

# Balaam and the Babe of Bethlehem

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BALAK'S SACRIFICE.--Num. xxiii. 2.

# BALAAAM AND THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM

## 1A. INTRODUCTION:

### 1b. Balaam's controversial character:

In the noble portrait gallery of the Old Testament, there are no figures more striking, more impressive or more perplexing than that of Balaam. Samuel Cox very nicely shows the contradictory character of Balaam:

**A heathen**, not a Hebrew, and yet elected for special distinction in the service of God; **a diviner**, seeking omens and auguries and interpreting them after the approved methods of the ancient East, and yet a prophet who heard the words of God and saw visions from the Almighty with opened eyes; **a soothsayer**, affecting to foretell and even to control human destinies, and yet a seer familiar with the ecstasies of the prophetic trance, and to whom the inspiration of the Almighty gave understanding of things to be; **a man of God** who, in the face of all threatening and allurements, professed that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord his God, "to do a small thing or a great," and who, in the teeth of his own most clamorous interest and desires, did consistently "speak the word that the Lord put into his mouth," and yet a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord, and who by his vile counsel to the daughters of Midian cursed Israel far more effectually than by any spell he could have cast upon them; **a sage** before whose mind there floated the loftiest moral ideal which has ever blessed the eyes of man, and to whom both the life and the death of the righteous were infinitely desirable, and yet a "fool" who "loved the wages of unrighteousness" even more than righteousness itself: here, surely, was a man whose character it is by no means easy to decipher and harmonize, a man of qualities and impulses so contradictory and opposed that, **to most of us, he remains an enigma to this day** (*Balaam -- An Exposition and a Study*, 10, emphasis added).

### 2b. Numerous controversies surrounding Balaam:

There is hardly an aspect of Balaam and his ministry which is not enveloped in controversy. Without an effort to solve all the controversies, it must suffice to enumerate some.

- 1c. The meaning of the name Balaam: Is the name related to *bileam*, "a devourer of the people" or to the nikolaitans of Revelation 2:14, "rulers of the people"?
- 2c. His place of origin: is he a native of Deir Alla (biblical Succoth) in Transjordan or is his home the city of Pethor in Mesopotamia (Deut. 23:4)?
- 3c. His relationship to God: is Balaam a true prophet gone bad or a pagan prophet possessing some knowledge of the true God?
- 4c. The source of his knowledge of God: was Balaam somehow exposed to Judaism or did he receive special revelation and illumination like Abraham and Terah (Joshua 24:2)?
- 5c. The reality of the conversation with the donkey: was the donkey actually conversing with him (2 Pet. 2:15-16) or was Balaam in a trance or did

God cause him "to interpret correctly the inarticulate sounds of the animal" ("Balaam," *ISBE*, 379)?

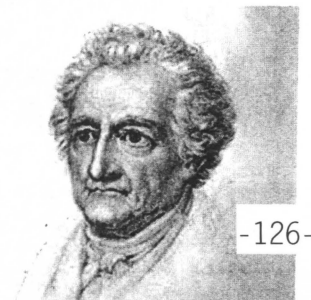


BALAAAM SEES THE ANGEL IN HIS PATH.

- 6c. The unity of the seven oracles of Numbers 23-24: are documentary scholars correct in seeing several sources in these three chapters, or do the oracles stand as a unified whole?
- 7c. The focus of the fourth oracle: is Balaam's prophecy of a star out of Jacob and a scepter out of Israel fulfilled in David's victory over the enemies of Israel or is its fulfillment realized by the babe of Bethlehem, "a savior who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11)?

By listing the problems, an effort is simply made to alert the reader to the fact that we as fundamentalists are not oblivious to some of the difficulties in the narrative of Balaam. As will be shown in passing below, a satisfactory solution to the issues may readily be found. The main thrust of this study is to underscore how a sovereign God enlisted Balaam to utter one of the most arresting prophecies concerning the Messiah king.

One is reminded of the plea for convictions by Germany's greatest poet. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe writes imploringly to a friend, "Give me the





benefit of your convictions, if you have any, but keep your doubts to yourself, for I have enough of my own."

Before analyzing Balaam's Messianic prophecy it might be helpful to give the background of the prophet and his activity.

## 2A. BALAAM'S MYSTERIOUS PAST:

As the Israelites pitched their tents on the plains of Moab, the Moabites and Midianites entered into league. Balak, king of Moab, gripped by panic because of Israel's victory over the Amalakites and the vastness of their army, sent for Balaam in Mesopotamia to curse Israel:

Num. 22:5-6 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: <sup>6</sup> 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.

It appears that Balaam's reputation was that of a sorcerer or diviner for whom the God of Israel was just another deity to manipulate.

## 3A. BALAAM'S MAGICAL PROFESSION:

Ron Allen has a fine summary of Balaam's character and profession:

Balaam is not a good prophet who went bad or a bad prophet trying to be good. He is altogether outside Israel's prophetic tradition. He is a pagan, foreign national whose mantic acts center on animal divination, including the dissection of animal livers, the movement of animals, and the flight of birds. He believed that he had a way with the gods, a hold on them. To him Yahweh was not the Lord of heaven but just another deity whom he might manipulate. He was in for the surprise of his life.

The narrative of this chapter shows his strong aversion to the pagan prophet Balaam by the interchange of the name for God (Yahweh, "the LORD") in Balaam's mouth (v. 8) by the term "God" as the narrator speaks of him (v. 9). By this subtle interchange, the narrator demonstrates his distance from Balaam's outrageous claims. That God did speak to Balaam is not to be denied; it is just that Balaam did not yet realize that the God of Israel was not like the supposed deities of his usual machinations. ("Numbers," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, II, 888)

## 4A. BALAAM'S MERCENARY PERSONALITY:

Balaam is universally condemned in the scriptures for his moral, ethical and religious falls. Balaam hired himself out as a prophet and epitomized greed and covetousness. He can be rightly called "**The Prophet for Profit.**" The Bible speaks of:

- **The way of Balaam** (2 Pet 2:15)
- **The error of Balaam** (Jude 11)
- **The doctrine of Balaam** (Rev. 2:14)

Merrill F. Unger has an excellent explanation of these three descriptions of Balaam:



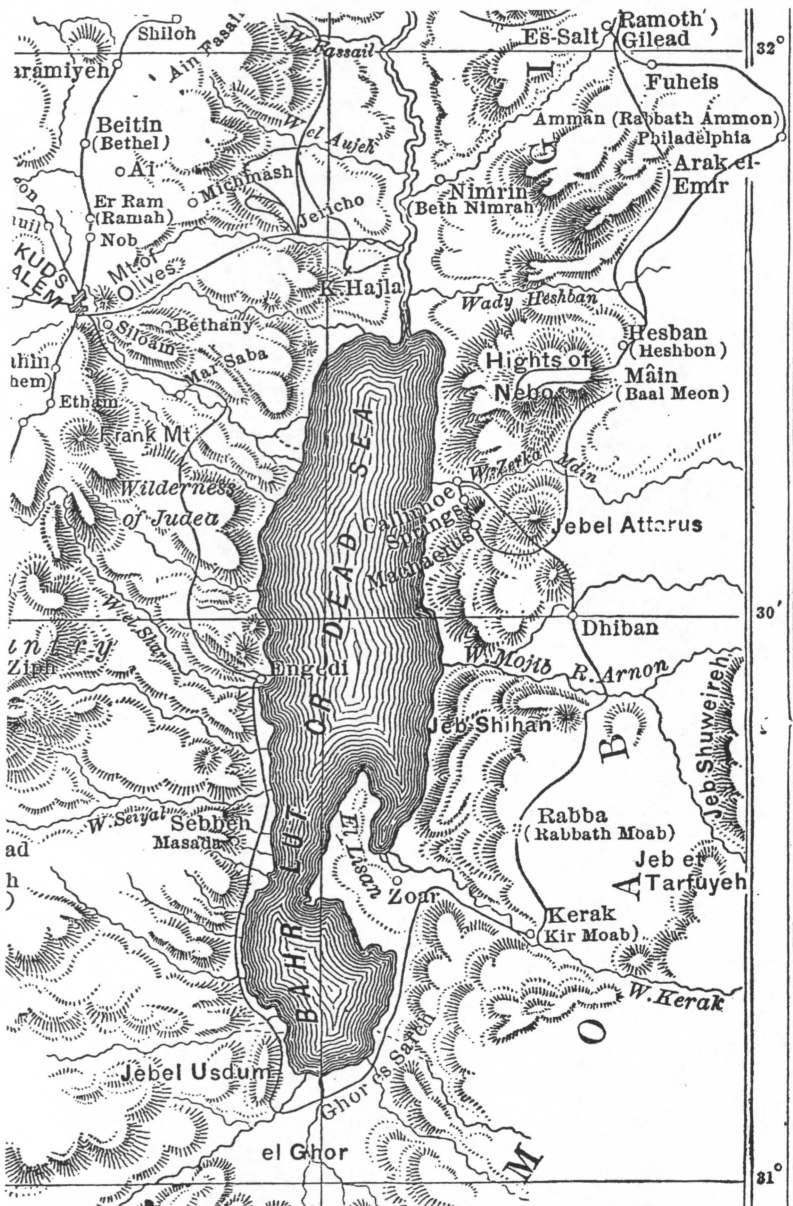
But, rejecting his chance and again succumbing to his inveterate love of money, he became the typical hireling prophet, anxious to commercialize his gift. This is **"the way of Balaam"** (2 Peter 2:13), which false apostate teachers choose.

Blinded to God's wonderful dealings with the sinner through the cross of Christ, so plainly prefigured in Israel's redemption from Egypt and priestly ritual instituted in the desert, Balaam, reasoning from a mere natural standpoint and viewing the evil in Israel, concluded that a righteous God must curse them. This is **"the error of Balaam"** (Jude 11), which rejects the necessity of the atoning work of Christ on the cross as the only means of man's salvation.

Discovering that God's people could not be cursed, Balaam enabled Balak at least partially to realize his desire against the people (Num. 31:15, 16; 22:5; 23:8), teaching them to marry the women of Moab, defile their separation, and abandon their pilgrim state. This is **"the doctrine of Balaam,"** which advocates easy world conformity and spiritual unchastity (Rev. 2:14) ("Balaam—Heathen Diviner or a Prophet of the Lord?" *Our Hope*, 465-466, emphasis added).

Normally overlooked in the discussion of Balaam's sin is the geographical context of the scene. The location of Balaam and Balak has an important bearing on the sin of Balaam:

(*Smith's Bible Dictionary*, I, 228).



\* The sin of Balaam was one of peculiar aggravation, and is characterized as such in 2 Pet. ii. 15, 16, and Jude 11. To see his conduct in its true light, we must call to mind the geography of the scene. This professed servant and prophet of Jehovah was standing at the time on one of the summits of the Abarim beyond the Jordan, from which Moses was permitted to behold the Land of Promise just before his death. For the range of view under the eye of the spectator from that position, see under NEBO (Amer. ed.). Standing there, Balaam was on a mount consecrated to pagan worship and thronged with idolaters. On his left hand he sees the dark waters of the Dead Sea with its black and desolate shores, which were recognized among all the eastern tribes as a monument of God's wrath against the impious and ungodly. On the right he sees the land of the Amorites, whom Jehovah had just overthrown as proof of His power and purpose to destroy the wicked and to give the victory to His people. In the valley of the Jordan lies spread out before him the camp of Israel, divided according to their tribes, in the midst of which is seen the tabernacle of God, above which hangs the pillar of cloud; while in the distance beyond the camp his eyes rest upon the land which he knew to be promised to the people of Israel. Yet even in this situation, amid so much adapted to show him how fearful a thing it is to sin against the Infinite One, he dared, for the reward with which Balak tempted his avarice, to abuse his office as a holy prophet and to attempt, once and again, to call down curses on those whom God had blessed. How much more vivid is our conception of Balaam's apostasy and guilt, when we thus place ourselves in imagination where he stood in that critical hour of his moral history!

## 5A. BALAAM'S MAGNIFICENT PROPHECY:

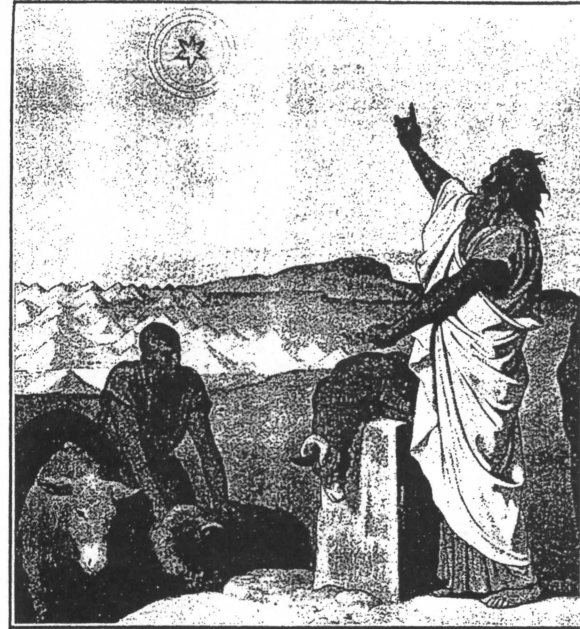
Balaam's fourth oracle:

24:15-19

Then he uttered his oracle:

"The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,  
the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly,  
the oracle of one who hears the words of God,  
who has knowledge from the Most High,  
who sees a vision from the Almighty,  
Who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened:

"I see him, but not now,  
I behold him, but not near,  
A star will come out of Jacob,  
a scepter will rise out of Israel.  
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,  
the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.  
Edom will be conquered;  
Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,  
but Israel will grow strong.  
A ruler will come out of Jacob  
and destroy the survivors of the city."



(Ron Allen's translation, 908)

Charles Ryrie summarizes the four prophecies contained in the oracle:

Before Balaam left for home, he predicted

- (1) the coming of the Messiah-Ruler of Israel (v.17; *the children of Sheth* is a general reference to tumult);
- (2) victory over Moab, Edom, the Amalekites, and the Kenites (vv. 17-21);
- (3) the Assyrian (*Asshur*) captivity of Israel (v. 22);
- (4) the affliction of Assyria and *Eber* (the Hebrews) by people from the Mediterranean area (*Chittim*, v. 24).

(Ryrie's *Study Bible*, note on Numbers 24:15-25)

1b. The debate concerning the identity of the star and scepter:

The seventeenth verse is by far the most debated and the most important verse in the oracle. Ron Allen is very clear that the prophecy of the star out of Jacob and the scepter out of Israel is a specific prophecy concerning of the coming Messianic ruler, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Allen, "Numbers," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 909).

Luther was unable to see this as a Messianic reference because he regarded Balaam as unworthy of such a sublime subject. Allen comments on the fact that while this verse has been heavily debated, frequently debased and allegorized,

it nonetheless speaks unmistakably of the coming of the Messiah. That this prophecy should come from one who was unworthy makes the prophecy all the more dramatic and startling.

Indeed, that Balaam, who was none of God's, could speak of the coming of the Messiah, who is all of God, is a fascinating aspect of the biblical doctrine of inerrancy. The truth of the Scripture could never be dependent on the worthiness of the writer or the personal piety of the speaker. Else we would have gradations in inspiration and shadings in trustworthiness. I say this reverently but strongly; the words of Balaam the pagan mantic, *when he was speaking under the control of the Holy Spirit of God*, were as sure as the words of the Savior Jesus in a red-letter edition of the NT (909, italics in the original).

Merrill F. Unger, in his fine study, *Starlit Paths for Pilgrim Feet*, concurs that Numbers 27:17 is a clear reference to the Messiah:

#### THE SCEPTER OF THE STAR-KING

Any doubt that the ascending star represents the appearance of a glorious ruler or king is removed by the parallel declaration "and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17). The star-king is the scepter-bearer. He comes forth out of Jacob and Israel as a star to denote his glory and splendor and as a scepter-bearer to signify his power and authority. It is He who shall have dominion (137).

Scholars like Samuel Cox reject the Messianic interpretation. He writes that "if it be meant that Balaam saw the figure and day of Jesus Christ afar off, predicted His personal advent and consciously hailed Him as a star and a scepter of Israel, we must demur. . . for when did Jesus of Nazareth smite Moab on both flanks, assume Mt. Seir as His possession, and destroy those who escaped out of their cities?" (*Balaam -- An Exposition and a Study*, 123-125).

Of course, what Cox fails to see is that the prophecies concerning Christ's victory over all enemies will be fulfilled in the Messianic kingdom.

Several reasons might be offered for a Messianic fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy:

1. The prophecy is concerning events that are "not now" and "not nigh" (Nu. 24:17) but will occur in the "latter days" (Nu. 24:14), a reference to the distant future and the Messianic period.
2. David's victory over the Edomites and Moabites was only temporary. Under Omri and Ahab, the nations became again archenemies of Israel. The prophecy demands the total destruction of "all the children of Sheth" (Num. 24:17) i.e. all the unbelievers, a judgment predicted for the second advent (2 Thess. 1:7-9).
3. The church fathers such as Justin Martyr interpreted the star of Numbers 24:17 to be the Lord Jesus-Christ.



Coin of Simon ben Kosiba, showing the Temple with the Messianic star on the roof and the Ark of the Covenant inside (British Museum)

In early Judaism this verse was applied to the Messiah. In fact, "This interpretation was so widely spread among the Jews, that the pseudo-Messiah who arose under Hadrian, and whom even *R. Akiba* acknowledged, took the name of *Bar Chochba* (son of a star), in consequence of this prophecy, from which the nickname of *Bar Coziba* (son of a lie) was afterwards formed, when he had submitted to the Romans, with all his followers" (Keil and Delitzsch, "The Fourth Book of Moses," *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. III *The Pentateuch*, 200 [footnote]).

When Simon ben Kosiba was recognized as Messiah in 132, he was nicknamed Simon bar Kochba, 'son of the star'. His coins show the messianic star.



In a volume of sermons on the oracles of Balaam, master homiletician David L. Larsen correctly stresses in his conclusion the centrality of Jesus Christ in Balaam's prophecies and most other O. T. predictions:

And so Jesus is the absolutely inescapable and unavoidable person in all of history – he is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. Thus midst all of the pluralism and relativism of our times, we confidently affirm with Thomas and worship with him: "My Lord and my God!" He is 'the way, the truth and the life – no one comes to the Father except through him' (John 14:6). There is nothing vague or blurred here at all – "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12) (*The Oracles of Balaam – An Ancient Text for Our Times*, 2006, 96).

## 2b. The difference between Balaam's star and that of the magi:

The star prophesied by Balaam finds its fulfillment in the one who appeared as the babe in Bethlehem. Balaam saw a star arising out of Jacob, an obvious reference to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. The shepherds found the star, the incarnate Savior, the light of the world. The wise men saw the star that guided them to the place where the Messiah was born. The star preceding the wise men was the **presence of the Lord**, the Shekinah glory. For the shepherds it was **the person of the Lord**. Lang's commentary shows the close relationship between the star of the wise men and the star out of Jacob:

The star which the wise men from the East saw, and which led them in the way to the newborn "king of the Jews," refers clearly to the prophecy of Balaam. It was not the star which he foretold, which he saw but not nigh; that star was Christ. **The star which appeared to them announced that the star which Balaam saw had now risen out of Jacob in the birth of the king of the Jews.** These Magi were, like Balaam, from the east. They were engaged in similar pursuits, devoting their lives to the study of occult sciences; men whose whole disposition would lead them to study eagerly the revelation made to the people of God scattered widely throughout the known world. They would naturally be drawn to the predictions of Balaam, one of their own class, and from their own country (John Peter Lange, "Numbers-Ruth," *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, 143, emphasis added).

An equally helpful distinction between Balaam's star and that of the wise men is found in the old and classic 3-volume work by J. H. Kurtz, *History of the Old Covenant*. Kurtz has one of the finest discussions of the mysterious prophet Balaam found anywhere. Below is a crucial paragraph from vol. 3, page 443.



The Sacrifice of Balak

In conclusion, we must return to the star, which shone above the manger at Bethlehem, and showed the wise men of the East the way to the new-born King of the Jews. From time immemorial Balaam's star out of Jacob has been placed in direct and immediate connection with the star of the wise men, of which it has been regarded as a direct prediction. We cannot admit, however, that there was any such connection as this. The star above the manger merely announced the coming of Christ; it served as a guide to the place of His birth. But the star which was seen in the future by Balaam's prophetic eye was Christ Himself. Balaam's star, therefore, was not a prediction of the star of the wise men, but they were both witnesses of the coming of Christ,—the former as a prophecy of the future, the latter as a symbol for the time then present.

## 6A. A MODERN POSTSCRIPT:

In an amazing discovery, an ancient text was found at Deir Alla, Jordan, on March 17, 1967, which tells about the activities of a prophet named Balaam. Deir Alla is situated in western Jordan about eight kilometers east of the Jordan River and about one kilometer north of the Jabbok.

Sometime in the eighth century B.C. Deir Alla was levelled by an earthquake, perhaps the very earthquake mentioned in the book of Amos and also spoken of by Zechariah. In the Deir Alla disaster, a wall fell which had an inscription done by a professional scribe in which he copied the text of an important religious manuscript.

Bryant G. Wood, of the Associates of Biblical Research, elaborates on the importance of the discovery:

The remarkable text found at Deir Alla consists of 119 fragments of plaster inscribed with black and red ink. It was among the rubble of a building destroyed in an earthquake. It seems to have been one long column with at least 50 lines, displayed on a plastered wall. According to the excavators' dating, the disaster was most likely the severe earthquake which occurred in the time of King Uzziah (Azariah) and the prophet Amos in about 760 B.C. (Amos 1:1; Zec 14:5). The lower part of the text shows signs of wear, indicating that it had been on the wall for some time prior to the earthquake.

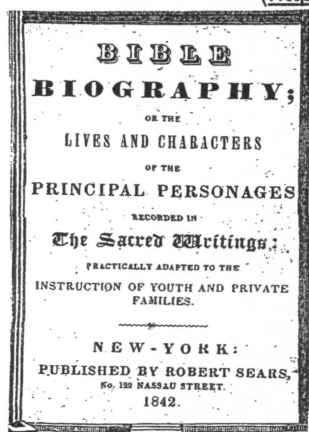
Written in Aramaic, the text begins with the title, "Warnings from the Book of Balaam the son of Beor. He was a seer of the gods." It is in red ink, as are other portions of the text where emphasis is desired. The reference to the "Book of Balaam" indicates that the text was part of a pre-existing document and therefore the original date of the material is much earlier than the plaster text itself. Balaam goes on to relate a vision concerning impending judgment from the gods, and enters into a dispute with his listeners. . . Balaam evidently was well-known as a "cursing prophet," for Balak specifically summoned Balaam for the purpose of cursing Israel (Num. 22:6). Much of the Deir Alla text is given to curses uttered by the prophet. The term "shadday-gods" is used on two occasions in the text. *Shadday* is one of the names for God in the Old Testament, used mainly in the book of Job. Since the account of Job is set in Transjordan (Job 1:1-3), it seems that Shadday was a name used for deity in this region. Balaam used the name twice in his blessing speeches where it is translated "Almighty" (Num. 24:4, 16).

The Deir Alla text presents a problem to those who dismiss the Biblical account of the Exodus, Wilderness Wanderings and Conquest as legendary, as is the trend in scholarship today. It is clear that Balaam was a real person who operated on the east side of the Jordan river. He was known as a cursing prophet and continued to be revered hundreds of years after his death. His persona as revealed in the Deir Alla text precisely matches that of the Balaam of Numbers 22-24. If Balaam was a real person, what about Balak, Moses, Joshua and all of the other persons named in the Biblical narrative? They must have been real as well, and the events described authentic.

(<http://christiananswers.net/q-abr-a014.html>).

BALAAM.

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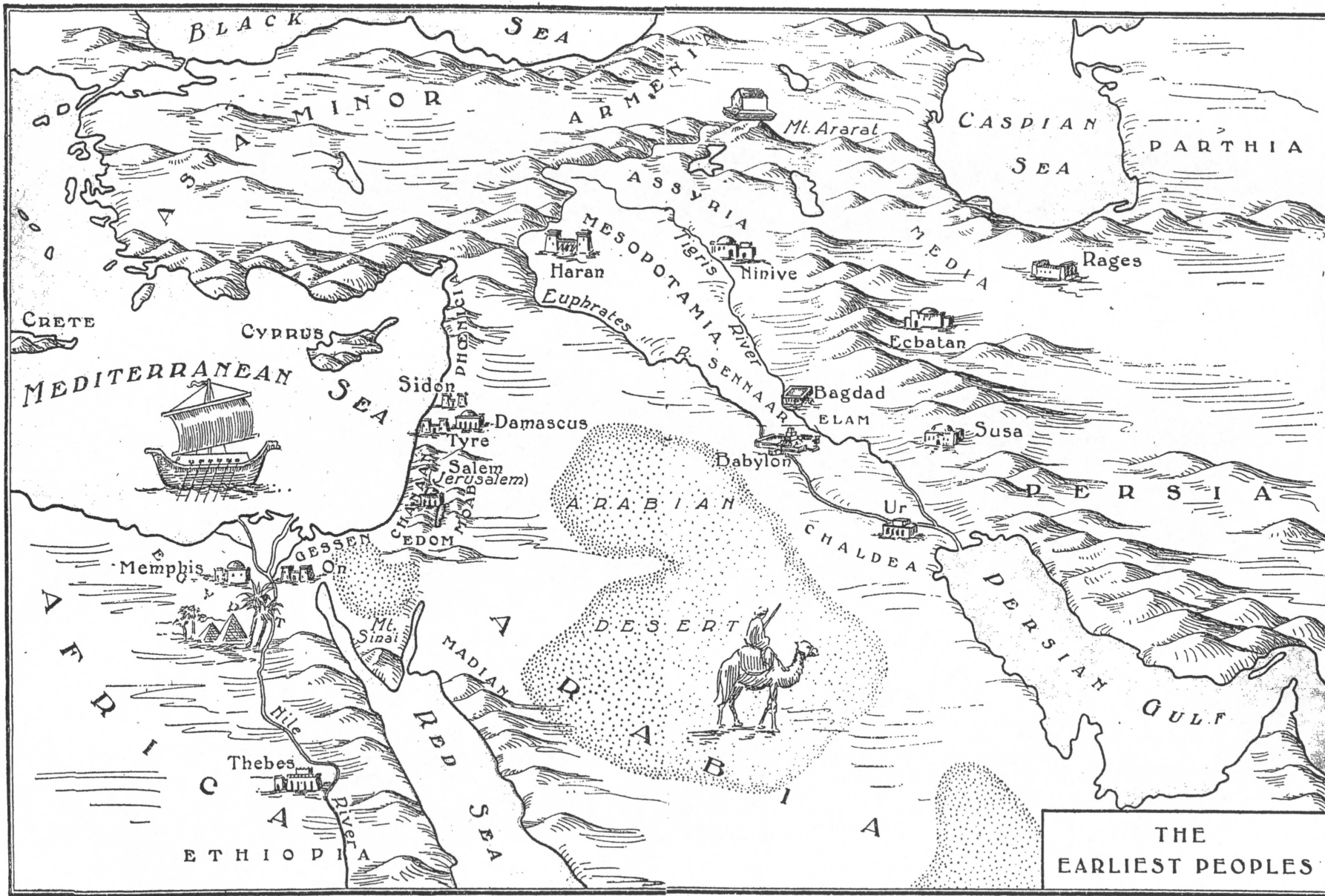


Being still under the divine direction, he poured forth a prophecy concerning Israel, and the fate of the different nations around, still more emphatic, particular, and lofty, than any of his former predictions. He begins with a pointed description of the Messiah, who in an after age should arise from among this highly distinguished people. "I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth." Numb. xxiv. 17. If this be true of David in some sense as a conqueror, it is still more so of the REDEEMER, who is the "bright and morning star," (Rev. xxii. 16,) "the day-spring from on high," (Luke i. 78,) the "Sun of righteousness," (Mal. iv. 2,) and the "King of Zion." Ps. ii. 6. The prediction of Balaam corresponds exactly with that of the dying Jacob, and can only apply in all points to Him who hath "brought life and immortality to light by his gospel;" (2 Tim. i. 10;) who hath subdued the spiritual enemies of his church, and to whom all the kingdoms of the earth shall finally be subject.

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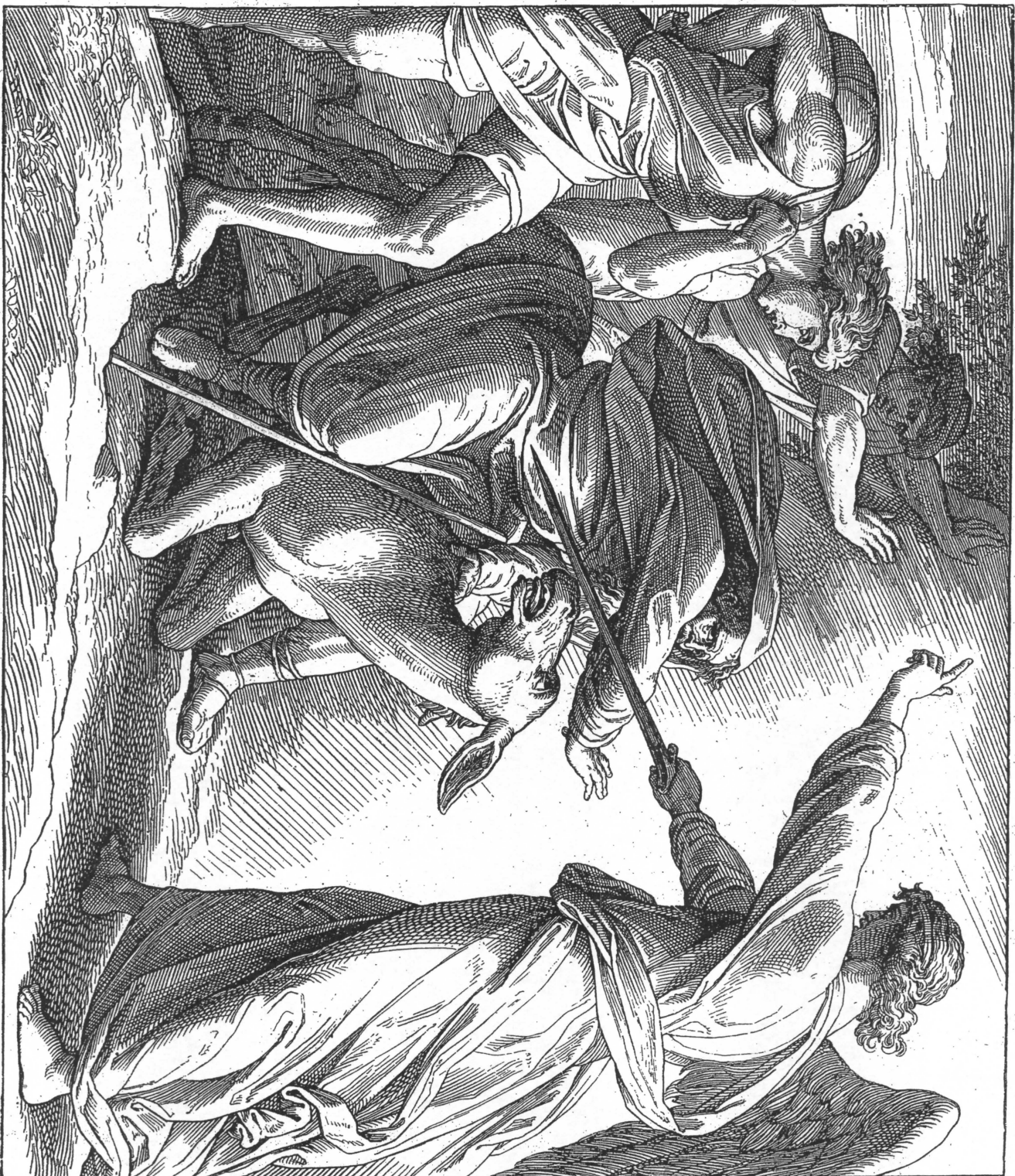


THE  
EARLIEST PEOPLES



Bileam und der Engel.

„Da öffnete der Herr Bileam die Augen, daß er den Engel des Herrn sahe im Wege stehen, und ein bloßes Schwert in seiner Hand.“—4. Moj. 22 : 31.



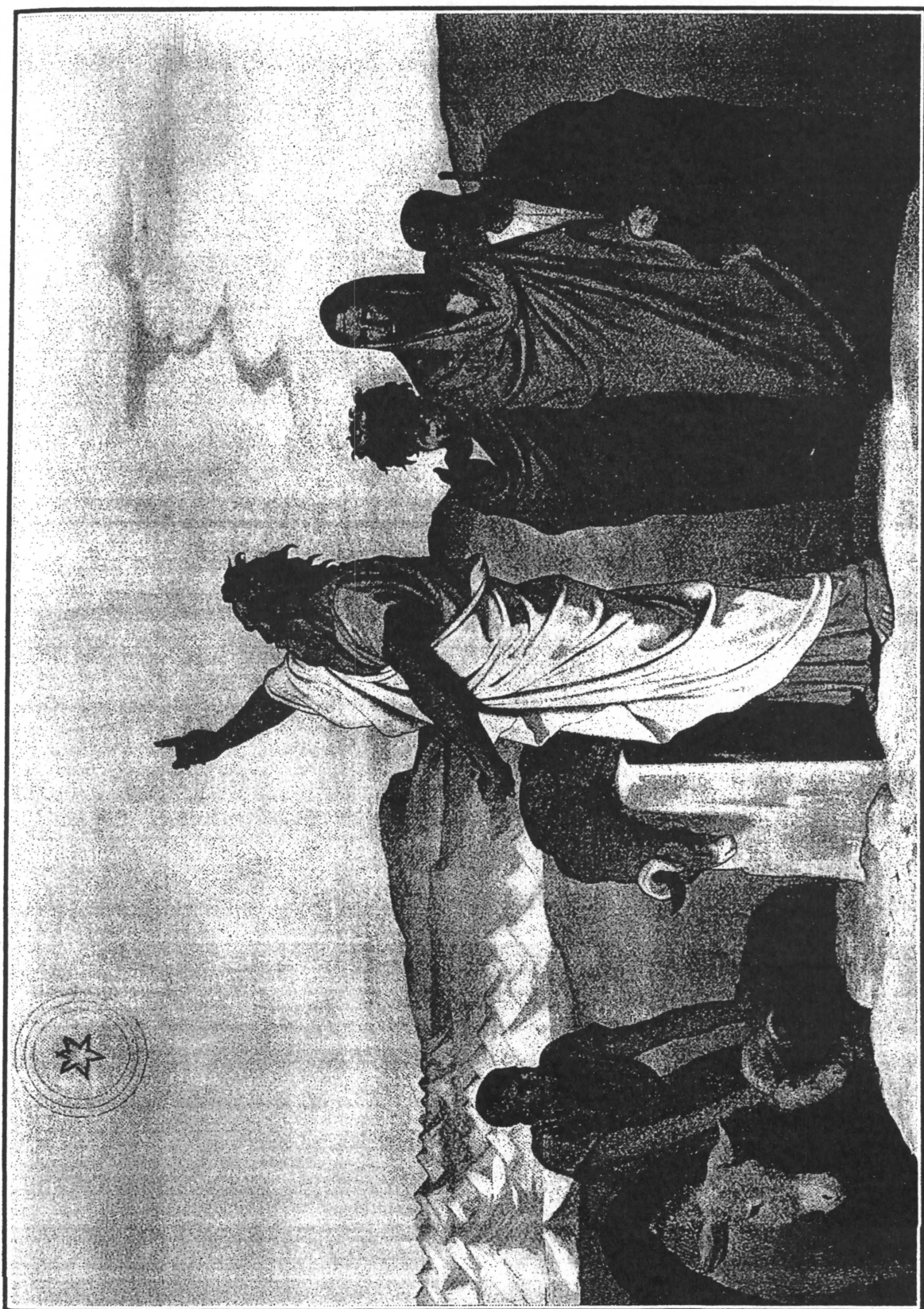
Wirtshaus von Göttingen in Göttingen.

Druck von Breitkopf und Sohn in Leipzig.

# Der Engel des HERRN tritt Jakob in den Traum.

Da öffnete der HERR Jakob die Augen, daß er den Engel des HERRN sah im Traum stehen und ein bloßes Schwert in seiner Hand, und neigte und büdete sich mit feinem Angesicht.





Balaam Blesses Israel



### Moab Leads Israel Into Sin

FROM THE SERIES, BY GERHARD HOET.

+







# Deir 'Alla Inscription

16

Reconstructing the contents is difficult, but it is clear that Bileam learns from the gods that the world will be destroyed, an apocalyptic event that is described with metaphors from bird life. Somehow, Bileam and his people seem to have averted this disaster. There is also a description of the Underworld.

The text, in a language between Aramaic and Canaanite, can be dated to c.800 BC.

## The Inscription

### Combination 1

**Balaam was visited at night by the high god El. The message from El was one of doom.**

The misfortunes of the Book of Balaam, son of Beor.  
A divine seer was he.

The gods came to him at night, and he beheld a vision in accordance with El's utterance.  
They said to Balaam, son of Beor: "So will it be done, with naught surviving, no one was seen [the likes of] what you have heard!

Balaam is so troubled by the vision's that he fasts for two days. He finally tells his followers the details of the vision.

The gods have banded together; the Shaddai-gods have established a council. And they have said to [the goddess] Shagar

'Sew up, close up the heavens with dense cloud, that the darkness exist there, not brilliance;

So that you instill dread in dense darkness

And -- never utter a sound again!

**Balaam goes on to describe the resulting chaos. So Balaam acts to save the goddess from sewing up the heavens and bringing chaos to the earth.**

Heed the admonition adversaries of Sha[gar-and-Ishtar]

To skilled diviners shall one take you, and to an oracle;

[To] a perfumer of myrrh and a priestess.

[Who] covers his body [with oil]

And rubs himself with olive oil.

To one bearing an offering in a horn.

One augurer after another, and yet another

As one augurer broke away from his colleagues

The strikers departed [ ]

**Balaam succeeds in saving the goddess and she doesn't have to sew up the heavens.**

### Combination 2

**Combination 2 is less clear but deals with the creation of a netherworld by El.**

El satisfied himself with [lovmaking]

And then El fashioned an eternal house

A house where no traveler enters,

Nor does a bridegroom enter there.

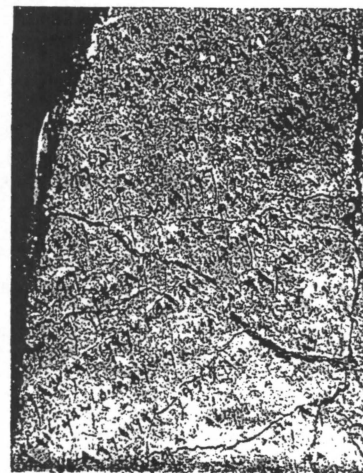
**The rest of the text talks about a seer being prevented from practicing his craft. No direct reference to Balaam is made.**

Your quest is distant to you.

To know how to deliver an oracle to his people

You have been condemned for your speech,

And [banned] from pronouncing words of execration.

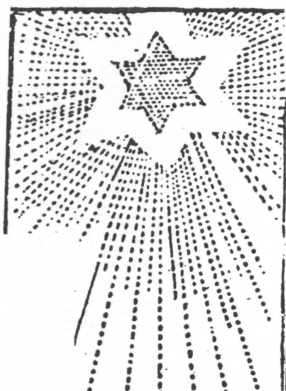


A portion of the "second combination" of the Deir 'Alla text

## BALAAH AND THE BABE OF BETHLEHEH

### Numbers 24:17

Star out of Jacob



Scepter out of Israel



Light	
Savior	
Witnessed by the Shepherds	
Redeemer	
Salvation	
Incarnation as Creator	
Emphasizes His Humanity	

MANFRED E. KOBER, TH.D.