

Numbers 24:17: A Messianic prophecy, or simply a reference to an earthly king?

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby acknowledge that the work contained in this Thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any academic institution for degree purposes.



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Abstract

The Balaam narratives are considered a source of fascination by many because of the comical tale of Balaam and his donkey. The narratives will however reveal more to the reader willing to engage with the text. May Balaam, despite his unsavoury reputation, be considered a real prophet and will this determination impact on the finding of verse 17 as a messianic prophecy? Current literary work and scholarly articles available were studied and dialogical and comparative methods used to summarise current views and debates relating to these questions.

The research revealed that like the rest of the Pentateuchal writings, despite likely revisions and interpolation in certain passages, the bulk of the current text, may be considered an original composition from the hand of Moses. Although never called a prophet, Balaam does the work of a prophet, delivering oracles under divine inspiration. He is probably best described as a pagan diviner used by Yahweh to communicate his word rather than a "true prophet" or a "false prophet" in the usual sense of those terms. The oracles of Balaam reaffirm God's promises first made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:1-3 and repeated throughout the Pentateuch, namely, promises of land, descendants, and blessing. But it also alludes to much more, the final destruction of Israel's foes under the Messiah. As the text is read and interpreted as part of the tapestry of the whole of biblical theology, a fuller, Messianic, meaning becomes evident.

The Balaam narratives serve as the theological hinge of the book of Numbers, recalling both the old generation of rebellion, and the new generation of hope that will re-enter the land of promise. Yahweh's purpose to bless his people will not be thwarted by the intrigues of Israel's enemies, or Israel's past disobedience. This promise of blessing is not only limited to a generation but extends to the future, to the ultimate blessing, the Messiah as prophesied by Balaam in Numbers 24:17.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDB - Brown F, Driver SR, and Briggs CA, ed., A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament

ESV English Standard Version

MT – Masoretic Text

NASB – New American Standard Bible

NEB- New English Bible

NET New English Translation

NIV New International Version

Sam – Samaritan Pentateuch

Vg – Latin Vulgate

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Balaam the butt of the joke, the seer who could not see, when a donkey could. Can anything said by this person be taken seriously? Not only is Balaam viewed with a sense of ridicule but Bible writers throughout have nothing good to say about him. Is it possible that this shady character could not only be a prophet of God but also be the deliverer of a profound Messianic prophecy?

1.2. The Research Problem

1.2.1. Main Problem

The aim of the study is to assess the meaning and significance of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17, especially whether it constitutes a reliable Messianic prophecy?

1.2.2. Sub-problems

1. How do background issues of the book of Numbers, such as authorship, readers, historical occasion and setting, literary structure, and theological motifs frame the interpretation of the Balaam narratives?
2. How would biblical criteria for judging prophetic ministries guide the evaluation of Balaam as a prophet in Numbers 22-24?
3. Does Numbers 24:17 constitute a messianic prophecy?

1.2.3. Hypotheses

The researcher will present two main hypotheses namely:

1. The prophecy in Numbers 24:17 is a reliable Messianic prophecy.
2. Balaam's status as true prophet or not does not take away from the prophetic nature of his oracles.

1.3. The Research Plan

This is a literary study, so the data required for each stage of the study consist of literary resources. The primary source material is the biblical text itself. Since the researcher lacks the proficiency with the Hebrew language to translate and analyse the Hebrew text, she will work from a variety of English translations (including NASB, ESV, NIV, NLT, and NKJV). The most important secondary resources are major English commentaries, namely, The Anchor Bible commentary, The International Critical Commentary, The International Theological Commentary, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament, and the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, supplemented by technical articles such as Fox (1997), Martin (1994), and Levine (2000).

The thesis is structured to probe the hypotheses, “The prophecy in Numbers 24:17 is a reliable Messianic prophecy. Balaam’s status as true prophet or not does not take away from the prophetic nature of his oracles”. One chapter will be dedicated to each of the three sub-problems.

1.3.1. Methodology for Chapter 2: The Book of Numbers

This chapter consists of a survey of scholarly materials dealing with the “introductory issues” in Numbers, to demonstrate how background issues of the book of Numbers such as authorship, readers, historical occasion and setting, literary structure, and theological motifs frame the interpretation of the Balaam narratives. Arguments for and against Mosaic authorship of the book of Numbers abound and have been intense over many decades because the book does not specifically identify its author. Viewpoints vary between the extremes of those resolute in their belief that Moses authored the book and those arguing vehemently against any recognition of Mosaic authorship to those preferring middle ground by acknowledging Mosaic authorship with some editorial editions. The view on authorship will set the course for other interpretations required to answer the research problem.

1.3.2. Methodology for Chapter 3: The Balaam Narratives

This chapter is a study of the Balaam narratives in Numbers 22-24. The chapter will both contextualise the more detailed study of Numbers 24:15-19 and provide insight

regarding one of the key questions, namely, whether or not Balaam is a true prophet. To answer this question, the chapter needs to provide an interpretive framework for assessing what a true prophet is. The researcher will review important literature on this subject in order to guide her evaluation of Balaam.

The chapter seeks to answer a variety of interrelated questions. Was Balaam a prophet? What is the biblical criteria for judging prophetic ministries and how will this guide the evaluation of Balaam as a prophet in Numbers 22–24? The definition of a prophet needs to be considered. How did the Old Testament authors define a prophet and which theological-ethical concerns governed their understanding of the prophetic office? Did the Old Testament authors' view of what prophecy entailed develop over time? Did this understanding of a prophet change during the various stages, and in the various contexts portrayed in the Old Testament? Is the prophetic office mandatory before a passage or verse may be defined as a messianic message?

1.3.3. Methodology for Chapter 4: Numbers 24:17

This final chapter is an exegetical study of Numbers 24:15-19, aiming to answer one main question: Is verse 17 a reliable messianic prophecy. The researcher presupposes a classical evangelical view of inspiration—the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the Old Testament includes prophetic utterances that point forward to the future Messiah.

The exegetical procedure will be based on Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (4th ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), with adjustments to compensate for the researcher's limited ability to work with the Hebrew text. The steps to be followed include:

1. Confirm the limits of the passage.
2. Analyse translation difficulties and alternatives.
3. Examine salient grammatical and lexical features.
4. Assess the form, structure, and life setting of the pericope.
5. Explore the literary and historical context of the pericope.
6. Analyse the history of interpretation of the passage, both in biblical and extra-biblical sources.

Stuart (2009, loc. 2290) encourages, “Even if your knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and other languages has deteriorated (or was never adequate), you can still work profitably with the original languages by using English-oriented texts. Do not hesitate to use these”. To minimise the language barrier, the researcher will use an interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament, drawing on Logos Bible Software to assist with parsing, vocabulary, and usage in other texts. She will consult a variety of respected translations and commentaries to gain insight into exegetical difficulties that may lie in the Hebrew text. She recognises that this is imperfect, but she is confident that the resolution of the main problem is not so heavily dependent on grammatical subtleties as to nullify the study.

Two kinds of secondary resources are extensively used in this stage of the study. The first is standard Old Testament lexica and dictionaries. For most word definitions, the researcher will rely on the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, edited by Koehler et al. The second category of secondary resources is major English commentaries on the Old Testament.

This goal of the analysis is to determine if Numbers 24:17 constitutes a messianic prophecy or if it is simply a reference to an earthly king. Is this verse merely the ramblings of an overly zealous “prophet”? The researcher assesses the meaning and significance of the prophecy as interpreted in Scripture, by the early church, and by later Christian writers. Her objective is to assess whether there is enough evidence to conclude that it constitutes a reliable Messianic prophecy. Did Balaam speak or was this a word from God? The “star” and “sceptre” images require evaluation to determine if they found fulfillment in the actions of king David as argued by commentators who deny any messianic reference, or if they do constitute messianic references, as Israel’s enemies were never completely defeated under David’s rule?

Chapter 2: The Book of Numbers

2.1. Introduction

As no Bible passage stands in isolation, it is necessary to ascertain how background issues of the book of Numbers, frame the interpretation of the Balaam narratives. In this chapter, the writer will survey scholarly materials to obtain a clearer picture of issues regarding authorship, readers, historical occasion and setting, literary structure, and theological motifs. Current literary work and scholarly articles available will be studied and dialogical and comparative methods utilised to summarise current scholarly views and debates. Where appropriate, conclusions will be made that form premises for the remainder of the study, but non-essential questions and debates will be left open.

2.2. Authorship, date, and audience

The fourth book of the Old Testament derives its English name from the LXX title *Arithmoi* and the Vulgate's *Numeri* (Sakenfeld 1995:2). The two census lists of Numbers 1 and 26 give rise to these titles and mark the edge between the old generation who wandered the wilderness and the new generation that will eventually enter the promised land (Ward 2009:95). The authorship and dating of the book of Numbers has long been a lively point of discussion and the researcher will review these contentious issues below. First arguments for Mosaic authorship will be summarised at the hand of internal evidence in the Pentateuch, other Old Testament books, the New Testament and references made by Jesus and his disciples. Secondly the researcher will look at the editorial view which holds to Mosaic authorship but admits to certain editorial work that accounts for the complexity of the history of the literary development of the book of Numbers and finally move to views disputing Mosaic authorship.

Though the text itself does not clearly state the author, both Jewish tradition and conservative scholarship have ascribed the authorship to Moses (Ward 2009:95). Schniedewind (2005:6-7) believes this tradition arose after c. 300 BCE as a response to author-centric Greek culture which was first clearly expressed in the Babylonian Talmud composed between 200-500 CE (Robinson 2008:98). Harrison defends substantial Mosaic authorship and is convinced that the “canonical” form of the book is true to life in the bronze age (Harrison 1990:21-23). When authors argue for Mosaic authorship, they opt for the pre-exile date and work from the theological presupposition that the text is authoritative and refers to actual historical events (Ashley 1993:3-4). Some Christian Evangelical scholars see Mosaic authorship as crucial to their understanding of the unity and authority of Scripture (Tenney 2010).

What can be concluded as concerns the arguments for Mosaic authorship? First, there are numerous passages within the Pentateuch itself, one can read numerous times how Moses wrote the law of God.

“Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said” (Exodus 24:4, NIV).

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write down these words’” (Exodus 34:27).

“At the Lord’s command Moses recorded the stages in their journey” (Numbers 33:2).

“So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the Levitical priests” (Deuteronomy 31:9).

Gleason (1975:81) mentions other internal evidences in the Pentateuch that further point to Mosaic authorship. The writer of Exodus for example, gives eyewitness details of the event that only a participant would know about. The author of both Genesis and Exodus portrays remarkable knowledge of Egyptian names and places. This knowledge is evident even in the style of writing used. Whitelaw (1939:2165) has noted that the writer used many idioms and terms of speech, which are characteristically Egyptian in origin, even though translated into Hebrew.

Bible writers throughout the Old Testament credited Moses with writing the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah or Law. A plain statement of this commonly held conviction is expressed in Joshua 8:32 which states “There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on stones a copy of the law of Moses”. Notice also that 2 Chronicles 34:14 states “Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses” (see also Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Malachi 4:4). As Josh McDowell noted in his book, *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, these verses refer to an actual written “law of Moses”, not simply an oral tradition (1975:93-94).

The New Testament writers also showed no hesitation in affirming that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. Luke recorded of the resurrected Jesus “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). John wrote “For the law was given through Moses...” (John 1:17). Peter affirmed Mosaic authorship when referring to the Jewish practice of publicly reading the Law “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). With this Paul concurred in Romans 10:5 “Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law...”. In 2 Corinthians 3:15 Paul makes use of metonymy (when authors are put for the works which they have produced) when he wrote “Even to this day when Moses is read a veil covers the heart”. This is akin to asking someone if he has read Shakespeare, Dickens, or Wilde by which we mean to ask if he has read the writings of these men. In Luke 16:29, one can read where Abraham spoke to the rich man concerning his five brothers saying ““They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them””, meaning that the rich man’s brothers had the writings of Moses and the prophets as these people were no longer alive at that point in time.

Both Jesus’s disciples and his enemies recognised and accepted the books of Moses. After Philip was called to follow Jesus, he found his brother Nathanael and said “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote...” (John 1:45). In Mark 12:19 even the Sadducees considered Moses as the author, “‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves

a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5).

The most convincing reason to not simply sit idly by and claim that it does not matter who wrote the Pentateuch, is because Jesus himself claimed “the Law” came from Moses. In Mark 7:10 Jesus quoted from both Exodus 20 and 21, attributing the words to Moses. Later in the gospel of Mark chapter 12 verse 26, we read where Jesus asked the Sadducees “have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?”. But, perhaps the most convincing passage of all is found in John 5:46-47 where Jesus said “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-18). It would be hard not to attribute either deception or error to Christ and the apostles if Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

While LaSor et al. (1996:163) continue to believe that Mosaic authorship deserves the benefit of the doubt they argue that it is better in view of the underlying assumptions of JEDP and the supporting historical evidence to conclude that it was then edited at later times into its present canonical form. Likewise, the researcher agrees with recent conservative scholars, such as Cole, that continue to believe in Mosaic authorship but opt for a slightly varied approach that takes the complexity of the history of the literary development of the book of Numbers into account (Cole 2000:29-35).

When accepting the editorial view, the question beckons, did the long period of transmission, and the shaping of the book by editorial hands to reflect certain perspectives, have the effect of diminishing the material into a “fictional” account? Provan opposes such a viewpoint and contends that the text can, “testify truthfully”

Like a portrait, a biblical narrative is in one sense a fabrication, because it consists of words on paper and not the actual past. Nevertheless, these words on paper, like paint on canvas, can accurately represent the historical past (Provan, Long and Longman 2003:85-86).

John Bright states confidently that although we know nothing of Moses’ career

“save what the Bible tells us, the details of which we have no means of testing, there can be no doubt that he was, as the Bible portrays him, the great founder of Israel’s faith” (Bright 1981:127). The writer agrees that this viewpoint that the Old Testament can testify “truthfully” about historical events poses no problem, if one holds 2 Timothy 3:16 as a theological presupposition that God has “breathed” (i.e. overseen the development and transmission of the final form of the text). Ashley (1993:7) so eloquently describes this concept

It seems best to take the materials of the text itself as offering some clue to the sources and composition of the book. Moses may have had a key role in the origin of some of the material in Numbers, though we have no way of knowing how much of it goes back to him. Much of what is in the book bears marks of antiquity, but there are also undoubted signs of a long period of transmission. The book probably went through a more complex history of transmission than is recoverable. I believe that, through all the complexities of the transmission of the text of Numbers, God was at work to bring to his people the final form of the text. Inspiration should not be limited to any one stage in the composition of the biblical text. The Church and the Synagogue confess the whole OT text as God’s Word, not just one stage in its composition.

Over time many critics however stepped forward who questioned Mosaic authorship and Wenham (1981:24-25) contends that the sources of the book underpin the reason for this. This led to the position of critical scholars who worked from the position associated with Wellhausen’s Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel (1878) that the Pentateuch is composed of a series of written documents commonly referred to as follows: J (Jahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deutoronomist), P (Priestly), dating from the time of the monarchy (J), to the post-exilic period (P). It is suggested that literary, theological, and linguistic criteria demarcate the source traditions, for instance the use of divine names and the presence of doublets (Ward 2009:96).

The view later known as the “Documentary Hypothesis” was refined over time and formed the basis for the development of other approaches to the study of the

Pentateuch, for instance Gerhard von Rad's form-criticism and Martin Noth's tradition-historical approaches (Ward 2009:96). Of late it became clear that the differentiation of sources has proven to be far more complex than Wellhausen initially believed which subjected the Documentary Hypothesis to substantial criticism. This has led to a call for a different approach by scholars like Whybray (1995) contending for a "fragmentary" hypothesis and Van Seters (1997) arguing that a "supplementary" view makes better sense of the evidence. Much of the text of Numbers has been understood to represent the work of a priestly editor, although large blocks of material, for instance, the Balaam Narratives in Numbers 22–24, represent the Jahwist and Elohist source traditions (Ward 2009:96). Friedman provides a new view into the five books of Moses with a recent detailed analysis in his work *The Bible with sources revealed* (Friedman 2003:2393-08).

Another popular view among liberal theologians since the eighteenth century is that Jesus accommodated the beliefs of his time and incorporated them into his teaching. The accommodation theory posits that he knew the belief was wrong, but didn't bother to deal with it because it would have been a distraction in his quest to save us from our sins.

A related view, the limitation theory, states that Jesus was limited in his understanding to the degree that he unwittingly taught error (Enns 2012:153). Both, of the above, are rejected by the researcher.

Beliefs relating to authorship inevitably impact on the date ascribed to the book of Numbers. The two major schools of thought are those of pre- and post-exilic dating. The researcher, as scholars ascribing to Mosaic authorship, argues for a predominantly pre-exilic date.

The discovery of fragments of the Hebrew Bible at Ketef Hinnom, known as the silver scrolls, dating to the 7th century BCE, placing it before the Babylonian captivity, suggests that at least some elements of the written Torah were current before the Babylonian exile. Professor Barkay et al. (2003:162-173) state that the verses containing the priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:24-26 are the only verses currently on hand from the time of the first Temple period and concede that although this find does not prove that the Pentateuch was written by the 7th century it is strong evidence for an argument in favour of that position.

In a more recent defense of the antiquity of the material in the Pentateuch, Milgrom has delineated eleven priestly terms and fifteen priestly institutions mentioned in Numbers that disappeared by the postexilic period. He also cites thirteen priestly terms and ten priestly institutions that originated “in the earliest period of (or prior to) Israel’s national existence.” (Milgrom 1990: xxxii–xxxv). Ancient terms include “assembly”, “tribe”, “clan”, “physical work”, “feel guilt” and “loaf”. Identified ancient institutions of Israel included the square shape of the Israelite camp, the early roles of the Levites, the purification rites for the Nazirite, details from the campaign against the Midianites, the boundaries of the Promised Land, the Temple and Levitical tithes, and the bronze serpent.

The ancient morphology of the names of the sons of Jacob and the leaders of the tribes in Numbers 1–2 are presented as further evidence for pre-exilic dating and is discussed in detail by Kitchen (1995: 48-75, 88-95) in his work *The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History*.

Cole (2000:13) further points out that the territorial allocations among the tribes, beginning in Numbers 32 and completed in Joshua 14–22, are completely different from the concerns of the postexilic community, where it is confined to only a small portion of that which was formerly Judah and Benjamin. He states that the matter of territorial provision for the daughters of Zelophehad, which frames the material of chaps. 27–36, is rendered meaningless outside of an early pre-exilic setting. In the postexilic era, land grant opportunities in northern Transjordan would have been meaningless.

McDermott (2002:21) concludes that scholars who believe that the text is the work of many hands over many centuries, date the first major comprehensive draft as being composed by the late 7th or 6th century BC (Jahwist). The addition of various narratives and laws later expanded this, with the final form of the text edited at the hands of a redactor (P) in the post-exilic period (Ashley 1993:4). Ska provides a detailed overview of the history of Pentateuchal scholarship in his 2006 work *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (English translation).

Although the prevailing view among scholars who accept the Documentary Hypothesis is that Numbers, in its final form, is a post exilic work, scholars like Kaufman (1980) hold that the Priestly materials in Numbers are in fact pre-exilic, a view shared by

Milgrom in his *Commentary on Numbers* in the *JBS Torah Commentary* (1990: xxxi–ixxxv).

Despite discoveries like the silver scrolls, there are still critical views that put the final form of Numbers only during the postexilic period, and if Van der Toorn (2007:249) is to be believed perhaps even under the editorship of the scribe Ezra, under a mandate from the Persian authorities to codify a Jewish national law. Ward (2009:97) refers to the fact that the law book read by Ezra in Nehemiah 8 has been identified with Deuteronomy, or with the Priestly materials by several scholars. While Ska argues strongly against the notion that the law code of Ezra 7 was the Pentateuch, he does agree that the Persian authorities created a favourable situation for the composition of a document that became the “identity card” of the Postexilic community (Ska 2006:225). In fact, he suggests that the Pentateuch resulted from the internal needs of the postexilic community (Ska 2006:225). Carter (1999) and Smith (1990) suggest that the conflict between the diaspora, who considered themselves “purified” by the experiences of the exile, and the “unclean” Judean population is reflected in both Ezra and Nehemiah. These viewpoints of the people would inevitably have substantial influence on the theological focus of the book of Numbers, and specifically the Balaam narratives.

Many Biblical scholars are, per Joseph Blenkinsopp (1992:1), united in the belief that, the written books were a product of the Babylonian captivity (c. 600 BCE) based on earlier written and oral traditions, completed by the period of Achaemenid rule (c. 400 BCE) as affirmed by Finkelstein and Silberman (2001:68). Weinberg’s (1992:151) theory of Citizen-Temple Community similarly supports a postexilic date for the composition of the Pentateuch in its final form. He remarks that, the Pentateuch would serve to both clarify the issue of “membership” in the community, and to provide the authority structures necessary to its success. It would further explain the insistence on separating aliens from the people of Israel and clarify the condemnation of Balaam in Nehemiah 13:2 as a foreign “pretender”.

The audience of the Book of Numbers per predominantly pre-exilic supporters is the people of Israel in the second generation from the Exodus, awaiting the command of God to cross the Jordan to conquer the land of Canaan.

The book describes the affairs of the people of the first generation, but its teaching is for their children who are now mature and are about to enter Canaan (Allen 1973:9). Post-exilic proponents envisage the audience as the Israelite community dealing with the aftermath of the exile. It aims to remind Israel of God's covenantal faithfulness not only regarding the promise of land but also pertaining to the future king and sets the stage for the Balaam narratives in Numbers 22–24.

To summarise the current state of Old Testament studies. Since 1670, when the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza suggested that Ezra might have authored the Pentateuch, source criticism has grown to such an extent that it has successfully removed serious consideration of Mosaic authorship for many scholars. However, the twentieth century has seen the pillars supporting the Wellhausen theory, weakened or removed. The result has been the uncomfortable reliance by many scholars on a system of literary criticism that no longer has a firm foundation. As one Old Testament scholar, has written

Wellhausen's arguments complemented each other nicely, and offered what seemed to be a solid foundation upon which to build the house of biblical criticism. Since then, however, both the evidence and the arguments supporting the structure have been called into question and, to some extent, even rejected. Yet biblical scholarship, while admitting that the grounds have crumbled away, nevertheless continues to adhere to the conclusions (Gleason 1975:81).

Beginning at the turn of the century, scholars have challenged the divine-names criterion for determining authorship. Albright, who remained within the documentary camp, called the minute analysis of the Pentateuch after Wellhausen "absurd" and "irrational". Hermann Gunkel, who introduced form criticism, concluded that "we really know nothing for certain about these hypothetical documents of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis". In other words, he refused to accept the numerous authors for the Pentateuch, particularly the J, E, and P sources, that had been speculated about by scholars for decades. There are too many critics to mention by name, but the cumulative effect has been substantial (Gleason 1975:83).

Where does this leave us today? Lyons (2002) concludes that it has left the scholarly community in search for new foundations. But even for those who reject the possibility of supernatural revelation, the evidence from archaeology, the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran, and information about the languages of the ancient orient are making dependence on the Wellhausen theory inexcusable.

The researcher humbly submits that the Pentateuch may be considered as a literary unit. Scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs, parallel narrative structure, and deliberate theological arrangement of literary units for teaching and memorisation support viewing the five books as a literary whole (Hill & Walton 2000:81). This gives credence to Mosaic authorship, albeit by Moses or by his attendant officials and/or later scribes through a history of oral and written transmission. The internal evidence does not afford a definitive conclusion regarding the final form of the Canonical Book of Numbers. Even the more traditional evangelical scholars like Harrison (1990:15-24) and Ashley (1993:5-7) acknowledge a textual history that includes a limited amount of history of interpolation, editing, and updating of materials. Yet in accepting later emendations, scholars always need to acknowledge the perpetual work of the Holy Spirit in and through faithful servants to finalise and preserve God's revelation.

2.3. Historical context: occasion, purpose, and milieu

Historical sources inevitably derive from certain environments and should be understood as connected to the conditions of those environments. One should always consider when, where and why a source came to be to fully understand its content.

The purpose of the book of Numbers is summarised by Maryono (1989:8) as the

narration of the preparation of Israel for entry into the Promised Land by describing the journey from Sinai to the region beyond the Jordan, and the legal decisions made in the wilderness. Moses also wanted Israel to learn from history. Together with describing in detail the great things God has done to and for them he also listed carefully various commands of God to govern their whole life. Their position as covenantal people obligates them to subject the whole area of their life under the control of God: worship, social, family, and individual. They are also

to know that the land they will possess is a covenantal land. The Lord dwells in it, therefore, they are called to guard the purity of the land. Obedience to his commands will assure the possibility of enjoying the blessing in the land. Then Moses warns the people ... [that] grave consequences shall [occur if] they fail to obey God. Their covenantal position does not exclude them from the possibility of receiving severe judgment.

Johnson (1989:1) writes that

Numbers continues to reveal Yahweh in His Presence among the people who permits Israel's disobedience to delay entrance into the land promised yet in the discipline of His permissive will prepared the next generation to enter the land in obedience administered under the responsibility demanded by law.

Allen (1973:10) describes a multifaceted purpose of the book namely to

compel obedience to Yahweh by members of the new community by reminding them of the wrath of God on their parents because of their breach of covenant; to encourage them to trust in the ongoing promises of their Lord as they follow him into their heritage in Canaan; and to provoke them to the worship of God and to the enjoyment of their salvation.

The purpose of the texts, Ska (2006:225-226) believes, is to present the importance of ties to the past. Instead of letting itself be assimilated or become just another province in the vast Empire, Postexilic Israel wanted to safeguard its identity.

Enns argues, that the final form of the Pentateuch reflects the concerns of the community that produced it, namely the Postexilic Israelites, who had experienced God's rejection in Babylon (Enns 2012:5). These stories were written to say something of God and Israel's place in the world as God's chosen people. Firstly, to narrate the preparation of Israel for entry into the Promised Land, by describing the journey from Sinai to the region beyond Jordan, and the legal decisions made in the wilderness. Secondly, the success of Israel in fulfilling her role as God's mediatorial agent to

exercise God's rule on earth does not rest on her but on the One who chose her into that position. There is a certain irony in God's permissive will in that He allows evil to draw people closer to him. Although sin appears to be allowed to interfere with what God is doing, it does not ultimately triumph. The question is not whether man can obey but whether man will obey (with the strength of the Lord). This is clearly illustrated in the Balaam narratives.

Olson (1996:4) describes the book of Numbers as focusing on “the promise and inheritance of land” whilst Douglas (1993:158) contends that the early post-exilic period is the time of the redaction of the text – a time when tension existed over land rights when returnees from Babylon wanted their homes and farms back from those who had been working their land for over fifty years. Budd (1984:xvii) writes, that the author had as his chief concern the establishment of principles of attitude and behaviour which are a precondition of possession and enjoyment of the land.

In, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian period: a social and demographic study*, Carter (1999) details how the returnees from exile were faced with not only the task of building a new community within the Persian province of Yehud, but also an internal theological crisis as they wrestled with the meaning of the Exile and the destruction of the Temple for their faith in Yahweh. Opposition from hostile elements remaining in Palestine during the exile, as well as political opponents from neighbouring provinces were further obstacles to be overcome.

Scholars consider the book to be written not only to remind Israel of their past and the consequences of their sin but also to reinforce the covenantal promises. The book that describes the “Desert Years” is designed to encourage spiritual confidence on the part of the people who are about to leave the desert.

2.4 Literary structure: structure and argument

The order (or disorder) of Numbers is often considered to be a difficulty for many in interpreting the book (Malick 2004:Section IV). Martin Noth observed that “from the point of view of its contents, the book lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction” (Noth 1968:1). Other commentators have been more optimistic at the

reader's ability to discern a plan and purpose for the book. Several approaches to the structuring of the book of Numbers have been taken.

Wenham (1981:14–18) offers several suggestions for understanding the literary structure of this book. In the first instance, the mixture of law and narrative is designed to remind the reader that saving history concerns everyone and that they should proceed to do the will of God now. Secondly the inclusion of law with narrative is designed to emphasise promise in that Israel can fulfil it and finally the variations in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers emphasise large cycles which bring out the parallels between the three journeys and the three occasions of law giving.

The traditional approach focuses on the three main geographic locations: at Mount Sinai (1:1–10:10); near Kadesh-Barnea (10:11–19:22); and on the plains of Moab (20:1–36:13). Ashley (1993:2) has modified this structure slightly around the themes of orientation (1:1–10:10), disorientation (10:11–22:1), and new orientation (22:1–36:13), with transitional travel narratives in 10:11–12:16, and 20:1–22:1 (Ashley 1993:8-9). Forsling (2013:15) notes that the problem with this approach is the fact that it is not neat at the seams.

There is no consensus as to how to delimit the middle section and because it is difficult to point out a specific place as particularly important by the end of the middle section. For these reasons, the geographical suggestions typically break down at some point.

Olson on the other hand has proposed an influential structure suggesting that Numbers can be sorted under two themes namely “death of the old and birth of the new” which per Forsling (2013:16) grant a definitive literary and theological structure to the book. The book falls into two sections that focuses on the two census lists, and the two generations represented by them (Olson 1996:5). In his 1985 book, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New*, Olson writes that Numbers 1–25 represents the old generation of rebellion and Numbers 26–36 depicts the new generation of hope.

Douglas (1993:158) points out that the problem with this view is the fact that the material in Numbers is not so easily divided into two distinctly contrasting sections (i.e. Numbers 1–10 does not reflect rebellion and doom while Numbers 22–24 portrays

Yahweh's blessing rather than the death throes of the doomed generation as would be expected.

The ring-structure suggested by Douglas (1993/1994:200) provides a less influential way to structure Numbers based on the festival calendars in Numbers 28–29.

Numbers is divided into 12 months creating sections that go around in a ring where the two strands of law and narrative alternate. She notes that

What is so unfamiliar as to be controversial in the lay out of the Book of Numbers is not the episodic use of parallelisms, nor even the regular alternation between legal and story sections. The surprise is the scale of paralleling which is comprehensive enough to organise the whole book.

Knierim and Coats suggest a two-part structure, choosing to mark the division at Numbers 1:1–10:10, "The Legend of the Organisation of the Sanctuary Campaign", and 10:11–36:13, "The saga of the campaign itself" (Knierim & Coats 2005:9). Forsling's critique of this viewpoint stresses the fact that Numbers 26–28 only very indirectly has anything to do with a failed attempt to conquer the promised land, requiring intricate reasoning to connect to this concept (Forsling 2013:17).

Despite the various suggested structures, which are more often than not formulated to exclude the others, none has achieved consensus. What is significant though is the fact that the Balaam narratives of Numbers 22–24 serves as the hinge or fulcrum between the two sets of generations as well as the hinge between the first and second halves of the book of Numbers uniting that which comes before Numbers 22, and that which follow Numbers 25 (Ward 2009:103).

There is then a message of hope and encouragement, for the new generation, of God's faithfulness which serves to encourage the new generation to detour from the history of apostasy and follow God faithfully.

2.5. Theological context: themes and motifs

Numbers is a work rich in theological importance with an indispensable role in the Pentateuch (Noth 1968:11). It is a book of practical theology that emphasises the interaction between God and his people. It anticipates the promised land but also

continues many themes of the previous books of the Pentateuch. Clines in his work, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, identified the overarching theme of the first five books as the partial fulfilment of a promise made by God to the patriarchs. The promise has three elements namely posterity, divine-human relationship, and land (Clines 1997:29).

The theme of descendants marks the first event in Numbers, the census which demonstrates the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise as well as serving as God's guarantee of victory over Canaan (Olson 1996:14). In chapters 1–10 the progressive theme of God's presence with Israel becomes clear in preparation for their conquest of the land (Ska 2006:38).

The theme of divine-human relationship is expressed or managed through a series of covenants, the third between God and Israel consists of an elaborate set of laws scattered through Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers which they are to observe and remain faithful to Yahweh, by putting their trust in him (Bandstra 2004:28–29).

Concerning the theme of land Ska points out that when Israel refuses to enter the land the whole generation is condemned to die in the wilderness. The message is clear; failure was due to their unfaithfulness and the new generation following the instructions of Yahweh as given through Moses is successful (Ska 2006:38).

Numbers is the story of people on their journey through the wilderness (Olsen 1996:1), who are engaged in moving from bondage to freedom (Sakenfeld 1995:1).

Although it contains several theological themes, Elwell considers the key theological theme to be a continuation from Exodus and Leviticus, namely the holiness of God which provides the reason for many of the requirements and commands in the book. The book affirms that sin and rebellion will not thwart the purposes of God (Elwell 1997). Ultimately it is the story about the promised yet ever surpassing loyalty of the God who refuses to let go of the people, no matter how rebellious they may be (Sakenfeld 1995:2).

The inclusion of the Balaam narratives in Numbers enhances the basic message of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness to Israel by reminding them they are blessed people nurtured and protected by his presence. It serves to encourage Israel on their journey to the promised land by demonstrating his sovereign control over the nations in the region.

It also extends the promise of future messianic kingship in the prophecy of the star and the scepter (Hill and Walton 2000:128).

The book of Numbers not only reflects the sin and rebellion of Israel but more importantly a time of grace and provision by a holy God forever true to his covenantal promises.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter surveyed scholarly materials dealing with the "introductory issues" in Numbers, utilising current literary works and scholarly articles.

The writer agrees with more conservative scholars, who after fair examination, disagrees with the modern hypothesis of the book being a late compilation from preexisting documents. The contention that some of the documents descended from primitive times, most of which were only the praiseworthy efforts of subsequent ages to preserve the national traditions of the Beni-Israel from becoming extinct, cannot stand.

Although there is every probability that, like the rest of the Pentateuchal writings, it has been subjected to one or more revisions, and may even have suffered interpolation in certain passages, the bulk of the text as we possess it, may confidently be considered an original composition from the hand of Moses.

The book reminds Israel of their past and the consequences of their sin but also serves to emphasise the grace and provision by a holy God forever true to his covenantal promises, a theme further explored in the promise of Numbers 24:17 studied in this paper.

Chapter 3: The Balaam Narratives

3.1. Introduction

Having determined the broader background of the book of Numbers, this chapter will direct the attention to the Balaam narratives in Numbers 22–24, to both contextualise the more detailed study of Numbers 24:15-19 and provide insight regarding one of the key questions, namely, was Balaam a true prophet? The answer to this question can only be revealed once we have an interpretive framework for assessing what a true prophet is. The researcher will review some of the literature on this subject, to guide her evaluation of Balaam.

3.2. Context

As seen in the previous chapter, the fact that the researcher, as many conservative scholars, ascribe to predominantly Mosaic authorship does not lead the researcher to absolutely exclude the possibility that certain characteristics within Numbers 22–24 may indicate inclusion from other sources and/or the work of a redactor to bring the book to its final form. This leads this study to closer investigate the relationship between the narratives and the oracles as well as the question of unity of the Balaam pericope.

3.2.1. The relationship between the narratives and oracles within the Balaam pericope.

The Balaam pericope of Numbers 22–24 is seen by many as standing on its own without real connections to any material preceding it, and which follow it. It is concluded by Milgrom that the pericope is an independent composition that was eventually inserted into the text of the book of Numbers and provides proof that the narratives and the poems were composed independently, and may in fact, reflect the compilation of a variety of sources (Milgrom 1990:467). The tale of the Donkey in Numbers 22:22-35 is generally viewed as an interpolation (Levine 2000:137). Should one entertain the

possibility that the narratives and poems were composed independently, the next question then arises, which came first: the poems or the narratives? Milgrom has argued that the oracles were composed for the sake of the narratives and that, without the narratives, the oracles would make no sense, and all their allusions to personalities, nations, and events would be incomprehensible (Milgrom 1990:467). This conclusion flows from the fact that (a) the oracles make repeated references to the narratives, and more specifically, to the prose passages which precede the poetical sections and (b) the oracles “keep perfect pace” with the development of the themes of the narratives (Milgrom 1990:467-478). He does however acknowledge the possibility that the poetic oracles and the narratives were originally independent of each other, “discrete epics” on the same theme, which were fused later by a single editorial hand. However, even were this so, the fusion is so thoroughgoing and skilful that the original seams are no longer visible. The redaction resulted in a new artistic creation (Milgrom 1990:468).

Ashley disagrees, and argues that it seems most likely, that the narratives were composed to provide a setting for the oracles. To substantiate his argument, he notes that no Israelite was present at these events, hence there is no clear indication as to how and when these narratives came into Israelite hands. Irrespective of what the background of the text might have been, the present text clearly presents Israelite theology to an Israelite audience (Ashley 1993:436).

Levine concurs with Ashley, in part, based upon the fact that the poems contain archaisms. He argues that the narratives were composed to provide a setting for the poems and concludes that

In literary-historical terms, as opposed to textual presentation, it is highly improbable that the Balaam poems were written to fit into the narratives. It is more likely that the poetic orations existed independently of the narratives, perhaps even as a collection (Levine 2000:210).

Budd (1984:263) suggests that while the orthographic evidence does not require a second millennium provenance for the poems, it is unlikely that they are later than the tenth or early ninth century. He further describes the date and provenance of the oracles as “obscure” but concludes that they are probably old, which makes it more

likely that the narratives were composed to provide a context for the oracles, as the linguistic data indicates the antiquity of the poetry over the narratives.

To date no definite solution to the question has been found.

3.2.2. Is Numbers 22–24 a unified text, or a melding of two traditions into one narrative account?

The answer to the question whether Numbers 22–24 presents a unified account, or whether it reflects at least two different traditions concerning Balaam that have been forged together into one narrative may be explored at the hand of the seeming narrative inconsistency, use of divine names, and the use of repetitive words as expanded on below.

3.2.2.1. Narrative Inconsistency and the tale of Balaam's Donkey. The dramatic change in the setting of the narrative suggests possible inconsistency. There is no-one around to witness the scene, the location is unknown, and the reader is transported to an almost surreal world in which animals talk, and angels with drawn swords appear (Ward 2009:53). Milgrom (1990:468-469) points out the following anomalies

- (1) Balak and his entourage have disappeared from the scene.
- (2) Balaam is seen traversing cultivated fields with walls – not the desert wastes which one would expect he would have had to cross to come to Balak from Pethor.
- (3) The plot has shifted from Balak as God's adversary, to Balaam as God's opponent. This seems to be at odds with Balaam's attitude towards Yahweh revealed in 22:13.

Further support for narrative inconsistency flows from the fact that the story of Balaam and his donkey seems nonessential to the pericope. Ashley (1993:437) states that the story would still make absolute sense even if the tale of Balaam and his donkey is left out entirely. Within the text there are also certain markers that indicate the use of the literary technique known as repetitive resumption (Ward 2009:58). This literary technique draws on the near repetition of words which signifies that a scribal intra-

textual expansion has been made within the text. The tale of the donkey is one such an example. The reader is told that Balaam “went with the officials of Moab” in Numbers 22:21. The tale of the donkey then follows. Afterwards, the narrator once again tells the reader that “Balaam went on with the officials of Balak”. Van der Toorn explains it as follows

Where an expansion causes an interruption in the flow of the text, the movement resumes with a repetition of the words found just before the expansion; the inserted text is thereby bracketed by two phrases that are very similar if not identical (Van der Toorn 2007:130).

Ashley, on the other hand, contends that the very roughness of the text (e.g. between the attitude of God in verses 20 and 22) may be attributed to one author, who left the rough edges and antimonies in the story for his own reasons, as opposed to a redactor who would likely have eliminated them (Ashley 1993:454).

Although beyond the scope of this study it seems possible that the tale of the donkey is an interpolation from another tradition about Balaam inserted by the final editor. Allen (1973:231) after discussion of several views as to the source of this narrative, suitably concludes, that we really do not know how in fact these materials were communicated to Israel. We however, must interpret the text as we find it and appreciate that whoever put these chapters together intended that this be done.

3.2.2.2. *The Use and Repetition of the Divine Names.* The varied use of the divine names in the text has traditionally been thought to indicate different source traditions (Gray 1923:309-313; McNeile 1911:123-124). In Chapter 22 verses 2-21, the reader finds the predominant use of Elohim, while in verses 22-35, the reader finds that Yahweh predominates (Budd 1984:257).

However, Ashley observes that the difference in divine names may be simply a matter of stylistic variation on the part of the author (Ashley 1993:433). Meir Sternberg (1987:330) has argued as much in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, and has suggested that the variations were intentional on the part of the narrator. The narrator’s purpose was to emphasise the distance between the narrator as a true follower of Yahweh and a pagan diviner who is

the subject of the narrative. By doing so, the narrator faithfully reports what Balaam said, but then distances himself from Balaam by employing a different name for God.

Whether the variation in the Divine names represents stylistic variation or different sources and what to make of narrative inconsistencies may be difficult to resolve conclusively. We only have the final form of the text, and should do our best to understand the rhetorical and theological purpose of the story as it presently is found in the Old Testament. But there are additional considerations to address in evaluating the unity of the narrative.

3.2.2.3. *Repetitive words as possible proof of unity.* The study of repetition enables the reader to identify key characters, topics, and themes within the text, but it also serves to reveal coherence of the text by highlighting progression and intensification of sequences of words and phrases. Ward (2009:45) refers to the above as “progressive texture and pattern” and believes it is important because it emphasises the narrator’s primary concerns within the narratives and so advance the narrative flow of the storyline. While a study into the frequency of word usage is not the only method of identifying key themes, it can aid in grasping the important concepts crucial to the author’s literary purpose.

Within the Balaam pericope there is repetition of certain characters and topics. Key characters include: Balak, the King of Moab; Balaam, the diviner/exorcist; Balaam’s donkey; the Angel of Yahweh; and God (called by various names throughout the cycles). In addition, the people of Israel, called by the phrase “Jacob/Israel” are passive and unknowing spectators of what transpires in the story. The key topics include those of *seeing* and *hearing*, and of *blessing* and *curse*. Balak, terrified by what he has *heard and seen* of the people of Israel, seeks the assistance of Balaam, an internationally known diviner/exorcist to *curse* Israel. However, God has announced his determination *to bless* them and Balaam cannot *curse* them. Ward (2009:46) highlights the irony in the tale of the donkey (Numbers 22:22-35), when Balaam, who allegedly could see into the future, and *hear* the words of Yahweh himself, is unable to see the Angel of the LORD, while his donkey is perfectly able to see the danger. Only later in Numbers 24:3b-4a does Balaam describe himself as the man “whose eye is clear”, the oracle of one who *hears* the words of God, who *sees* the vision of the Almighty.

(1) *Repetition of the word “see”*. Robert Alter reiterates the importance of the verb “to see” which appears at least twenty times throughout the pericope (Alter 1981:105-106). The narrative begins with Balak who sees what Israel has done to the Amorites. The fact that the donkey sees the Angel of the LORD that causes him to turn aside three times, is intensely contrasted with Balaam, the great diviner, who is ironically blind to the danger. Yahweh’s opening of Balaam’s eyes is the turning point of the story. Now that Balaam sees his situation clearly, he is ready to become an instrument in God’s hands. The progression of seeing continues in chapters 23–24 when after meeting with God, Balaam utters his first oracle in 23:7-10, in which he can see Israel with clarity for the first time. The progression of *seeing* is complete, Balaam is beginning to see that it pleases God to bless Israel. The Spirit of Elohim comes upon Balaam in chapter 24:2 and he recounts that he is the man “whose eye is clear”, who “sees the vision of the Almighty”, who “falls down, but with eyes uncovered” (24:3-4). The fourth oracle in Numbers 24:15-19 summarises what he has finally *seen* – with clear eyes, in a vision given by the Almighty. Ward (2009:56) describes verse 17 as the climax of the progression of seeing. Balaam sees a star coming out of Jacob, and a sceptre out of Israel. A royal one will come forth who will destroy Moab and Edom. The power of Yahweh finally assures the victory of Israel and her borders.

Dennis Olson agrees that the theme of *seeing* is critical to an understanding of the text. He describes it in the following terms

A carefully crafted story with recurring cycles of three scenes or episodes built into its narrative structure. The repeated theme of "seeing" or "not seeing" appears throughout both the narrative scenes and the oracles of Balaam as another means of binding the cycle into artfully constructed unity (Olson 1996:142).

From the above we see how the repetitive use of *see* clarifies the rhetorical progression of *seeing* in the pericope which aids in the unity of the text.

(2) *Repetition of the words “bless” and “curse”*. The words *bless*, and *curse* and their synonyms are used numerous times throughout Numbers 22–24. Alter notes that the

words *bless* and *curse* function within the narrative to answer the question whether “language confers or confirms blessings and curses” (Alter 1981:104-105).

One cannot mention the terms *bless* and *curse* without considering the possibility of so called “corrections of the scribes”, in which the scribes made editorial alterations to avoid having the text appear to be “cursing” God. Linafelt has discussed the standard euphemism theory with reference to the prologue of Job (Linafelt 1996:157). This approach recognises that in several places the Sopherim altered the text to read *bless*, rather than *curse* as a euphemism for what is perceived as blasphemy. A commonly accepted passage that illustrates this practice is found in 1 Kings 21:10, 13, in the Naboth story, where the word is translated as *curse*. Christopher Mitchell provides an extensive discussion of the standard euphemism (1987:162ff.). Consider also the example of Psalm 10:3b “he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord” (NIV) as opposed to “those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord” in NRSV where it is properly translated *curse* (Craigie 1983:124). Balentine describes it this way

The conventional reasoning behind this translation is that the original author (or a later editor) regarded a text that mentioned cursing God as blasphemous and unacceptable. To avoid this situation, the author substituted the word “bless” for “curse”. Later readers would be expected to recognise that the original text had been changed and to re-substitute the word “curse” at the appropriate place (Balentine 2006:49).

Within the Balaam narratives one does not find any instance in which the standard euphemism is being employed. In each case within Numbers 22–24, the use of *bless* and *curse* makes narrative sense within the context. Ward (2009:71) describes the relationship between *bless* and *curse* as a nuanced one and warns against an overly dogmatic approach when determining the range of meaning. The translation of both *bless* and *curse* from the same word throughout the Balaam narratives introduces a sense of heightened ambiguity.

Which does Balaam intend to do – *bless* or *curse* Israel? God’s intentions are clear throughout. In time, Balaam comes to recognise that he can only *bless* – not *curse* Israel. Thus, the narrator makes it clear that it is God’s purpose from the outset to *bless*

his people, and he will use Balaam to accomplish his purpose. Allen (1973:85) sees the interaction between *blessing* and *cursing* as one of the central themes of the pericope fulfilling the promise made in Genesis 12:1-3 to Abraham. Divination and sorcery can have no power over God's people where he has purposed to *bless*.

In much the same way as the progression of *seeing*, the reader of the Balaam narratives will note a progression of *blessing* evidenced in the repetition noted above. In chapter 22, Yahweh flatly tells Balaam that he cannot *curse* Israel – “they are blessed” (22:12). Rather, he is to say that which Yahweh commands. The tale of the donkey does not develop this theme, except indirectly. The focus is, apparently, that Balaam intends to attempt to *curse* Israel, and so the adversary has come out to oppose him. The tension is resolved with the re-commissioning of Balaam by the Angel of Yahweh. In chapters 23–24, the progression of *blessing* intensifies as Balaam makes four separate pronouncements of *blessing* upon Israel, culminating in his prophecy that a royal one will come out of Israel who will defeat her enemies, particularly her arch-enemies Moab and Edom. Thus, the progression within the text of *blessing* serves to demonstrate the coherence of the story as it appears in its final form. It emphasises the author's focus on demonstrating that Balaam was an instrument in the hands of Yahweh to *bless* Israel. These examples of verbal repetitive-progressive texture in the Balaam narratives help to create the story for the reader, and to clarify its focus.

In conclusion, although the repetitive resumption seen in 22:21 and 22:35b may point to an insertion into the main storyline, as does the narrative inconsistency within the tale of the donkey, by repeating key words such as “seeing”, “blessing” and “curse” the narrator highlights specific rhetorical emphases within the text and underscores key themes in the story. The repetitive structure of the themes of *seeing* and *blessing* enable the reader to understand the author's rhetorical focus within the narrative and plays a key role of unification within the narrative. It is also significant that the words emphasised within Numbers 22–24 is linked closely to that found in the key Pentateuchal passages pertaining to the definition of a prophet.

3.3. Who is Balaam?

Butzer (1953:247) describes Balaam as “one of the most perplexing problem characters in all literature”. The discovery in 1967 of a wall inscription relating a story

concerning a diviner named Balaam ben Beor at Tell Deir 'Alla in Jordan has only served to fuel the flame of interest in this obscure figure (Hackett 1986:218). Some commentators believed him to be an idol-worshipping false prophet whom God compelled against his will to bless Israel while others believe him to be a true prophet of Yahweh.

The meaning of Balaam's name has long been a subject of controversy. Holladay (1988:41) mentions the play on the pun with Numbers 22:4 "as an ox licks up the grass" should the name come from the root meaning to "swallow up". Timm (1989:156) favours the Aramaic root meaning to "be eloquent" whereas Jones' dictionary of Old Testament proper names (1990) leans toward the root "**balal**" meaning "to confuse" which would make Balaam "the confuser".

Allen states that the name Balaam has a connotation in Hebrew that may be the result of a polemical thrust. The name may express contempt and judgment on the part of the writer of our story. This person is making a deliberate attack on Yahweh's people and resulting from this nation's relationship to her God, this is considered an attack on the person of Yahweh himself. The "destroyer of the people" is powerless when he confronts the God of Israel (Allen 1973:165). It seems that Jones (1990) prefers a combination of the word "**am**" people and the verb "**bala**" meaning to swallow. This verb is often used to mean ruin or destruction as seen in Lamentations 2:2.

Balaam can thus be described as "one who swallows up" or "the confuser". Although there is much in a name it is not the only measure of a man and we need to explore this character as described throughout the Old and New Testaments as well as the Deir 'Alla texts.

3.3.1. Balaam in the Old Testament

Balaam is first encountered in Numbers 22. He is referred to in Numbers 22:5 as "Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the Euphrates river, in his native land". Throughout Numbers 22–24 there is no real indication whether he is considered as good or bad. The text does not pronounce on the matter and his character is incidental to the story (Ashley 1979:435). His death is announced in passing in Numbers 31:8. He is only mentioned twice in the remainder of the Old Testament. In Joshua 13:22 he is

referred as “Balaam son of Beor, who practiced divination”. The only other mention of his name is in Micah 6:5.

3.3.2. *Balaam in the New Testament*

There are only three references to Balaam found in the New Testament, all of which describe the pagan diviner as an enemy of God’s people. His character is brought into sharp relief through the New Testament’s assessment (Ward 2009:259) where all three references give an unqualified condemnation of Balaam’s character. Peter tells us in 2 Peter 2:15-16, that Balaam “loved the wages of doing wrong”. Because of this he was rebuked by a “speechless donkey” who “spoke with a human voice”. Jude seems to identify Balaam’s error as unrestrained greed. And in Revelation 2:14, the church at Pergamum is warned that some of their members hold to the “teaching of Balaam”, which seems to be a reference to idolatry and sexual immorality.

The New Testament portrait is then one of a pagan who pursued the acquisition of wealth rather than truth and followed idolatry and sexual immorality. Nowhere is there any mention of his role as a diviner or prophet. Despite his genuine encounters with Yahweh, Balaam is viewed as one who turned away and conspired with Balak to lead God’s people into sin.

3.3.3. *Balaam outside of Scripture*

The Tell Deir ‘Alla, which lay on the alluvial plain of the upper terrace where the Jabbok River flows into the Jordan River valley, was excavated by a Dutch team under H. J. Franken in 1967. Inscriptions were uncovered that recount the activities of a Balaam son of Beor, written in red and black ink on a plastered wall or stele, possibly in a temple. The texts have been dated as from the mid-eighth to the seventh century B.C. using paleography, linguistics, and stratigraphy. The fragmented plaster sections have been pieced together into twelve combinations, only two of which are substantial enough to conjecture a translation. Walton (2009:384) notes that though combinations I and II have various gaps, several conclusions can be drawn from the contents. One Balaam son of Beor, described as a “seer of the gods”, has a frightening night vision that he shares with his colleagues amid his fasting and grief. Balaam then, it seems, exercises his prophetic-divination expertise to confront or curse the gods and

goddesses who have brought on this calamity and implores the goddesses Ashtar (consort of Chemosh in Moab) and Sheger (known from Ugarit and Phoenician sources) to bring light, rain, and fertility to the land. Milgrom (1990:476) suggests that “perhaps the temple on whose walls this inscription was written was founded to honor the gods (Sheger and Ashtar) who heeded Balaam’s plea/sacrifice”.

The Deir ‘Alla texts which are thought to talk specifically about Balaam outside of Scripture were found in the same general area as the events described in Numbers 22–24 and shed light on Balaam’s place of origin. Deir ‘Alla is located about 25 miles north of this area, where the Jabbok river flows into the Jordan valley. Balaam was from Pethor, near “the river” (Numbers 22:5), in “Aram” (Numbers 23:7, Deuteronomy 23:4). The reference to Aram has led most scholars to conclude that Balaam was from northern Syria, near the Euphrates river. That does not fit well with the Biblical account, however, since Balaam’s home seems to have been close to where the Israelites were camped (Numbers 22:1-22; 31:7-8).

William Shea (1989:31) concludes that Deir ‘Alla could reasonably be expected to be Balaam’s home as he was clearly revered at Deir ‘Alla, based on the reading of the clay fragments discovered at Deir ‘Alla (1989:108-11). He further suggests that the original place name was Adam, with the “d” being miscopied as “r”, since the two letters are nearly identical in ancient Hebrew. Adam was a town about eight miles southwest of Deir ‘Alla, on the east bank of the Jordan river, where the Jabbok meets the Jordan.

Balaam’s occupation is never stated in so many words but from the text of Numbers he was clearly seen as a diviner of sorts. His reputation is apparently quite well-known, as Balak is quite certain of his ability to curse Israel. The Deir ‘Alla texts clearly states that he was a diviner.

Now that we have an idea as to whom Balaam was, it is necessary to ascertain if he was considered to be a prophet and if this is in fact a requirement for the validity of the oracle in Numbers 24:17. To answer this question we will start by understanding the definition of a prophet throughout Scripture.

3.4. The definition of a prophet

The International Standard Bible Commentary describes a prophet as

a speaker of or for God. His words are not the production of his own spirit, but come from a higher source. For he is at the same time, also, a seer, who sees things that do not lie in the domain of natural sight, or who hears things which human ears do not ordinarily receive.

In Jeremiah 23:16 and Ezekiel 13:2 a sharp distinction is made between those persons who only claim to be prophets but who prophesy "out of their own heart" and the true prophets who declare the word which the Lord has spoken to them. It is not necessarily a voice which he could hear through his natural ear, but the important thing is to be able sharply to distinguish the contents of this voice from his own heart.

There are several words used in the Hebrew language to describe a prophet, each will be discussed below.

3.4.1. *Nābî'* - Prophet

The most commonly used term in the Hebrew Bible to describe a prophet is *nābî'*, derived from a verb signifying "to bubble forth" like a fountain; hence the word means one who announces or pours forth the declarations of God. The English word comes from the Greek *prophētēs*, which signifies in classical Greek one who speaks for another, especially one who speaks for a god, and so interprets his will to man; hence its essential meaning is "an interpreter". The term seems to have some sort of association with the Akkadian verb *nabu* (to name or call), and may have the active sense of a "speaker, herald or preacher", or a passive sense of "one who has been called" (Koehler-Baumgartner 2001:661-662).

In the Old Testament, it is used broadly to refer not only to prophets per se, but to almost any significant figure in leadership. So, the term is used not only of Moses, the prophet par excellence in Levitical terms, but also of Abraham (Genesis 20:7); Aaron (Exodus 7:1); Miriam (Exodus 15:20), and Deborah (Judges 4:4). The Mosaic prophet is defined in Deuteronomy 18:18 as one who speaks only that which the Lord has put in his/her mouth, "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command".

It is worth noting that the term is sometimes used in conjunction with other descriptors. For example, Gad is referred to not only as a *nābî'*, but also as a *ḥōzeh* (2

Samuel 24:11). And when Saul goes in search of Samuel to ask for help in locating his livestock, we are told that what had formerly been referred to as a *nābî'* is now referred to as a *rō'eh*, or "seer" (1 Samuel 9:9). What is most interesting is the fact that of the fifteen prophets to whom written books are attributed, few of them ever use the term *nābî'* to describe themselves. In only three cases, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Zechariah, is the term found in the superscription of the book. The term is used of Isaiah (37:2, 38:1, 39:3), and Jeremiah (1:5), and only in passing of Ezekiel (2:5). Many of the so-called biblical prophets reject the application of the term to themselves. Amos explicitly rejects that he is a *nābî'* (Amos 7:14) while Micah seems to intentionally contrast his own authority and power with that of the *nābî'* and *rō'eh* of his own day (Micah 3:5-8). And Zechariah makes the term *nābî'* a term of opprobrium (Zechariah 13:2-5).

3.4.2. *Rō'eh* - Seer

In the time of Samuel another word, *rō'eh*, "seer", began to be used and it occurs seven times with reference to Samuel. The *rō'eh* or "seer" was one who had the ability to see that which was hidden from ordinary eyes. From 1 Samuel 9, we can infer that the seer was normally paid a fee for his services, and seems to have been based in a certain place.

3.4.3. *Ḥōzeh* - Visionary

Blenkinsopp has noted that it is difficult to distinguish the *ḥōzeh* or "visionary" from the "seer". And in fact, within the Hebrew Bible, they were sometimes bracketed together (cf. Isaiah 30:10). Likewise, no great attempt was made to distinguish the *ḥōzeh* from the *nābî'* (cf. 2 Kings 17:13; Isaiah 29:10, Micah 3:7) (Blenkinsopp, 1995:125). Amaziah refers to Amos as a *ḥōzeh*, while Amos retorts that he is definitely not a *nābî'* (Amos 7:12-15). This would seem to indicate that these words functioned almost interchangeably within ancient Israel (see also the example of Gad who is called by the biblical author a *ḥōzeh*, while Nathan is referred to as *nābî'*). Afterwards another word, *ḥōzeh* "seer" (2 Samuel 24:11), was employed. In all these three words are used: Samuel the "seer" (*rō'eh*), Nathan the prophet (*nābî'*), Gad the "seer" (*ḥōzeh*).

3.4.4. *Qesem* - Diviner

Qesem and *naḥaš* respectively have a negative connotation and in Joshua 13:22 Balaam is called a *qesem* "diviner", a word used only of a false prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:10, the reader is told that those practising divination were not permitted in Israel. Divination is included in the list of prohibited practices, including soothsaying, augury, and sorcery. As previously noted, in the Old Testament, the only vocational designation ever given to Balaam is that of *qesem*, found in the Joshua 13:22 account.

3.4.5. *Naḥaš* – Practice of divination

The term *naḥaš* often refers to the practice of divination or the seeking of omens. However, it could also be understood as referring to bewitchment or a magic curse (Holladay 1988:235).

In conclusion then the "prophet" proclaimed the message given to him, as the "seer" beheld the vision of God. A prophet was a spokesman for God. He is the mouth by which God speaks to men and therefore what the prophet says is not of man but of God. Anyone being a spokesman for God to man might thus be called a prophet. Thus Enoch, Abraham, and the patriarchs, as bearers of God's message (Genesis 20:7; Exodus 7:1; Psalm 105:5), as also Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15; 34:10; Hosea 12:13), are ranked among the prophets. The title thus has a general application to all who have messages from God to men.

3.5. Was Balaam a true prophet?

Since we now have a description of a prophet we may begin to explore if Balaam was ever considered to be a prophet? The general application of the term prophet to all who delivered messages from God to men is not applied as a rule of thumb to Balaam by writers.

Baskin (1983:24) writes that many Christian thinkers maintained as Philo had done, that a prophet must possess special spiritual qualities which Balaam did not necessarily possess. She refers to Jerome, who maintained that it was through Balaam that God made his love known to the nations, and he is sometimes allegorically seen as the

representative of the pagan Christian. She also mentions Ambrose, who wrote that Balaam could prophesy so that through an adversary's word the proof of God would be raised even higher. She concludes that Balaam was also the bearer of a messianic oracle, and early Christianity was required to see him, not only as villain, but as divinely inspired prophet. And when Augustine writes in *The City of God* that we should not be surprised to hear of foreigners, not of the people of Israel, who have prophesied something about Christ, it seems likely that he too has Balaam in mind. In rabbinic tradition Balaam was a gentile prophet, ultimately unworthy, but a prophet nonetheless.

Nechifor (2015:173) points out that there is a foreword uttered by Balaam which has the purpose of reassuring that the message that is about to be delivered is authentic. Therefore, right from the very beginning, Balaam emphasises that the author of the promise that will be uttered is God, and he is only a means through which the divine message is revealed. Milgrom (1990:473) comments that during the third and fourth oracles "casting divination aside, he rises to the level of prophecy, "Needing no dictation from God but flooded by his Spirit, he composes his own utterance of blessing". Unger (1952:215) concludes that

although never called a prophet, he does the work of a prophet, delivering oracles, which bear, in every detail, the superlative seal of divine inspiration. "He is neither a "true prophet" nor a "false prophet", in the usual meaning of those terms. He is rather a pagan diviner used by Yahweh for the communication of His word and because the word is from God the vessel does not impact on the relevance of the message".

On the other hand, Shenk (1993:46) concludes that Balaam remains an obstinate seer testifying for the Israelites against his own will. In line with this Noth (1968:190) notes that the physical stance of Balaam during the delivery of the fourth oracle may be significant in that it reveals that he was robbed of his normal control of his own body completely under the influence of the Spirit of God. Allen (1973:164) refers to Hengstenberg's survey of the writers in opposing camps portraying him both as true prophet and villain. He concludes that The Old Testament never calls Balaam a prophet but a "diviner", a title never used to describe true prophets of Yahweh in Scripture.

However, it is important to note that nowhere in the record of Numbers 22–24 are we told that Balaam ever accepted a fee for divination, nor does he appear to have functioned as a diviner within the story. It is used in this fashion in Numbers 23:23 where the author may be telling the reader that Balaam is no longer seeking to curse Israel – but rather, to seek a word from the Lord. In Numbers 24:1 we are told that Balaam did not go “to look for omen” as he apparently had at other times.

As we have observed, there were different terms used in the Old Testament that might have application to Balaam. The key problem is that the narrative itself (Numbers 22–24) makes no judgment on the matter. This has led some to surmise that Balaam was someone entirely outside of Israel’s prophetic context. Christopher Mitchell has concluded that Balaam is best understood as a Mesopotamian *baru* (Mitchell 1987:91). In a fascinating study entitled *The Balaam Traditions, Their Character and Development* (1990:25), Michael Moore suggests that the Balaam cycles are best understood as reflecting an intra-role conflict Balak expects Balaam to serve as a sorcerer/exorcist, while Balaam sees his role as that of one who receives oracles. Moore further understands the final form of the text as an attempt to allow the recognition and preservation of both role-sets (diviner/seer and sorcerer/exorcist) while placing the primary focus on Israel’s God.

Ward (2009:3) states that the definition of a prophet developed in stages within different contexts in the Old Testament, and these different perspectives are reflected in the diverging understandings of Balaam with views of Balaam gradually becoming darker within the Old Testament text. Balaam is portrayed positively only within Micah 6:5. But as the understanding of the *nābî’* and the prophetic role begins to change, so does the portrayal of Balaam. He becomes within the perspective of the Deuteronomistic authors (Deuteronomy 23:4-6 and Joshua 24:9-10), one who attempted to curse Israel, but whose efforts were thwarted by Yahweh. Joshua 13:22 identifies Balaam as one who was a diviner, a violation of Deuteronomy 13 and 18, and a crime worthy of death. It is important to note that the Chronicler uses the terminology of prophet, seer, and diviner interchangeably, without any indication that diviners & seers are to be viewed with contempt.

In Numbers 31, Balaam is reduced to an enemy of Yahweh and Israel. He is the one deemed responsible for the unspeakable acts of apostasy that occurred at the Baal of Peor in Numbers 25, and as an enemy of Yahweh his discrediting is now complete. He is a villain of the worst sort. Balaam's gradual discrediting follows the gradual shift in the understanding of prophets and prophetism within the Old Testament. Originally seen as nearly synonymous with seers and diviners (1 Samuel 9:9), by the postexilic era, they are, at times, viewed with contempt as frauds and charlatans (Zechariah 13:2-6). Within the postexilic context, the written Torah has assumed the place of the prophets. If Moses is the quintessential prophet, and if the Torah is seen as thoroughly Mosaic in authority, then there remains no real need for prophets. Rather, the exposition and application of the Torah of Moses is needed. Such an understanding would greatly support the efforts of the newly constituted Israelite community in Yehud to define what it means to be a Jew, and a worshiper of Yahweh. Blenkinsopp observes that

If prophetic activity was to continue in the basically different social and political circumstances obtained in the post disaster period, it would necessarily be of a different kind and would be perceived differently among the survivors of the disaster. Once prophecies, delivered in an earlier epoch, were available in writing, the emphasis would tend to be less on direct inspired prophecy and more on the inspired interpretation of past prophecy (Blenkinsopp 1996:227)

The new emphasis on the Deuteronomic reformulation of prophecy and redefinition of the prophetic role would result in an ever-increasing conviction among the postexilic community that God does not communicate directly but has revealed his will and purpose in past communications whose bearing on the present situation remains to be elucidated (Blenkinsopp 1996:227). Considered to be little better than a purveyor of falsity, and therefore subject to the death penalty following Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:20, the "professional" prophet would quietly recede into the religious background of the Second Commonwealth community (Blenkinsopp 1996:235). These developments would, of course, have implications for the way in which Balaam was viewed, and whether he was perceived as a hero or a villain.

Unfortunately for his literary reputation, the latter would prove to be the case. And for anyone tempted to think more highly of the figure of Balaam than they ought, the tale of the donkey would serve to remind them of the buffoon that Balaam truly was. At the end of the day, Balaam would be remembered ultimately as a pagan baru, used by Yahweh.

To ask the question whether Balaam was a genuine prophet, or a false prophet is then perhaps poorly worded and wrongly directed. If one means by the question, was Balaam used by Yahweh as a messenger of his word? The answer would have to be "yes". But if the question is phrased to ask, was Balaam a genuine Yahwist? Then the answer would have to be "no". We are best advised to take a mediating course between the extremes of the "true prophet view" and the "false prophet view". Balaam was a pagan diviner; it is also true that Yahweh used him to mediate his word (Allen 1973:172). Ashley (1993:435) aptly comments that "The Lord can strike a mighty blow with a crooked stick".

3.6. Conclusion

From the above it becomes clear that Balaam was not viewed in a positive light in Scripture or by later Christian writers. He is in fact referred to as a diviner which immediately implied that he was a false prophet. When one examines the oracles in Numbers 24 however, it becomes increasingly clear that Balaam is not acting or speaking out of his own volition. Numbers 24:2 states that the Spirit of God came on him. He acts under guidance of the Holy Spirit. He assures Balak that he "could not do anything of his own accord, good or bad to go beyond the command of the Lord—and I must say only what the Lord says". This is exactly what one would expect of a prophet.

Writer agrees with Unger (1952:215) that although never called a prophet, he does the work of a prophet, delivering oracles, which bear in every detail the superlative seal of divine inspiration. He should probably not be described as a "true prophet" nor a "false prophet" in the usual meaning of those terms. He could rather be described as a pagan diviner used by Yahweh to communicate his word. As is always the case with prophecies, the focus should be on the fact that the word is from God and therefore the vessel does not impact on the relevance of the message.

Chapter 4: Numbers 24:17

4.1. Introduction

The journey has finally led to this study of Numbers 24:15-19, aiming to answer one main question: Is verse 17 a reliable messianic prophecy? Before setting out, the researcher should inform the reader of her presupposed classical evangelical view of inspiration—the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the Old Testament includes prophetic utterances that point forward to the future Messiah. As such, the Balaam poems may be viewed as re-contextualising the language found in Jacob’s blessing in Genesis 49:9-10. By drawing the comparison with Jacob’s blessing of Judah, the narratives in Numbers emphasise the fact that (all appearances to the contrary), Yahweh’s promises to the Patriarchs will be fulfilled. Israel will ultimately prevail through the leadership of the “royal one” who will reign over the peoples (Ward 2009:59).

4.2. Translation

The NASB will be used as the principle English translation as the researcher will not attempt any translation herself.

15 He took up his discourse and said,
“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,

16 The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
And knows the knowledge of the Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.

17 I see him, but not now;
 I behold him, but not near;
 A star shall come forth from Jacob,
 A sceptre shall rise from Israel,
 And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,
 And tear down all the sons Sheth.

18 Edom shall be a possession;
 Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession,
 While Israel performs valiantly.

19 One from Jacob shall have dominion;
 And will destroy the remnant from the city”.

4.3. Textual and translation notes

Most of the textual difficulties in the book arise from chapter 21 and the Balaam oracles in chapters 22–24. Ashley avers that the fact that neither the LXX nor the Samaritan Pentateuch aids in reconstructing the original probably indicates that the problems are older than these documents (Ashley 1993:500).

Although not perfect the preferred text used by most commentators is the Masoretic text (Ashley 1993:501). Specific variants and problems are seen in verses 17–19. Scholars have offered variant translations due to the arrangement and interpretation of the Hebrew text.

Albright suspected disturbances in the text and suggested a rearrangement that would read, verses 19b, 18a, 18b, 19a, 18c which according to him, would allow an easy link between verse 19b and the end of v 17 (Albright 1944:207–53). Budd (1984:256) also refers to 1QM 11:7 that has verse 19 before verse 18.

Wenham suggested a rearrangement of the text, in which the word “his enemies” is transposed from verse 18 to the first colon in verse 19. This would yield the following translation: “Jacob shall rule his enemies and destroy the survivors from “Ir” (Wenham 1981:180; also, Milgrom 1990:208). Cole (2000:428) finds this proposed composition

inviting, but unnecessary, because as he sees it the term “his enemies” stands in opposition to Seir.

This section presents some difficulty as it deals with the future and often mentions terms and names that are not explained in the text itself, and that could have multiple applications. This uncertainty is highlighted by the fact that the MT is not clear in places, and this is not eased by referring to ancient versions which mostly translate the text warts and all (Ashley 1993:500).

4.4. Overview discussion of salient features

This passage presents an interesting and debated section full of variant readings. Riggans (1983:186) contradicts the traditional view that verses 15–24 constitute one whole oracle and favours the view that the section should be divided into four separate short oracles, or at the least four partial oracles namely:

- (a) Verses 15–19;
- (b) Verse 20;
- (c) Verses 21–22;
- (d) Verses 23–24.

This study will only focus on verses 15-19, concerning Israel, which opens in the same way as the previous oracle in verses 3–4. Balaam speaks of a future figure, evidently royal, in verse 17, who will gain control over Moab and its neighbouring territories to the south, as mentioned in verses 17–19 (Sakenfeldt 1995:133).

Allen (1973:325) describes the theme of this oracle as: “Israel's ultimate blessing seated in her Deliverer from all her enemies”, and fittingly divides the oracle into the following three sections.

1. Introductory formula: Balaam takes up his oracle (15a).
2. Exordium: Balaam about to utter his most important oracle, expands the exordium of the preceding section (15b-16).
3. Blessing:
 - A. Israel has a coming deliverer (17).
 1. The deliverer will come in the future (17a, b).
 2. The deliverer will be like star and sceptre (17c, d).
 3. The deliverer will bring victory over the enemies (17e, f).

B. Israel has a coming dominion (18-19).

1. Her enemies will be destroyed (18).

2. Her people will have dominion (19).

The interpretation of especially verse 17 is varied and focuses on two main viewpoints. Those concluding that the verse is fulfilled in the exploits of the earthly king David, and those contending that the verse goes beyond the literal and provides a vision of Israel's ultimate deliverer, the Messiah.

4.5. Verse-by-verse analysis

Verse 15

This verse is similar in wording to that seen in the third oracle of Numbers 23:27–24:13. Balaam received revelation differently from that in chapter 23 where it was “placed in his mouth” but here “the Spirit of God came upon him”, making it God's utterance. Balaam's role as portrayed in the introductory verses of each oracle progresses towards an increasingly positive and active role as a prophet of God (Olson 1996:148).

There is a slight difference in translation of the last part of the verse. The NASB and ESV read “the man whose eye is opened” whilst the NKJV and NET translate eye in the plural “the man whose eyes are open”. The NIV varies from the other translations by translating the verse as “one whose eye sees clearly”.

The variant translations all yield the same understanding of the text. They all seem to lead to the perception that by stating that his “eye” has been opened, Balaam claims that his inner eye of perception has been opened. He is attuned to understand and communicate with God (Ashley 1993:488). He is not speaking of his own accord but conveying a message from God.

Verse 16

There are only slight variations between modern translations but nothing to considerably vary or distract from the overall meaning of the verse. The opening of the fourth oracle is like the opening verses of the third (see 24:3-4), except for an additional clause referring to “the Most High”, disclosing the source of the revelation. Balaam

appears to grow into his role as a true prophet of God over the course of the four oracles (Olson 1996, 148).

This reference to a deity was evidently associated with Jerusalem (Genesis 14:18-22), and may have been the manifestation of El worshiped at the pre-Israelite sanctuary there (Deuteronomy 32:8; Psalms 18:14; 78:17, 35, 56; 83:19) Budd (1984:269). That the word may have pagan origins, is explored by Jacob (1958:47), who contends that it may refer to the highest god in a pantheon, which in the Old Testament context would refer to Yahweh. In Psalm 82:1 the word is used to describe Yahweh's council. There does not seem to be any reason to understand anything other than Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Balaam received the revelation in the previous sections, made known to him when "the Spirit of God came upon him", which he proceeds to communicate now (Budd 1984:270). This prophetic revelation uncovers that he not only hears the words of God and sees his vision, but he now also knows the knowledge of God. The two senses of seeing and hearing are supplemented by an intimate knowledge of the Most High that can only come as the result of divine inspiration and human receptiveness (Olson 1996:148).

Verse 17

Most translations (NASB, ESV, NET, NIV) use the present tense "I see him" whereas the NKJV makes use of the future tense "shall see him" to translate the Hebrew imperfect tense. The theme of "seeing" runs throughout both the poetic oracles and the prose story of Balaam. What Balaam "sees" in the oracles moves from the vague vision of Israel as an uncountable dust cloud in the first oracle (Numbers 23:9-10) to the detail of the one specific star or sceptre that rises out of Israel (Numbers 24:17; Olson 1996:147). The word "see" probably refers to a spiritual rather than physical "seeing" as mentioned in Numbers 22:41; 23:13 and 24:2. Balaam speaks as a prophet, describing a figure only known to God, whose actual coming is in the distant future (Olson 1996:150). The identity of the "him" that is seen, is ambiguous and may refer to the one(s) referred as the "star" and "sceptre" later in the verse (Noth 1968:192; Wenham 1981:178-179) or Israel as a people (Binns 1927:171-172).

That the vision concerns the future is reiterated by the terms “not now” and “not near”. The repetition of the thought enriches the chronological idea of “not now” with the spatial idea of not nearby (Ashley 1993:500).

Modern translations (NASB, ESV, NET, NIV, NKJV) describe a star that will come from Jacob and a sceptre that will rise out of Israel. The star is a natural and common poetic symbol of an illustrious personage recurring many times in Scripture (see Job 38:7; Isaiah 14:12; Daniel 8:10; Matthew 24:29; Philippians 2:15; Revelation 1:20; 2:28). Budd (1984:253) refers to other interpretative translations found in the LXX which reads “a man” and the Syriac where it is translated as “a prince” (1983:256). Allen (1973:256) also notes the precise royal interpretation of “king” in the Targum Ongelos. Ashley however states that Cook (1970:745) and Binns (1927:171-172) find it uncommon for this image to be used to describe a royal figure in Israel (see Isaiah 14:12; Ezekiel 32:7 and Revelation 22:16) but common in the Ancient near East (Ashley 1993:500). The word is also used in Isaiah 14:12 where it is a metaphor for a king, and favours this understanding of the word in the Balaam context (Allen 1973:500).

The royal sceptre or staff represented the position of a ruler, a symbol of authority and power seen in Genesis 49:10; Psalm 45:6; Amos 1:5, 8 and Esther 5:2. The same word is used when describing the staffs carried by Moses and Aaron, which symbolised their divinely granted authority and power over nature (Exodus 4:2–5; 7:8–13; 17:5–6; 17:1–10) (Ashley 1993:500). The term “sceptre” defines the “star” as a ruler of men, for the sceptre is used in that sense in the dying prophecy of Jacob in Genesis 49:9-10. In the blessing of Jacob upon his son Judah, the patriarch stated that the sceptre would not depart from Judah meaning that Judah’s royal lineage would be everlasting. This image further functions to reiterate the royal image of the star (Ashley 1993:500).

This royal figure will go on to crush “the forehead” NASB, ESV, NKJV, or “skulls” (NIV, NET) of Moab. Budd prefers to translate “the forehead of Moab” as “the two corners” (dual), or “the two sides of Moab” in other words “shall crush Moab on either side” (Budd 1984:263). The word literally means “corners” and perhaps the corners of the head are intended (Allen 1973:462). Ashley (1993:500) prefers “temples of” not just “sides of” as seen in Leviticus 13:41 (sides of the face) and Leviticus 19:27 (side of the head). Allen shows the interpretation as “leading men of Moab” found in the LXX,

Targum Onkelos and Latin Vulgate (as published in Weber's edition) (Allen 1973:462). This word was also used in Numbers 24:8, in the context of Israel shattering the arrows of her enemies. In Judges 5:20 it is used to describe Jael piercing the temple of Sisera with a tent peg, and in other contexts of "shattering the heads of the enemies" (Psalm 68:22). The word literally means "corner, side", but is used of the temples of one's head several times in Leviticus 19:27 and Jeremiah 9:25; 25:23; 48:45; 49:32; (Allen 1973:332). Allen agrees that the reference it seems, is then to the "head" of Moab referencing its leaders.

The word translated as "tear down" (NASB), "break down" (ESV), "destroy" (NKJV) is found in an important parallel to this text in Jeremiah 48:45, where this prophecy is in a manner quoted as an oracle against Moab and the word destroy is altered into crown of the head (Albright 1944:220). The altered use of the word in Jeremiah 48:45 as well as the comparison with the Samaritan Pentateuch leads to Ashley preferring "crown of the head" (Ashley 1993:501). This raises a very curious and interesting question, as to how the prophets made use of the earlier Scriptures, but it gives no authority for an alteration of the text. It would appear to be somewhat hazardous to attempt to alter the Numbers passage based on Jeremiah and therefore the word should probably be retained and translated as "tear down" or "break down".

The expression "all the sons" (NASB, ESV, NET), "people" (NIV) or "children" (NKJV), "heads of all the sons" (NET) of Sheth has occasioned some difficulty as well. The Jewish commentators, followed by the Septuagint and the older versions, understand it to mean the sons of Seth, the son of Adam (Ashley 1993:501). This would then mean "all mankind" or the like. But the destruction of all mankind does not seem a fitting parallel to the destruction of Moab. When one considers that the primary role of this future figure is destruction and not only dominion, then it is unlikely that the whole human race would be referred to.

An early alternative suggestion was that it is like the word "seen" in Lamentations 3:47, meaning "destruction". The phrase "sons of destruction" would then be a figure used of Moab. This would agree with Jeremiah's, "sons of tumult" (Jeremiah 48:45; Allen 1973:462). Noordzij (1983:223) also translates the term "sons of Seth" as "sons of

tumult” or “war-minded”, referring to the prideful character of the Moabites confronted by the latter prophets (Isaiah 16:6; 25:11; Zephaniah 2:10).

Albright (1944:207-53) suggested reference to an ancient tribal name, the Shutu of the Egyptian execration texts of the 20th and 19th centuries B.C. In terms of the context of the use of the term, it should be a parallel to Moab. In his textual notes, Wilson (*ANET*, 329) took the Shutu to be the equivalent of the “children of Seth” and Moab in Numbers 24:17. If so, the Shutu could have been the Semitic forerunners of the classical Iron Age Moabites (see also Milgrom 1990:208; Wenham 1981:179).

In the absence of more information concerning the tribe Shutu, and its relationship to Moab, Allen (1973: 318), prefers the rendering "sons of confusion". It seems that Balaam begins with Moab, then moves to Edom (verse 18), and in the successive verses moves to other peoples. The relevance to an otherwise unknown tribe seems out of order here, and does not agree with Jeremiah 48:45.

In verse 17, there is the thematic statement: Israel has a deliverer. This deliverer will come in the future, he will be like a star and sceptre in his royalty and he will bring victory over the enemy. It is certainly significant that the enemy cited first is none other than Moab. The third oracle ended with an implied curse on Moab in general terms; the fourth oracle has a curse on Moab in very detailed terms. Moab the curser becomes Moab the cursed in fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.

Verse 18

Although using different words “shall be a possession” (NASB, NET, NKJV), “be disposed” (ESV) and “be conquered” (NIV), the demise of Edom is certain. Seir is referred to as an enemy who will be “a possession” (NASB, NET, NKJV), “dispossessed” (ESV) and “conquered” (NIV) whilst Israel will “do/act/perform valiantly” (NKJV, ESV, NET, NASB) or “grow strong” (NIV). Once again Seir as Edom has a certain end whilst Israel will prosper.

The term "Seir" may refer to a mountain range in Edom, and is used regularly as a parallel for "Edom" (Genesis 32:4; 36:8, 9) or a substitute for Edom (Deuteronomy 1:44; 2:4, 8, 12). Seir, was the ancient capital of Edom (Judges 5:4) in the opinion of Snaith (1964:300), but the allusion here may be intended as a simple synonym for Edom. More specifically, Seir denotes the chief mountain range in Edom mentioned in Deuteronomy

33:2 (Budd 1984:253). Seir (Genesis 32:3), or Mount Seir (Genesis 36:8), was the old name, still retained as an alternative, of Edom and the two names function as parallel terms in this verse.

Ashley (1993:502) notes that as in Judges 5:4, Edom/Seir is called “his enemies” and according to him this “his” refers to the star/sceptre of verse 17 identified with Israel or one who represents Israel. Budd refers to 1QM 11:7 that lacks the references to both “Edom” and “Seir”, speaking only of “the enemy” as being “his” by conquest (Budd 1984:253). The context infers that it is the enemies of Israel or her representative.

Verses 18-19 build upon verse 17, and give the second element in the development of the oracle: Israel has a coming dominion. In this verse, the spotlight of curse turns from Moab to Edom. There are two elements: Her enemies will be destroyed, and her people will have dominion.

Verse 19

The idea of a ruling figure coming from Jacob is upheld by all translations albeit in different wording. This figure will exercise “dominion” (ESV, NASB, NKJV) or “destroy” whomever is left, “survivors” (ESV, NET, NASB, NKJV) “remains” (NET, NKJV) or “remnants” (NASB) of the “city” (NIV, NET, NASB, NKJV) “cities” (ESV).

Riggans (1983:162) states that “shall have dominion” literally means, “one shall rule”. The meaning of the NIV clause in verse 19, “A ruler will come out of Jacob” closely parallels the translation in the NKJV, “Out of Jacob One shall have dominion”. Thus, the translation is derived: “Jacob shall rule his enemies and destroy the survivors from Ir”. (Wenham 1981:180; cf. Budd 1984:253, 256; Albright 1944:207–33).

Ashley (1993:502) states that the MT read “let him (it) exercise dominion” but opines that the verb should be understood impersonally “let one exercise dominion”. The second verb “let one destroy the remnant” creates a twofold wish that should probably be understood to mean that when the former is exercised the latter will be destroyed as seen in Isaiah 60:12 and Zechariah 12:6. The source from which the dominion will be exercised will be Jacob or Israel and those who will be destroyed is “the city” which could be translated as “Ar” or “Ir” being the city in Moab where Balaam met Balak in the beginning. This brings the oracle full circle back to the subject of Moab.

The word "city" in this verse is not defined, but may refer to the (capital) city of Edom (verse 18). Some have taken city to be a proper name leading the Torah to render, "To wipe out what is left of Ir", an actual city known as Ir Moab, mentioned in Numbers 22:36 or even Ar of Moab mentioned in Numbers 21:28 (see Milgrom 1990:208; Wenham 1981:180). A third approach, as given in the ESV, is the use of the word in a collective sense and render "cities". This last approach may demonstrate an advance in thought. Not only will the Coming One defeat Moab and have dominion over Edom, but he will enforce dominion over the remnants of all cities. The expression implies not only conquest, but complete destruction of the foe. In conclusion Wenham remarks,

With bone-chilling drama he declares that every inhabitant of Ir will perish. This prediction of Moab's total defeat at the hand of a future Israelite king is an appropriate point for Balaam to end (Wenham 1981:180).

4.6. Verse 17: A Messianic prophecy or not?

Without question, the most debated and the most important verse in the oracle is Numbers 24:17. The theme of this verse is: *Israel Has a Coming Deliverer* (Allen 1973:332), but who is this deliverer? Was the oracle fulfilled in an earthly king like David or Saul, or is this in fact looking further to the Ultimate Deliverer, The Messiah?

As can be expected there are differing views as to the Messianic message of this verse. Scholars, the likes of Allegro and Luther, debased and devalued this verse as they would not entertain the thought of the passage speaking of Christ, because they regarded Balaam as an unworthy prophet (Bornkamm 1969:240).

Writers such as Mowinckel (1956:13) and Becker (1977:36) found that the promise from Numbers 24:17-19 is of no messianic significance but that it only describes a Jewish king, who will have victory over the Edomites, the Moabites and the Ammonites and according to them, this king is David. Bewer (1905:238-262) regards the oracle as a poetic description of David written during the time of his reign whilst it is considered a reference to David's trans-Jordanian expeditions by Seybold (1973:1-19) who argues that a specific purpose of this fourth oracle is to present David as a successful conqueror, like the Pharaohs of Egypt.

Many conservatives such as Kerr (1960:176) believe the words “star” and “sceptre” to prophetically refer to David. He mentions that

this prophecy was understood, by the rabbis, to refer to the ideal king or Messiah to come, and it has been applied by many Christians to Jesus. To do this, however, it is necessary to translate all the physical terms into spiritual counterparts. It is better to see the fulfilment of this prophecy in David, the king of Israel who did actually crush both Moab and Edom. The ideal can be transferred to the Messiah only in the sense that the throne of David prefigured the rule of Jesus Christ over an infinitely greater kingdom.

Olson (1996:155) questions the argument of literal fulfilment in the time of David as does Clark (1971, 343-344). It was not until the time of David that the Israelites seriously attacked Moab but although many of the people of Moab were slaughtered (II Samuel 8:2), they were not annihilated and during the period of the divided kingdom they rebelled again following the death of Ahab (II Kings 1:1). This would exclude the possibility of David's wars being the ultimate fulfilment of the prophecy of Balaam. Extrabiblical evidence in the form of the Mesha Stele circa 830 before Christ confirms that David did not defeat Moab (Allen 1973:334). The continued prophetic oracles against Moab after the time of David (Isaiah 15:1–16:14; Jeremiah 48:39-47) also speak of future defeat. David likewise conquered Edom (II Samuel 8:14) after the division of the Israelite state, but Edom also became independent again (II Kings 8:20-22), proving a ruthless adversary of Israel (Isaiah 63:1-6).

This lack of permanence led the prophets to look forward to a future conquering of both (Isaiah 11:14; Ezekiel 25:12-14; Amos 2:1-3), which according to Ashley (1993:503) inevitably lead to a messianic interpretation.

The wars of David therefore satisfied the passage only in part, which alludes to the possible ultimate fulfilment in the person of the Messiah who will achieve final victory over the enemies of Israel, represented in our passage by Moab and Edom.

Ashley (1993:503) as LaSor, Hubbard & Bosh (1982:172) sees the passage as giving the first glimpse of messianic hope when viewed in the context of the whole scripture, even if indirectly.

Sim and Sakenfeldt believe that although this prophecy probably originally referred to King David, in later Jewish thought the star and the sceptre was interpreted along messianic lines (Sim 1999:990, Sakenfeldt 1995:121). This view is also held by Klingbeil (2013:4) who argues, that the historical interpretation of verse 17 and its wider prophetic context, suggests an eschatological perspective focusing firstly on David and then in a more inclusive perspective on the Messiah.

Lack of specific New Testament reference to the passage is often cited as proof against Messianic interpretation but explicit New Testament citation is not mandatory to render an Old Testament Passage Messianic (Olson 1996:155).

As a counter-argument to the idea that “the star from Jacob” and “the sceptre from Israel” are exclusive images of David, Kaiser (1995:55) asserts that the prophecy is taken from Jeremiah 48–49, clearly referring to the future. Therefore, the promise from the Old Testament that a star will rise from Jacob, namely a Sceptre from Israel materialised strictly through the Messiah’s role as a King, confirmed specially through the Gospels. Collins (1995:64) considers the verse in the Qumran community and concludes that “Balaam's oracle was widely understood in a messianic sense and that the “Prince of the Congregation” was a messianic title”.

The frequency and context in which Numbers 24:17 appears in the Qumran literature leads to the conclusion that the verse played a significant role in the messianic speculations of the Qumran community, and perhaps the whole Jewish community (Biersdorff 2014:68-70). The Targumim generally reveal a messianic interpretation of Numbers 24:17 and Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs although containing both Jewish and Christian material, corroborate the application of Numbers 24:17 to a messianic figure in the early centuries CE. Despite the challenge posed by the character of Balaam himself (who was commonly reviled in the New Testament), early Christian writers often appealed to Numbers 24:17 as a prediction of the coming of the Messiah. Although scholarly opinions were often divided over whether the Hebrew version of the Balaam oracles is itself specifically “messianic”, it is evident that Balaam's

oracles, especially Numbers 24:17, were often taken as messianic predictions during the Second Temple and early Christian periods. The Balaam oracles have often been cited as evidence of messianic interpretation in the LXX Pentateuch because of this interpretive history, and based on unique aspects of the LXX translation of the Balaam oracles (Biersdorff 2014:68-70).

Despite objections the belief persists that this verse indeed points to the Messiah. The discovery in the Hebrew Bible of various proof texts which could show that the prophecies of Scripture had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ was a popular method of interpretation in the early Church (Baskin 1983:23). Among those verses frequently cited was Numbers 24:17. Early Christian apologists, such as Justin and Clement of Alexandria, anxious to establish the antiquity of the Christian tradition, used such messianic texts eagerly to lend greater authority to their arguments against pagan and Jewish opponents (Baskin 1983:23).

But many authors, suspicious of Balaam's righteousness, attempted to cite the augury without its author. As such Justin (1915:48) cites Numbers 24:17 in his Apology as an Old Testament verification of the Incarnation, but he joins Balaam's star prophecy with the root of Jesse prediction of Isaiah, and attributes the whole to that author. He also refers to Balaam's prophecy in his Dialogue with Trypho, this time placing it correctly in the Books of Moses, but again without attribution to Balaam. Baskin (1983:23) also refers to Athanasius' effort to separate the man from his words by quoting Balaam's prophecy under the name of Moses (Baskin 1983:24).

Baskin reveals that Origen holds that each prophecy has an immediate reference as well as a future one and specifies three ways in which prophecy may be interpreted. Firstly, things the prophet spoke to his contemporaries, secondly predictions to those who lived later, and lastly, oracles of a certain Saviour who was to come and live among mankind. As a proof text Origen provides as an example of this last type of prophecy none other than Numbers 24:17 (1983:24).

The competing views of the Messiah and differing eschatologies were all mediated through interpretation of Scripture according to Caulley (2014:130), especially certain prophecies understood to be messianic of which Balaam's "Star Oracle" was very popular.

The passage introduces a ruler who is going to come from the lineage of Jacob and who will be like a “star” and will hold “the sceptre”. The important role of the king that will be born from Jacob’s seed is mostly highlighted by his main actions, emphasised by the verbs used in verses 17-19. Nechifor (2015:172) compares the similarity of expressions with those in Genesis 49 and opines that the Messianic character of this prophecy is further proved in the Hebrew verse from Numbers 24:17. The promise goes hand in hand with the prophecy written in Genesis for Jacob, namely that his descendants will be blessed and that kings will come from his seed. Therefore, both phrases “A star will come out of Jacob”, and “That who will be born from Jacob” clearly point to the fact that the Messiah will be born from Jacob and that he will be like a star, meaning that he will be among other things a King.

Nechifor (2015:174) further states that even the Hebrew perception of those who lived only a century ago from the Ascension of the Lord to heaven, considered that the prophecy from Numbers 24:17-19 refers to the Messiah, as the leader of the Jewish rebellion during the rule of King Adrian (in 132 AD) called him Simeon Bar Kochba translated “Son of the Star”, because they considered the Messiah foretold in Numbers 24:17. Rabbi Akiba understood the Messianic significance of this passage when he proclaimed Simon bar Kosiba to be “Bar Kochba” (“Son of the Star”), thereby consecrating him as the Messiah (Collins 1995:202).

The researcher agrees with the consensus of the early church and early Judaism that this passage indeed refers to the Messiah and put forth arguments for Messianic interpretation.

The expressions “not now” and “not near” clearly denote futurity in the oracle and intensify the future element already seen in the third oracle. The researcher concedes that this alone does not “prove” an eschatological setting, but the terms argue for a time relatively later to the time of the prophecies of the preceding oracle. Since the third oracle spoke of the Golden Age of Israel under kings Saul-David-Solomon, it is satisfying to relate the present oracle to the Messiah (Olson 1996:150).

The glory of this King is portrayed using two metaphors, the “star” and the “sceptre”. Isaiah used the star imagery in the context of royalty in describing the coming fall of the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14:12-13), and in the New Testament Jesus Christ is referred to

as the royal "Root and Offspring of David and the Bright Morning Star (Revelation 22:16). His birth as the incarnate King was declared by the heavens in the appearance of a star over Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-10). The Qumran sectarians interpreted this passage as having Messianic import, as did other Jewish sources of the period between the mid-second century B.C. and the first century A.D. (Collins 1995:24, 63–70; Fitzmyer 2000:75, 86, 98; Boyles 1997:23).

The verb used to describe the action of the star immediately suggests something more than just a star. Whereas a star may usually be said to rise the verb here means "to tread or to march". We therefore read, "a star shall march out from Jacob". Both this verb and its parallel are prophetic perfects according to Cole (2000:428). The second verb used with sceptre means "to arise" in the sense, "to come on the scene or to appear" as is used of leaders, prophets, and kings (Judges 5:7; 10:1 3; Deuteronomy 13:7; 34:10; II Kings 23:25) (Allen 1973:371).

The two nouns "star and sceptre" bespeak the Messiah's royalty. Whereas the word "stars" (in the plural) is often used symbolically in the Hebrew Bible the noun "star" (in the singular) is used only twice, here and in Amos 5:26 (where it is used with reference to pagan worship, BDB:878, star gods"). The use of "star" as a metaphor for a king is frequent in the ancient Near Eastern literature, but not in the Bible. Some read the noun as "comet", a close parallel to star. But if the word star is taken as a symbol of royalty, "sceptre" forms an admirable parallel. The word "sceptre" is used several times in the Old Testament as a symbol of royalty (cf. Genesis 49:10; Psalm 2:9; Isaiah 14:5).

If we accept the prophecies as genuine, it is, again, only possible to reject the Messianic element by assuming that no Jewish prophecy overleaps the narrow limits of Jewish history (Allen 1973:372).

The writer would agree with Unger Bible handbook (1967:135) and (Vischer 1950:235-38) who writes

This is the most remarkable of the four parables, containing a magnificent messianic prophecy of "the Star out of Jacob" and a "Sceptre out of Israel, " which "shall smite the corners [of the head] of Moab" and destroy "all the sons of Sheth, " Although the royal symbols "star" and "sceptre" include David, whose empire encompassed the Promised Land (Gen

49:10), yet they find their fulfilment only in the greater David when at the second advent the kingdom is restored to Israel (Acts 1:6). Then Israel's foes, Moab, Edom, Amalek, Asshur, Eber, and Kittim, that portray the latterday Gentile world powers, will be judged (Matthew 25:31-46), before Israel's kingdom is set up.

4.7. Conclusion

In its present context in Numbers, the fourth oracle is a final vision of Israel's future exaltation over its enemies as it becomes established as a nation in the promised land of Canaan. Together, the four oracles build into a rising crescendo of hope and promise for a new generation poised on the brink of entering Canaan. The oracles of Balaam reaffirm God's promises first made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:1-3 and repeated throughout the Pentateuch, namely, promises of land, descendants, and blessing. But it also alludes to much more.

The fourth oracle required no journey to a sacred observation point, no sacrificial preparations, or special rituals of divination. One of the most remarkable prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, interpreted for centuries before the Christian era as foreshadowing the great Messianic king and kingdom, is here uttered by a pagan divination expert.

Wenham (1981:179) cautions that texts such as the present often point as much, to a type of fulfillment, as to a definite historical meaning, that can be said to fulfil them. As the text is read and interpreted as part of the tapestry of the whole of biblical theology a fuller meaning may become evident.

Numbers 24 has some reference to the conquests of David, but ultimately alludes to the final destruction of Israel's foes under the Messiah. Not only will the Coming One defeat Moab and have dominion over Edom, but he will have dominion over the remnants of all cities. This fits well with a Messianic point-of-view. The Messiah in his Kingdom will exercise dominion over all peoples.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1. Summary

The study of the Balaam narratives has reached the finish line and it is time to reflect on the outcomes before concluding on the study.

In Chapter 1 the journey set out with an outline of the objectives of the study. Faced with a research problem that required determining if, based on available literary evidence, the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 could be understood as a reliable Messianic prophecy? The hypothesis at the time was that: The prophecy in Numbers 24:17 is a reliable Messianic prophecy which is not affected by proving Balaam a true prophet.

In chapter 2, the researcher explored how the background issues frame the interpretation of the Balaam narratives. The study surveyed scholarly materials to obtain a clearer picture of issues regarding authorship, readers, historical occasion and setting, literary structure, and theological motifs. Current literary work and scholarly articles available were studied and dialogical and comparative methods utilised to summarise current scholarly views and debates. Of specific note was the debate regarding authorship having to determine if Moses could be considered to have written Numbers.

Chapter 3, focused on the Balaam narratives in Numbers 22–24, to, not only, contextualise the more detailed study of Numbers 24:15-19, but also provide insight regarding one of the key questions, namely, was Balaam a true prophet? The answer to this question could potentially ultimately validate or invalidate the hypothesis set forth in chapter one. An interpretive framework for defining a true prophet, its definition and development over time had to be investigated, before coming to a suitable conclusion.

The final study of Numbers 24:15-19 in Chapter 4, aimed to answer the main research problem: Is verse 17 a reliable messianic prophecy? Investigation was required to determine if Balaam's words were a prophecy. Was this a reference

completely fulfilled through the earthly king, David or did it indeed and more specifically refer to the coming Messiah?

5.2. Conclusion

Following investigation and consideration of various scholarly and literary works the researcher reached the following specific conclusions:

1) Although there is every probability that, like the rest of the Pentateuchal writings, it has been subjected to one or more revisions, and may even have suffered interpolation in certain passages, the bulk of the text of the book of Numbers as we possess it, may be considered an original composition from the hand of Moses. Despite various contradicting viewpoints the conclusion reached at the end of this chapter was that Mosaic authorship could be maintained with confidence. The book has the purpose of reminding Israel of their past and the consequences of their sin, but it also serves to emphasise the grace and provision by God forever holy and true to his covenantal promises, a theme further explored in the promise of Numbers 24:17.

2) Balaam was not a man viewed in a positive light in Scripture or by later Christian writers. He is in fact referred to as a diviner which immediately implied that he was a false prophet. The review of the literature on this subject led to the conclusion that Balaam could be defined as a prophet in the sense that he delivered a message from God. Balaam is not acting or speaking out of his own volition. Numbers 24:2 states that the Spirit of God came on him. He assures Balak in verse 13 that he "could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad to go beyond the command of the Lord—and I must say only what the Lord says". This is exactly what one would expect of a prophet. Writer agrees with Unger (1952:215) that although never called a prophet, he does the work of a prophet, delivering oracles, which bear, in every detail, the superlative seal of divine inspiration. He should probably not be described as a "true prophet" nor a "false prophet" in the usual meaning of those terms. He could rather be described as a pagan diviner used by Yahweh to communicate his word. As is always the case with prophecies, the focus should be on the fact that the word is from God and therefore the vessel does not impact on the relevance of the message. The message delivered was from God and therefore Balaam's status or office as prophet would not affect the Messianic classification of verse 17.

3) The oracles of Balaam and more specifically Numbers 24:17 is delivered as one of the most remarkable prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, which has been interpreted as foreshadowing the great Messianic king and kingdom, for centuries before the Christian era. Despite some reference to the conquests of David, it ultimately alludes to the final destruction of Israel's enemies under the Messiah. He will defeat Moab and have dominion over Edom, but ultimately, he will have dominion over the remnants of all cities. As the text is read and interpreted as part of the tapestry of the whole of biblical theology the fuller meaning is reiterated. The Messiah in his Kingdom will exercise dominion over all peoples. Resultant from the research the writer is confident that Numbers 24:15-19 is indeed a Messianic prophecy.

The Balaam narratives present an amazing picture of God in his sovereign desire to bless his people Israel. Israel's future is not in the hands of the king of Moab, but rather in the hands of the God of Israel. Despite the history of disobedience since they left Egypt, God is determined to bless this people. He will utilise whatever means he chooses to reveal himself and his will for his people, even if it means divinely drafting for service one who would seem the ultimate antithesis of what the world would envision for a leader and spokesman.

Now as the journey reaches its end, it is the researchers sincere hope that when hearing the name Balaam, the reader will recall more than the fool on the donkey. God used Balaam, as he does us many times. Although he was not seen as a prophet by many before and after his time, in a very real way he was used to portray a message of hope. A hope foreseen in Numbers 24:27, fulfilled in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In like manner, we too may know that, no matter what our station or occupation, God may use us to be his mouthpiece. No matter how inadequate we might be or feel when God speaks the vessel is of no importance and only his word matters.

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