deadly breath. All the cases of ancient curses known to us were uttered in sight of those who were cursed at such a distance that the victim not only remained within the sphere of the magician's vision, but had to be seen distinctly, whether it was a separate

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<sup>1</sup>The number seven was a sacred number in the religion of Israel. Certain festival required seven sacrifices (Num 28:19,27; 29:4,13,17). Certain Babylonian deities were also approached with seven altars of sacrifice; see Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 172; seven days of sacrifices was often important in the worship of Baal, see Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 166. Because of the possibility of syncretism no particular theological significance can be safely attached.

<sup>2</sup>Krutz, *History*, III:375-77. In an extensive argument Krutz tries to show that from the place of the first oracle *all* the people were visible, but from the second they were not. It is more likely that from no place could the entire nation be seen at once.

individual or a conjunction of several people.<sup>1</sup>

Balaam leaves Balak beside the sacrifice while he goes alone to "a barren height" (Num 23:3) to meet with God. The text reads יללח "perhaps," an adverb of uncertainty which ususally expresses hope.<sup>2</sup> Balaam had no assurance at this time that God would give him the promised words to speak, much less what he would be told to speak. Giving no promise of cursing to Balak he promises to speak "whatever" God reveals to him.

Balaam never commits himself to blessing for Israel apart from repeated inquiry for God's word. There is no aura of deceit, even as Balaam moves from sacrifice to sacrifice. Neither does Yahweh force Balaam to succumb to his greater power.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Balaam repeatedly seeks God, and God repeatedly comes to him with a message, some hold that Balaam did not expect a reply from God, or as Greenstone says, God met Balaam "Accidentally, indicating an inferior degree of prophecy . . ."<sup>4</sup> What could be meant by "inferior" is not apparent in the words given to Balaam, for they are truly those spoken by Yahweh. It is these words that shock the Moabite monarch, for far from being a curse they are a blessing

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<sup>1</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, p. 158. Apparently Eichrodt would disagree with Seraphim's opinion here. Eichrodt makes a strong case for the belief in the power of the spoken word. Eichrodt, *Theology*, I:173.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Coats, "Balaam," p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Greenstone, *Numbers*, p. 253.

upon Israel.<sup>1</sup> But though Balak realizes that his hired seer has done him disservice instead of service he does not understand the warning divinely revealed to him. Balaam explains that he is unable to curse or denounce those whom Yahweh has not cursed or denounced (Num 23:8).

The mysterious words of this blessing are the final ones: "let me die the death of the righteous and may my end be like theirs" (Num 23:10b). This is of course not a prediction, but a desire, a desire not attained. How did Balaam hope to achieve the death of the righteous without the life of the righteous! In the last two lines of the poetic discourse there is the apparent parallel between *יְשֻׁלָּאֵל* and *כִּמְהֵרָה*. If so, then it would align Balaam morally with Israel, increasing the wonder Balaam's ultimate accomplishment of bringing sin upon the chosen nation. This is the ultimate problem which recurs throughout the story of Balaam, the dichotomy between Balaam's words and actions.

#### The Second Oracle: Numbers 23:13-27

In all fairness to Balak it must be noted that he was not retributive towards Balaam for blessing Israel. He does not even blame Balaam but takes him to a new location to repeat the ritual of sacrifices, perhaps with a view of

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<sup>1</sup>The content of the various oracles is not within the scope of this paper and will be discussed only as they relate to the character of Balaam. The reader should consult Allen, "Balaam Oracles" for exegesis of the oracles at length.

the people which will be more inducive<sup>1</sup> to a cursing from the prophet and from the gods petitioned.

In the second petition to Yahweh in Moab, Balaam indicates with more assurance that he would indeed meet personally with God for he tells Balak to wait with his offering וְאַנְכִי אֵצֶקֶה לָּהּ. (There is some element of chance in the verb קרה,<sup>2</sup> but not as great as indicated by אֵצֶקֶה in v 3.) And meet with Yahweh he does and there receives the second discourse to deliver to Balak. This second oracle is a lesson in theology to both Balaam and Balak. If the prophet was unaware of God's immutability before he should not be now. Aware too should Balak be of the fruitlessness of war against Israel.

Behold, a people rises like a lioness,  
And as a lion it lifts itself;  
It should not lie down until it devours the prey,  
And drinks the blood of the slain.

Numbers 23:24

If Balak indeed realized that Israel had the ability in war under the direction and blessing of Yahweh then it would be reasonable for him here to desist from his efforts. He had observed what Israel had done in the past (Num 22:1-5) and was afraid; why was his fear not increased to the point of seeking peace rather than war? As Balaam ignored the halting

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<sup>1</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, III:180.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 899. The conclusion of Keil and Delitzsch that this verb is used here in a technical sense "for going out for auguries" (III:182) is founded upon a comparison with Num 24:1. In the opinion of the writer this is too weak a ground to advance upon.



of his faithful ass along the road to Moab Balak continues to ignore the warnings of Yahweh given through Balaam. But instead of thankfulness for the warning and patience of God Balak is only angry with Balaam. As following the first blessing Balaam again gives the simple defense of that he must speak all that Yahweh says. Persistent in his headlong rush into folly Balak seeks another place for the curse to be given.

Balak again thought that if the proper view of the object was obtained that God would surely allow Balaam to curse Israel. The text implies that the king was not at least aware that it was not in the power of Balaam to do as he pleased for in Numbers 23:27 he says, אֵלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵינַי הָאֵלֵהִים וְנִקְבְּחוּ לִי. "Perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me." It seems that Balak was learning something about the prophet/Yahweh relationship that he didn't know before.

#### The Third Oracle: Numbers 23:28-24:25

Balaam and Balak went to the top of Peor overlooking the wasteland (Jeshimon) of Moab across which the prophet could see Israel camped "tribe by tribe" (Num 24:2). The same sacrifices were made as before, but there the similarities end. Numbers 24:1 reports that "Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel."

Balaam had been told from the beginning that Yahweh had blessed Israel (Num 22:12) and in each of the provisions two oracles explained this fact to Balak. It now became a

realized<sup>1</sup> fact in the mind and heart of Balaam that it was "pleasing (טוֹב בְּעֵינָי) to Yahweh to bless Israel. As result he no longer (כְּפָעַם-כְּפָעַם), "as usual"<sup>2</sup> the hendiadys literally means "as time on time" and refers to the previous occurrences) went to "seek omens" (NASB). This last phrase is of considerable difficulty because the term שִׁנְּנָה is used in this sense only here and in the second oracle, Numbers 23:23.<sup>3</sup>

### שִׁנְּנָה

The usual interpretation is that this refers to the searching for omens in nature or by the use of instruments of divination, such as arrows, and that the implication is that on the previous occasions he did indeed use such in seeking after God.

Even though we were not told before that Balaam had sought to propitiate God to perform what he wished by magical acts and incantations, this shows us that that was the case. כְּפָעַם-כְּפָעַם, "as at other times," must refer primarily to 23:3,15 but may include also the custom of Balaam when he was back in Mesopotamia. It is fitting that in the great messianic prophecies to follow that there should be not even a trace of auguries or enchantments.<sup>4</sup>

Martin has noted the lack of "enchantments" in the third oracle, but there are none to be found in the entire narrative. Even if it be granted that Balaam had sought omens from nature or objects there is no hint that he tried to

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 907. שִׁנְּנָה -  
 . . . 3. "see so as to learn to know; . . ."

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 822.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 638.

<sup>4</sup>Martin, "Balaam Oracles," pp. 70-71.

"propitiate" Yahweh.

As noted above from Brown, Driver and Briggs שָׁחַז occurs but twice in Scripture. Its meaning comes from the cognate verb שָׁחַז, and from parallel usage with חָסַד in Numbers 23:8. The interesting point is that the verb form does not always carry a negative connotation. Alden gives the following.

שָׁחַז (*nāhash*) II, *learn by experience, diligently observe, divine, practice divination or fortunetelling, take as an omen.* . . .

This first occurrence of *nāhash* is in Gen 30:27, where Laban "learned from the omens" (JB)<sup>1</sup> that Jacob's presence meant his blessing.

. . . Joseph claimed for his brother's benefit that he could "divine" with a special cup . . . Benhadad "took as an omen" Ahab's use of the word "brother". . .<sup>2</sup>

As can be seen above שָׁחַז can be used in a morally neutral sense, and is so used several times. חָסַד, used in synonymous parallelism with שָׁחַז in Numbers 23:23 is used once in a good sense, Proverbs 16:10, "A *decision* is on the lips of the kings."

The important exegetical question is the use of the noun in this context. That there can be the meaning of "divination" or the less negative "learn by experience" in the word has been established. The following should be noted from the context.

(1) There is never a mention of mechanical means

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<sup>1</sup>The Jerusalem Bible is making a poor translation here, at least for modern western man. The passage shows no evidence that Jacob did anything but "learn by experience."

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Alden "שָׁחַז" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, II:572.

of divination in the narrative.

(2) In the previous two instances Balaam goes to meet the Lord and receives divine revelation from Him.

(3) For the third oracle Balaam does not go to meet God but "directed his face" toward the wilderness. He lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camped across from him. The appearance is one of inward contemplation.

(4) God did not come to him, but rather the Spirit of God "came upon him."

Therefore, from the context there can be seen no indication of seeking omens by mechanical means, other than the offering of the common sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> Rather, there is the concept of seeking direct verbal communication from God as he had received on five previous occasions in the preceding narrative. This he did not do now; in fact the text does not say that he intended to do anything. It was then that the Spirit of God came upon him and he delivered his third Oracle.

#### The Nature of the Third Oracle

Unlike the previous two discourses this final oracle was not verbally communicated to Balaam but he was inspired inwardly by the Spirit of God. Compare this to the experience of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:20 where the Spirit of God came upon him and he spoke the word of the Lord to the people.

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<sup>1</sup>The sacrifices themselves do not appear to be a means of divining, though it may be argued that they were made in order to induce Yahweh to give omens. Compare Cox, *Balaam*, pp. 86-88.

The change in methods has been noted by many commentators.

The heathen diviner, hired by Balak, King of Moab, after three unsatisfactory attempts at divination according to the regular drill, is represented as suddenly turning into a true prophet and making a stand against time-serving like that of Micaiah.<sup>1</sup>

E. J. Young believes that the first two utterances were forced by God into the physical body of Balaam, much as the ass spoke. But the third he sees as an instance of true prophetic ecstasy. In Young's opinion the true prophets were "overpowered by the Spirit" and went into a trance.<sup>2</sup>

Robinson considers Balaam to be a genuine ecstatic but not part of the Hebrew heritage.<sup>3</sup> The present writer believes that Balaam spoke his third oracle under inspiration of the Spirit of God in the same manner as the Hebrew prophets; this is clear from Num 24:2. But there is no indication of "ecstasy"<sup>4</sup> on the part of Balaam.<sup>5</sup> The description of Balaam "falling down" "seeing the vision of Shaddai" "having

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<sup>1</sup>E. W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Baltimore: Penquin Books, 1958), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>E. J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 176-79.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (London: Duckworth, 1928).

<sup>4</sup>Krutz, *History*, III:347-50, considers "falling down" to be convulsions and fits of unconsciousness characteristic of ecstasy.

<sup>5</sup>The present writer sees little evidence for ecstatic experiences among the prophets as described by Young. Compare the discussions of Leon J. Wood, "Ecstasy and the Prophets," both in *JETS* 9:3 (1966): 125-37; 149-56. Also Donald L. Fowler "Observations on the Critical View of Ecstasy and Israel's Early Prophets," Post Graduate Seminar paper, Grace Theological Seminary, October, 1971.

his eyes uncovered" given in Num 24:3-4 is quite consistent with the experiences of some of the Hebrew prophets, for instance Daniel in Dan 10.

#### Introduction of the Oracle

The oracle opens with an introduction far different than the first two. The character of the speaker is commented upon; he: (1) has his eye opened (2) hears the words of God (3) sees the vision of the almighty (4) has his eyes uncovered and (5) in the repetition of the introduction as the discourse is resumed in Num 24:15, he has knowledge of the Most High. This is not the experience of a forced prophecy, not of an ecstatic experience. Neither is it the picture of a clairvoyant as Eichrodt has suggested.

Outwardly the Israelite *rō'eh* or *hōzeh* seems little different from similar figures in Oriental heathenism. There are indeed men who, as their name indicates, 'see' more than ordinary mortals not only of the future, but in general of anything that is hidden.

This is very well pictured in the case of Balaam, Num 24.3f.: 'The man whose (sc. outward) eye is closed . . . which heareth the words of God, which seeth the vision of the Almighty, fallen down and having his eyes open.' We are dealing unmistakably with people who possess the gift of clairvoyance—a well-attested fact not only in ancient, but in the most modern times. The term *'īs 'elōhīm* is applied to such persons in the sense that they are endued with divine power, they have been initiated into the divine realm. Their clairvoyant gift may be manifested outwardly in widely differing physical phenomena; it may be associated with serious ecstatic disturbances of consciousness, as is palpably demonstrated by Balaam, who with eyes closed and only semi-conscious sinks to the ground and is granted visual and auditory revelations; on the other hand, the gift may be exercised in a fully waking state, or even in sleep, by means of clairvoyant dreams, as seems to have been the case with Samuel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eichrodt, *Theology*, I:296.

Such clairvoyance is not a gift of God anywhere in Scripture, but "knowledge of the Most High" (Num 24:16) is always the result of special revelation. Unger admits that Balaam thus attained the status of a bona-fide prophet of Yahweh, after here renouncing his heathenism, though he believes he later lapsed.<sup>2</sup>

#### Content of the Third Oracle

As with the preceding oracles Balaam blesses Israel, much to the dismay of Balak who finally gives up on his hope to curse Israel through Balaam. Balak tells Balaam to flee to his home without reward. Giving the Moabite credit where due, he recognizes that Yahweh is responsible for Balaam's blessings and failure to receive reward (Num 24:11). This blessing is in fact more detailed than the preceding two, and as Balaam resumes his discourse, he gives what has come to be interpreted as Messianic prophecy (Num 24:17-19). He also foretells the conquest of Moab, Shur, Edom, Deir, Amalek, and the Kenites. The work of Allen is again recommended for exposition of the oracle.

#### Conclusion of the Narrative

The story of Balaam ends suddenly with the departure of the prophet for his own place and the return of Balak for his. Balaam is left in a most favorable light. Had this been the final word on Balaam there would be little discussion as to his character. But the remaining Old Testament and New

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<sup>1</sup>Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, p. 126.

Testament Scriptures are less kind to Balaam as will be seen in the following chapters.



### CHAPTER III

#### OLD TESTAMENTS SUPPLEMENTS

##### Numbers 31:8,16

The most significant facts concerning the past narrative history of Balaam are found in Numbers 31. V 8 records his death, v 16 the sin that brought his death upon him.

##### Verse Eight

". . . they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword." This recording of Israel's execution of Balaam has an interesting Rabbinic tradition. "The Rabbis say that he was slain after a trial by a Beth Din (Sifri)."<sup>1</sup> Cox calls this a "judicial death"<sup>2</sup> and by implication supposes that there was a trial, and if a trial, a defense. This defense Cox assumes to be autobiographical, as was the common practice in the ancient east: hence, the origin of the Balaam oracles. This explanation for their source and place in

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<sup>1</sup>Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 704. Note: A Beth Din was an ancient Jewish court composed of three or four judges. Sifri is the oldest Jewish commentary on the Torah.

<sup>2</sup>Cox, *Balaam*, p. 14. His note says "So the best critics read the Verse, understanding by 'Balaam they slew *with the sword*,' the sword of justice since the battle was over when he was slain." Unfortunately, he does not say who the "best critics" are nor does he give support for his view of these words.

Numbers assumes a considerable amount of non-demonstrable conjectures, yet offers a good if not the best explanation for the text as it stands. Consider the facts: (1) Only Balaam, possibly a servant or two, and God had first-hand access to all the events of Numbers 22-25. (2) Balaam was apparently quite a persuasive person and good with words by nature of his occupation and practice; he would surely try to defend his actions. (3) Of all the Scriptures pertaining to Balaam, the narrative places him in the best light. Cox believes that no other theory offers as good an explanation of how Israel came into possession of the account. This writer would tend to agree.

There is some lexical support for the view that a "judicial death" could be indicated by the word *הָרַג*.

The root includes the ideas of murder and judicial execution, as well as the killing of animals.

There is much overlapping in the use of the various words for "kill." This word is seldom used of killing animals. It is usually men and numerous times of violent killing in war or intrigue.<sup>1</sup>

### Verse Sixteen

"Behold these caused the sons of Israel through the counsel of Balaam to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord." Numbers 25:1-3 explains that the women of Moab invited the people of Israel to the sacrifices of their god Baal. They not only attended but participated by eating and

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Stigers, *הָרַג* "Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament", I:222.

bowing down to the idols. In addition, they committed sexual acts with the Moabite women, some of which was ritualistic in nature. For this Yahweh caused a plague which cost 24,000 lives.

It is this sinful action which contradicts all the words of faith which Balaam spoke in the narrative and which causes such a problem in ascertaining his true character.

#### Deuteronomy 23:4,5

The significance of this passage is that it states that "the Lord was not willing to listen to Balaam," but "turned the curse into a blessing." The implication is that Balaam had petitioned God to curse Israel, at least on one occasion. It cannot be safely inferred that this was the continual desire of Balaam from this text. This is due to the context of the reference, i.e., the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly of the Lord, v 3. The focal point of the Balaam reference is the calling for the curse of Balak, the purpose that Balaam was brought into the picture. The entire episode was turned into a blessing, not simply words of cursing intended by the prophet.

#### Joshua 13:22

In this passage, which again reports Balaam's death, he is called הַקֹּסֵם "the soothsayer." This participle of the verb קסם is used of those who practice divination, which is prohibited by the Lord in Deuteronomy 18:10. The importance attached to this appellation is commented upon by Hengstenberg.

On the other hand, against those who maintain that Balaam was a thoroughly pious man and true prophet, even the appellation *הַקֹּסֵם*, soothsayer, which is given to him in Josh. xiii.22, plainly decides. Against this, those who maintain the opinion in question avoid themselves of a twofold, but equally inadmissible shift. They maintain either that the designation of him as soothsayer refers only to the period after the fall of Balaam, when he had lost the prophetic gift and the prophetic office, (thus e.g. BENZEL, l.c. p. 46) or they affirm that the word *קֹסֵם* appears also in a good sense, and should be so taken here.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars have made issue that Balaam is never called a *נָבִיא*<sup>2</sup> but Seraphim suggests that this is of minor importance.

In reality, great importance need not be attached to the fact that Balaam was not considered worthy not only of the appellation *נָבִיא* (prophet), but not even of that of *הַלֵּוֹהִי* (sic) or *רֹאֵה*, (seer) and was stamped with the name *הַקֹּסֵם* (kosem), sorcerer, soothsayer (Josh. xiii, 22). . . . In the prophet Micah (iii.5) the word *נְבִיאִים* means prophets *that make the people err*'; in the seventh verse, instead of *נְבִיאִים* the words *הַלֵּוֹהִים* and *קֹסְמִים* are used as synonyms; and, in the eleventh verse, the divination *נְבִיאָם* made for money, are called *יְקֹסְמֵי* divine (falsely).<sup>3</sup>

It appears that the reference to Balaam as *הַקֹּסֵם* is meant to carry a negative connotation, but is not to be used as a deciding factor in determining his character.

Joshua 24:9,10

Then Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and

<sup>1</sup>Hengstenberg, *History fo Balaam*, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup>Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, p. 125. Unger obviously refers to *נָבִיא* when he says that Balaam is never called a prophet. But in 2 Peter 2:16 Balaam is called *τοῦ προφήτου*.

<sup>3</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, p. 272-73. On the use of *נָבִיא* see also Elwood A. Neu, *Standards for Discernment of Prophets*, (M.Div thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1980), p. 10. Note: The incomplete pointing of the Hebrew is Seraphim's.

fought against Israel, and he sent and summoned Balaam the son of Beor to curse you.

But I was not willing to listen to Balaam. So he had to bless you, and I delivered you from his hand.

This passage says essentially the same thing as Deuteronomy 23:4,5 and is of no particular importance to this study.

#### Nehemiah 13:2

This is a recounting of Deuteronomy 23:4,5. No new information is added.

#### Micah 6:5-8

V 5 is an exhortation for the people to recall the incident of Balaam and Balak. The chapter is an indictment of God's people for their injustice.

Cox, among others, believes that v 6-8 are a conversation between the people of Israel and the prophet.<sup>1</sup> The use of Balaam and Balak as historical examples in the indictment does not require dialogue on their part, neither would such an interpretation fit the context of v 9-16.

#### Conclusion

The Old Testament supplements show the sinful actions of Balaam that contrast so greatly with his words. In themselves, they do not present a substantial enough data base for determining the character of Balaam, but are a decided negative influence.

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<sup>1</sup>Cox, *Balaam*, pp. 155-156.

## CHAPTER IV

### NEW TESTAMENT SUPPLEMENTS

#### 2 Peter 2:15,16

2 Peter 2 concerns the rise of false prophets (v 1). The significance to this study is that certain ones have "followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness."

#### The Followers

Important to the exegesis of the passage is the identification of those described as ἐξακολουθήσαντες in v 15. Two groups are found in the chapter, the false teachers and their followers who cause the truth to be maligned, οὗς referring back to πολλοί. But in v 3 πλαστοῖς λόγοις is certainly the product of false teachers, who then must be the subject of the verb εμπορεύονται. The subject of the historical examples follows this and hence the resumption of the description in v 12 "οὗτοι δέ" also refers to the false teachers. From there the subject of the following verses does not change throughout the chapter. Therefore, the conclusion is that the followers of Balaam are the false teachers of v 1.

V 20 is the key to understanding the soteriological issues of the chapter. The language of Peter is most clear:

"εἰ γὰρ ἀποφυγόντες τα μιάσματα τοῦ κόσμου ἐν ἐπιγώσσει τοῦ

κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ σωτῆρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ."

Alford remarked "ἐπιγνώσει, genuine and accurate knowledge: shewing that he is treating of men who have not been mere professors of spiritual grace, but real possessors of it."<sup>1</sup> "For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them," (v 21). This clearly refers to the Christian life.<sup>2</sup>

If then the transference of the character of these false teachers to Balaam is insisted upon, then it must be said that Balaam was a regenerate man. Since, however, Balaam is used as historical example this would perhaps be a hermeneutical blunder. Certainly it cannot be maintained that he was unregenerate from this passage.

#### Balaam's Sin

The passage in question states that Balaam "loved the wages of unrighteousness." This must refer to his experience prior to his arrival in Moab, for v 21 says that the "dumb donkey, speaking with the voice of a man, *restrained* the madness of the prophet." Therefore, after the confrontation upon the Moab journey Balaam no longer was in this standing before God, at least as far as 2 Peter is concerned.

It would seem that if we can judge anything from

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, revised by Everett F. Harrison (4 vol. Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), IV:411.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

2 Peter about Balaam, it would be that he was an inconsistent man as to his faith.

#### Jude 11

The passage in Jude is very near to being parallel to that of 2 Peter 2. Instead of τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ Βαλαάμ there is reference to τῇ πλάνῃ τοῦ Βαλαάμ, which is not defined. Due to the parallelism there is not likely to be a great difference, though many believe the error of Balaam to be related to his failure to perceive the judgment of God for his sin. The thrust of judgment in this letter does indeed lend support to this view, as does the reference to those who "do not understand" in v 10.

The men and angels of the earlier verses of the letter are definitely unregenerate individuals. But Cain and Balaam are not referred to in the same manner, i.e. as being condemned, but their "way" and "error" is used as an example. Therefore, nothing concerning the soteriological state of Balaam (or Cain) can be deduced from this passage with any degree of finality.

#### Revelation 2:14

This passage further develops the later sin of Balaam for which he suffered death, i.e., he taught Balak to cause the Israelites to sin by partaking of heathen sacrificial feasts and committing acts of sexual immorality with the women of Moab. This is called τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ. Walvoord draws a distinction between this and the way and



error of Balaam.<sup>1</sup> Again this distinction may not be completely valid, though fine shades of meaning may be noted.

The Lord has "somewhat" against the church at Pergamum for having those who hold τῇω διδαχῇω Βαλαάμ. But it is something that may be repented of (v 16). There is no sweeping condemnation upon the church, but a warning. The salvation of these is not determinable here, but they are surely in an ungodly standing. Therefore, transference of their position to Balaam accomplishes little in ascertaining his character.

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<sup>1</sup>John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 68.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Bishop Seraphim attempts to collate the opinions of Balaam's relationship to God in his helpful study.

. . . Balaam is accused of two grievous (sins) matters—cupidity and disobedience. . . . For though Balaam resisted the first temptation and refused to follow the Moabite princes, notwithstanding the gold offered to him (Num xxii. 13), he evidently only thus acted out of fear and most unwillingly; so that at the second appeal of Moabites, he could no longer resist the promised gifts. . . .

Therefore in the present case, the majority of Balaam's commentators (all Protestants) conformed their appreciation of his character according to the whole sum of his actions, which are known to us, and according to the qualificative proportion of good to evil. . . . They attached no importance to the soundness of his faith, and tried to explain his prophecies as a purely mechanical reflection of Divine thoughts in his spirit, . . . some commentators, like Hengstenberg, Kurtz, and Keil, found that the truth lay in the middle course and represented Balaam both as a heathen soothsayer and a prophet of Jehovah.<sup>1</sup>

For all of his work the good Bishop does not come to a clear conclusion. Allen decides that Balaam was a pagan diviner, but used of God.<sup>2</sup> Cox makes observations that cause the reader to search his own heart as he examines Balaam.

And if Balaam is to be condemned as a sinner above all men because, though he saw visions and heard words from God, he nevertheless wanted to curse the people he was

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<sup>1</sup>Seraphim, *Soothsayer*, pp. 274-80.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, "Balaam," p. 185.

bound to bless, and studied how he might evade the spirit of the injunction he had received from the Most High, what are we to say to Jonah who first tried to flee from the presence of the Lord rather than deliver the warning to Nineveh with which he was charged, and then was "very angry" with God because He did not "destroy that great city in which were more than six score thousand little children, and also much cattle," destruction of that vast multitude of living men than of that of the quick-springing gourd which sheltered his head from the heat of the sun? Was not this a prophet of like passions with the other, as mean and selfish, but not as great, although the son of Amittai was a Hebrew, and lived in the light of a period nearly a thousand years subsequent to that of Balaam?

Nay, more: are Balaam and Jonah the only two men, or even the only two good men, who while seeing and approving the better course, have taken the worse; who have left the path of righteousness to fall into the pit of transgression? Do none of us ever attempt to evade the pressure of unwelcome duties and commands, and seek how to take our own way and to gratify our own desires without altogether breaking with God and his law?<sup>1</sup>

That Balaam was a sinner is undebatable. The *result* of his sin makes the action of his sin appear even greater. But the expressions of his faith are clear, and though he is called to account for that sin in the Scriptures and used in both the Old and New Testament as an example his faith is never placed in doubt.

How do we then judge Balaam? As all men, by their expression of faith. For though there are tests of faith in the Christian life as made clear throughout Scripture, especially in the First Epistle of John there is equally clear teaching that one may believe into eternal life and yet live a life marked by sin.

The inevitable conclusion of those who argue against the believer continuing in sin is that nowhere then could you have a believer who is judged and taken home to Heaven

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<sup>1</sup>Cox, "Balaam," pp. 183-91.

because of disobedience. Scriptures are in existence (1 John 5:16; 1 Cor 11) where that is potential and actual occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

How can we say less of the experience of the Old Testament saints? Very possibly Balaam cannot be numbered among such. This is the conclusion of Allen who writes:

The fate of a Balaam is beyond comprehension. Perhaps the Balaam of the Numbers account will not be the only one who died in an enemy camp having never been related to the God whose word he communicated to others.<sup>2</sup>

The present writer would disagree however.

Very possibly all your conclusions are sound enough, but they are not warranted by the facts from which you infer them.<sup>3</sup>

The writer makes no pretence to be able to judge Balaam's salvation without a direct statement to that effect from Scripture. But the evidence does show that he had a working, personal relationship with Yahweh, that was characterized by monotheistic worship and obedience to direct commands, such as would imply that Balaam was a genuine Old Testament saint.

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<sup>1</sup>Dale W. Parker, *The New Testament Doctrine Pertaining to the Carnal Christian* (M. Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Allen "Balaam," p. 468.

<sup>3</sup>Cox, *Balaam*, p. 42.

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