

# A Star Shall Rise: The Messianic Prophecy of the Pagan Prophet

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Far from being a random collection of strange stories, “the Book of Balaam” or the Balaam narrative in Numbers 22–24 is a masterfully structured composition. It uses multiple episodes of mirroring to prepare the reader for the prophetic climax of the third oracle.

Behind the creative literary form, there is a clear theological message: God’s sovereignty over the whole world, including pagan prophets. Further, it demonstrates God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant and messianic hope.

## 1. Blessing and Curse: The Abrahamic Frame

From the beginning, the Balaam story echoes God’s covenant promise to Abraham:

*“Those who bless you will be blessed, and those who curse you will be cursed.”* (Numbers 24:9; cf. Genesis 12:3)

Balak’s request to Balaam to “curse” Israel (Numbers 22:6) directly mirrors, and even seems to parody, God’s words to Abraham. The repetition of *blessing* and *cursing* throughout the narrative (14 and 17 times respectively) binds Balaam’s oracles to the covenantal theme begun in Genesis 12 and the Abrahamic Covenant.

The entire episode is about whether the nations will participate in God’s blessing or in their own self-inflicted curse.

## 2. The Donkey and the Prophet: A Parable on Four Legs

The donkey scene (Numbers 22:22–35) is one of my favorites. It is not a mere Old Testament biblical oddity (with a talking Donkey), it is the interpretive key to the whole narrative. In a highly recommended chapter about the Balaam oracles in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, theologian Seth D. Postell notes that the Balaam narrative is split into two symmetrical sections, each with three episodes. The third episode in both is climactic.

Just as Balaam strikes his donkey three times before his eyes are opened, so Balak compels Balaam three times to curse Israel before his eyes are again opened in prophecy (Numbers 24:4). The donkey “sees” what Balaam cannot—the Angel of the Lord blocking the way.

The lesson? Balaam is God's donkey. Like the animal, he cannot resist God's control; he will speak only what God opens his mouth to say (Numbers 22:28; 23:5, 16). All of the nations lie under the sovereign hand of God. YHVH is not merely a local or national God. He is the God of all the earth.

### 3. The Eyes Opened

The narrative's recurring pattern of "*three times*" (Numbers 22:28, 32–33; 24:10) cues readers to expect revelation on the third cycle.

- First and second attempts: Balaam "uses omens" (Numbers 24:1 implies he had done so before).
- Third attempt: "The Spirit of God came upon him," and "his eyes were opened" (Numbers 24:2–4).

In both episodes—the donkey's vision and the prophetic oracle—Balaam's eyes are opened *on the third time*.

*"Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD."* (Numbers 22:31)

*"The oracle of the man whose eyes are opened, who sees the vision of the Almighty."* (Numbers 24:3–4)

The parallel signals that the third oracle (Numbers 24:5–9) is the climactic revelation of the entire narrative: A Spirit-empowered prophecy about Israel's future King.

### 4. From Nation to King: The Singular Focus

A shift occurs between Balaam's second and third oracles. In the second oracle, Israel is the collective subject ("God brought *them* out of Egypt," Numbers 23:22). In the third, the pronouns change:

*"God brought him out of Egypt; He is like the horns of a wild ox for them."* (Numbers 24:8)

The singular "him" points not to the nation but to Israel's King, whose dominion and victories the oracle predicts.

This is profound: Balaam moves from seeing Israel blessed to seeing Israel's King exalted—the very One through whom the Abrahamic blessing will extend to all nations. It is critical to recognize that these two truths stand together. The prophet who foretold the coming Messianic King of Israel is the same prophet who repeatedly affirms God's irrevocable blessing over corporate Israel. The covenant people and their coming King are inseparable in God's redemptive plan.

This matters deeply in our time. As the spirit of antisemitism once again spreads across the world—and tragically finds a foothold even within the Church, many are tempted to separate what God has joined. Replacement Theology, in particular, blinds the Church to this divine tension: God's promises to Israel and His promise of the Messiah are not competing truths but complementary ones. The exaltation of Israel's King does not nullify the blessing upon Israel; it fulfills it.

## 5. Echoes of Genesis 49: Judah's Lion and the Coming Scepter

The language of Numbers 24:9 directly mirrors Jacob's blessing over Judah:

*“He crouches, he lies down like a lion... who dares to rouse him?”* (Numbers 24:9; cf. Genesis 49:9–10)

This is not coincidence but continuity. Balaam's oracle reaffirms Jacob's prophecy of a royal ruler (the Lion of Judah) whose scepter will not depart until He comes to whom it belongs.

Postell rightly notes that the three great poetic “blessings” of the Pentateuch (Genesis 49, Numbers 24, Deuteronomy 33) all share the same structure and point forward to the same hope: a future King through whom Israel's destiny will be fulfilled. These three blessings should be seen as an extension of the Protoevangelion and the Abrahamic Covenant.

## 6. The Gog/Agag Question and the End-Time Enemy

In Numbers 24:7 there is a fascinating textual variant. The Masoretic Text reads, *“His king will be greater than Agag.”* Many ancient witnesses (LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, Dead Sea Scrolls), however, preserve a more original reading: “Gog”, not Agag.

If so, the prophecy is not about Saul's victory over Amalek but about the Messiah's future triumph over Gog, the eschatological foe of Ezekiel 38–39. This links Balaam's vision to the final defeat of evil in the “last days.” It also explains why God says to Ezekiel's Gog that he is the one who was spoken of by the ancient prophets.

This means that the first proper name the Bible gives to the final adversary—the Antichrist—is “Gog.”

## 7. The Third and Fourth Oracles: Star and Scepter United

The third oracle (Numbers 24:5–9) and fourth oracle (Numbers 24:17–19) are literary twins. Both are called “oracles,” both are spoken with “open eyes,” and both describe a warrior-king who will crush Israel’s enemies:

*“He will smash the forehead of Moab... A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel.”* (Numbers 24:17)

In Hebrew, the same root word for “smash” links both oracles (24:8 and 24:17). The “star” and “scepter” imagery tie back to Jacob’s blessing of Judah in Genesis 49:10 and also forward to Revelation 22:16, where Jesus declares Himself “the bright morning star.”

### Takeaway for Learners

By tracing these structural and literary parallels, we see that the Book of Balaam (Numbers 22–24) forms a unified prophecy.

- The donkey story authenticates Balaam’s words. We can trust the prophetic words that follow, not because Balaam is righteous, but because God is sovereign over every tongue that speaks His Word.
- The triplet pattern builds tension toward the climax of the narrative. The narrative’s structure itself builds anticipation for the moment when Balaam finally “sees” with opened eyes and prophesies by the Spirit of God.
- The third oracle unveils the messianic King. When Balaam’s eyes are opened (Numbers 24:2–4), he sees more than Israel encamped; he sees Israel’s future King:
- The fourth oracle confirms His end-time reign. The focus of the fourth oracle moves from Israel’s King to His future dominion: His triumph over the enemies of God (Moab, Edom, Gog).
- In biblical theology, this anticipates the eschatological reign of the Messiah

The result is a prophetic tapestry stretching from Abraham’s blessing (Genesis 12) to Jacob’s lion (Genesis 49) to the coming Star and Scepter (Numbers 24)—culminating in Jesus, the Messiah-King who fulfills them all.

*“Those who bless you will be blessed, and those who curse you will be cursed.”* (Numbers 24:9)

*“A Star shall come forth from Jacob, a Scepter shall rise from Israel.”* (Numbers 24:17)

## Recommended Resources:

Seth D. Postell, “Numbers 24:5–9, 15–19: The Distant Star,” in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 285.