

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

Balaam, finding that God was determined to bless Israel, seeks no longer for enchantments, Numbers 24:1. The Spirit of God coming upon him, he delivers a most important prophetic parable, Numbers 24:2-9. Balak's anger is kindled against him, and he commands him to depart to his own country, Numbers 24:10, Numbers 24:11. Balaam vindicates his conduct, Numbers 24:12, Numbers 24:13; and delivers a prophecy relative to the future destruction of Moab by the Israelites, Numbers 24:14-17; also of Edom, Numbers 24:18, Numbers 24:19; of the Amalekites, Numbers 24:20; and of the Kenites, Numbers 24:21, Numbers 24:22. Predicts also the destruction of Asshur and Eber, by the naval power of Chittim, which should afterwards be itself destroyed, Numbers 24:23, Numbers 24:24. Balaam and Balak separate, Numbers 24:25.

Verse 1

He went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments - We have already had occasion to observe that the proper meaning of the word $\times \times$ — $\times \odot$ (nachash) is not easily ascertained; see Numbers 21:9 (note), and Genesis 3:1 (note). Here the plural $\times \times$ — $\times \odot \times^{\text{TM}} \times$ • (nechashim) is rendered enchantments; but it probably means no more than the knowledge of future events. When Balaam saw that it pleased God to bless Israel, he therefore thought it unnecessary to apply for any farther prophetic declarations of God's will as he had done before, for he could safely infer every good to this people, from the evident disposition of God towards them.

Verse 2

The Spirit of God came upon him - This Divine afflatus he had not expected on the present occasion, but God had not yet declared the whole of his will.

Verse 3

He took up his parable - His prophetic declaration couched in highly poetic terms, and in regular metre, as the preceding were.

The man whose eyes are open - I believe the original $\times \odot \times^{\text{a}} \times$ • (shethum), should be translated shut, not open; for in the next verse, where the opening of his eyes is mentioned, a widely different word is used, $\times' \times \odot \times$ • (galah), which signifies to open or reveal. At first the eyes of Balaam were shut, and so closely too that he could not see the angel who withstood him, till God opened his eyes; nor could he see the gracious intentions of God towards Israel, till the eyes of his understanding were opened by the powers of the Divine Spirit. This therefore he mentions, we may suppose, with humility and gratitude, and to the credit of the prophecy which he is now about to deliver, that the Moabites may receive it as the word of God, which must be fulfilled in due season. His words, in their meaning, are similar to those of the blind man in the Gospel: "Once I was blind, but now I see."

Verse 4

Falling into a trance - There is no indication in the Hebrew that he fell into a trance; these words are added by our translators, but they are not in the original. $\times \times^{\text{a}} \times \odot$ (nophel) is the only word used, and simply signifies falling, or falling down, perhaps in this instance by way of religious prostration.

Verse 6

Lign aloes which the Lord hath planted - Or, as the tents which the Lord hath pitched; for it is the same word, $\times \times^{\text{a}} \times \odot \times^{\text{TM}} \times$ • (ohalim), which is used in the 5th verse. But from other parts of Scripture we find that the word also signifies a species of tree, called by some the sandal tree, and by others the lignum or wood aloes. This tree is described as being eight or ten feet high, with very large leaves growing at the top; and it is supposed that a forest of those at some distance must bear some resemblance to a numerous encampment. As the word comes from the root $\times \times^{\text{a}} \times \odot$ (ahal), which signifies to spread or branch out, and therefore is applied to tents, because of their being extended or spread out on the ground; so when it is applied to trees it must necessarily mean such as were remarkable for their widely-extended branches; but what the particular species is, cannot be satisfactorily ascertained. By the Lord's planting are probably meant such trees as grow independently of the cultivation of man - Nullis hominum cogentibus; or, as Virgil expresses it, Sponte sua quae se tollunt in luminis oras.

Virg., Geor. ii., 47.

"Such as sprung up, spontaneously into the regions of light."

As cedar trees - Gabriel Sionita, a very learned Syrian Maronite, who assisted in editing the Paris Polyglot, a man worthy of all credit, thus describes the cedars of Mount Lebanon, which he had examined on the spot: -

“The cedar grows on the most elevated part of the mountain, is taller than the pine, and so thick that five men together could scarcely fathom one. It shoots out its branches at ten or twelve feet from the ground; they are large, and distant from each other, and are perpetually green. The cedar distils a kind of gum, to which different effects are attributed. The wood of it is of a brown color, very solid, and incorruptible if preserved from wet. It bears a small apple, like to that of the pine.”

Deuteronomy la Roque relates some curious particulars concerning this tree, which he learned from the Maronites of Mount Libanus:

“The branches grow in parallel rows round the tree, but lessen gradually from the bottom to the top, shooting out parallel to the horizon, so that the tree is, in appearance, similar to a cone. As the snows, which fall in vast quantities on this mountain, must necessarily, by their weight on such a vast surface, break down these branches, nature, or rather the God of nature, has so ordered it, that at the approach of winter, and during the snowy season, the branches erect themselves, and cling close to the body of the tree, and thus prevent any quantity of snow from lodging on them.”

Mr. Maundrell, who visited Mount Libanus in 1697, gives the following description of the cedars still growing there: -

“These noble trees grow among the snow, near the highest part of Lebanon, and are remarkable, as well for their own age and largeness as for those frequent allusions to them in the word of God. Some of them are very old, and of a prodigious bulk; others younger, and of a smaller size. Of the former I could reckon only sixteen, but the latter are very numerous. I measured one of the largest, and found it twelve yards and six inches in girth, and yet sound, and thirty-seven yards in the spread of its branches. At about five or six yards from the ground it was divided into five limbs, each of which was equal to a great tree.” - Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem, p. 142.

Verse 7

He shall pour the water out of his buckets, etc. - Here is a very plain allusion to their method of raising water in different parts of the East. By the well a tall pole is erected, which serves as a fulcrum to a very long lever, to the smaller end of which a bucket is appended. On the opposite end, which is much larger, are many notches cut in the wood, which serve as steps for a man, whose business it is to climb up to the fulcrum, in order to lower the bucket into the well, which, when filled, he raises by walking back on the opposite arm, till his weight brings the bucket above the well’s mouth: a person standing by the well empties the bucket into a trench, which communicates with the ground intended to be watered.

His seed shall be in many waters - Another simple allusion to the sowing of rice. The ground must not only be well watered, but flooded, in order to serve for the proper growth of this grain. The rice that was sown in many waters must be the most fruitful. By an elegant and chaste metaphor all this is applied to the procreation of a numerous posterity.

His king shall be higher than Agag - This name is supposed to have been as common to all the Amalekitish kings as Pharaoh was to those of Egypt. But several critics, with the Septuagint, suppose that a small change has taken place here in the original word, and that instead of *meagag*, than Agag, we should read *miggog*, than Gog. As Gog in Scripture seems to mean the enemies of God’s people, then the promise here may imply that the true worshippers of the Most High shall ultimately have dominion over all their enemies.

Verse 8

God brought him forth out of Egypt - They were neither expelled thence, nor came voluntarily away. God alone, with a high hand and uplifted arm, brought them forth. Concerning the unicorn, see Numbers 23:22 (note).

Verse 9

He couched, he lay down as a lion, etc. - See the original terms explained Numbers 23:24 (note).

These oracles, delivered by Balaam, are evident prophecies of the victories which the Israelites should gain over their enemies, and of their firm possession of the promised land. They may also refer to the great victories to be obtained by the Lord Jesus Christ, that Lion of the tribe of Judah, over sin, death, and Satan, the grand enemies of the human race; and to that most numerous posterity of spiritual children which should be begotten by the preaching of the Gospel.

Verse 11

Lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honor - A bitter and impious sarcasm. “Hadst thou cursed this people, I would have promoted thee to great honor; but thou hast chosen to follow the directions of Jehovah rather than

Verse 15

Verse 17

The Targum of Onkelos translates the whole passage thus:

The Jerusalem Tarqum is a little different:

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon has, in my opinion, perfectly hit the meaning of the prophecy in the following paraphrase of the text:

â€œI shall see him, but not now. This is David - I shall behold him, but not nigh. This is the king Messiah - A Star shall come out of Jacob. This is David - And a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel. This is the king Messiah - And shall smite the corners of Moab. This is David, (as it is written, 2 Samuel 8:2: And he smote Moab, casting them down to the ground) - And shall destroy all the children of Sheth. This is the king Messiah, of whom it is written, (Psalm 72:8). He shall have dominion from sea to sea.â€•

Verse 18

And Edom shall be a possession - That is, to David: as it is said: "And all they of Edom became David's servants;" 2 Samuel 8:14.

Seir also shall be a possession - That is, unto the king Messiah; as it is said: "And saviours shall come upon Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's;" Obadiah 1:21. See Ainsworth.

Verse 19

Out of Jacob shall come, etc. - This is supposed to refer to Christ, because of what is said Genesis 49:10. It is exceedingly difficult to fix the true sense of this prophecy in all its particulars. Probably the star, Numbers 24:17, is only an emblem of kingly power. Among the Egyptians a star is said to have been the symbol of the Divine Being. The scepter refers to the kingly power in exercise. The corners or outskirts may mean the petty Moabitish governments, as the Chaldee has understood the term. If (karkar), which we translate utterly destroy, be not the name of a place here, as it is in Judges 8:10, (which is not very likely), it may be taken in one of those senses assigned to it, (see on Numbers 24:17 (note)), and signify the blending together the children of Sheth, that is, all the inhabitants of the earth; for so the children of Sheth must necessarily be understood, unless we consider it here as meaning some king of the Moabites, according to Grotius, or a city on the borders of Moab, according to Rabbi Nathan. As neither Israel nor the Messiah ever destroyed all the children of men, we must (in order to leave the children of Sheth what they are generally understood to be, all the inhabitants of the world) understand the whole as a prophecy of the final universal sway of the scepter of Christ, when the middle wall of partition shall be broken down, and the Jews and Gentiles become one united, blended fold, under one shepherd and bishop of their souls.

I cannot think that the meteoric star which guided the wise men of the east to Bethlehem can be intended here; nor do I think that Peter refers to this prophecy when he calls Christ the day star, 2 Peter 1:19; nor that

Revelation 2:28, where Christ is called the morning star, nor Revelation 22:16, where he is called the bright and morning star, refers at all to this prophecy of Balaam. Nor do I think that the false Christ who rose in the time of Adrian, and who called himself Barcochab, which literally signifies the son of a star, did refer to this prophecy. If he had, he must have defeated his own intention, because the Son of the star is not The Star that should arise, but at the utmost a descendant; and then, to vindicate his right to the Jewish throne, he must show that the person who was called the star, and of whom he pretended to be the son or descendant, had actually reigned before him. As the sun, moon, stars, planets, light, splendours, effulgence, day, etc., were always considered among the Asiatics as emblems of royalty, government, etc., therefore many, both men and women, had these names given to them as titles, surnames, etc. So the queen of Alexander the Great, called Roxana by the Greeks, was a Persian princess, and in her native tongue her name was (Roushen), splendor. Hadassah, who became queen to Ahasuerus, in place of the repudiated Vashti, and is called Esther by Europeans in general, was called in the language of Persia (Sitareh); from whence by corruption came both Esther, the Persian queen, and our word star. And to waive all farther examples, a Mohammedan prince, at first named Eesouf or Joseph, was called (Roushen Akhter) when he was raised to the throne, which signifies a splendid or luminous star. This prince, by a joyful reverse of fortune, was brought from a gloomy prison and exalted to the throne of Hindostan; on which account the following couplet was made, in which there is a paronomasia or play on the name Roushen Akhter; and the last line alludes to the history of the patriarch Joseph, who was brought out of prison and exalted to the highest honors in Egypt.

(Roushen Akhter boodclass="translit"> aknoon mah shudl

Yousef az zendan ber amd shah shud).

He was a bright star, but is now become a moon.

Joseph is brought out of prison, and is become a glorious king.

Verse 20

Amalek was the first of the nations - The most ancient and most powerful of all the nations or states then within the view of Balaam; but his latter end shall be that he perish for ever, or his posterity $x \cdot x - x \cdot x^{TM} x^a x$ (acharitho), shall be destroyed, or shall utterly fail. This oracle began to be fulfilled by Saul, 1 Samuel 15:7, 1 Samuel 15:8, who overthrew the Amalekites, and took their king, Agag, prisoner. Afterwards they were nearly destroyed by David, 1 Samuel 27:8, and they were finally exterminated by the sons of Simeon in the days of Hezekiah, 1 Chronicles 4:41-43; since that time they have ceased to exist as a people, and now no vestige of them remains on the face of the earth; so completely is their posterity cut off, according to this prophecy. The marginal reading does not appear to give the proper sense.

Verse 21

He looked on the Kenites - Commentators are not well agreed who the Kenites were. Dr. Dodd's opinion is, I think, nearest to the truth. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is called a priest or prince of Midian, Exodus 3:1, and in Judges 1:16 he is called a Kenite; we may infer, therefore, says he, that the Kenites and the Midianites were the same, or at least that the Kenites and the Midianites were confederate tribes. Some of these we learn from Judges 1, followed the Israelites, others abode still among the Midianites and Amalekites. When Saul destroyed the latter, we find he had no commission against the Kenites, 1 Samuel 15:6, for it appears that they were then a small and inconsiderable people; they had doubtless been wasted, as the text says, though by what means does not appear from history. On the other hand, it may be observed that the Midianites mentioned here lived close to the Dead Sea, at a great distance from the Midian where Jethro lived, which was near Horeb. Perhaps they were a colony or tribe that had migrated from the vicinity of Mount Sinai. It seems that at this time the Kenites occupied a very strong position: Strong is thy dwelling place, and thou puttest thy nest in a rock; where there is a play on the original word $x \cdot x^{TM}$, which signifies both a Kenite and a nest. High rocks in these countries were generally used as their strong places.

Verse 22

Until Asshur shall carry thee away captive - The Assyrians and Babylonians who carried away captive the ten tribes, 2 Kings 17:6, and the Jews into Babylon, 2 Kings 25, probably carried away the Kenites also. Indeed this seems pretty evident, as we find some Kenites mentioned among the Jews after their return from the Babylonish captivity, 1 Chronicles 2:55.

Verse 23

Who shall live when God doeth this! - There are two senses in which these words may be taken: -

1. That the event is so distant that none then alive could possibly live to see it.

2. That the times would be so distressing and desolating that scarcely any should be able to escape.

The words are very similar to those of our Lord, and probably are to be taken in the same sense: "Wo to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days."

Verse 24

Ships shall come from the coast of Chittim - Some think by Chittim the Romans, others the Macedonians under Alexander the Great, are meant. It is certain that the Romans did conquer the Assyrians, including all the people of Syria, Mesopotamia, etc., but Calmet strongly contends that by Chittim Macedonia is meant, and that the prophecy refers to the conquests of Alexander. Chittim was one of the sons of Javan, the son of Japheth, the son of Noah, Genesis 10:4; and his posterity, according to Josephus, Antiq., 1. iii., c. 22, settled in Cilicia, Macedonia, Cyprus, and Italy also; and therefore, says Mr. Ainsworth, the prophecy may imply both the troubles that befell the Assyrians and Jews by the Greeks and Seleucidae, in the troublous days of Antiochus.

And shall afflict Eber - Probably not the Hebrews, as some think, but the people on the other side the Euphrates, from "abar" (abar), to pass over, go beyond; all which people were discomfited, and their empire destroyed by Alexander the Great.

Verse 25

And Balaam - returned to his place - Intended to have gone to Mesopotamia, his native country, (see Deuteronomy 23:4), but seems to have settled among the Midianites, where he was slain by the Israelites; see Numbers 31:8.

Though the notes in the preceding chapters have been extended to a considerable length, yet a few additional remarks may be necessary: the reader's attention is earnestly requested to the following propositions: -

1. It appears sufficiently evident from the preceding account that Balaam knew and worshipped the true God.
2. That he had been a true prophet, and appears to have been in the habit of receiving oracles from God.
3. That he practiced some illicit branches of knowledge, or was reputed by the Moabites as a sorcerer, probably because of the high reputation he had for wisdom; and we know that even in our own country, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, persons who excelled their contemporaries in wisdom were reputed as magicians.
4. That though he was a believer in the true God, yet he was covetous; he loved the wages of unrighteousness.
5. That it does not appear that in the case before us he wished to curse Israel when he found they were the servants of the true God.
6. That it is possible he did not know this at first. Balak told him that there was a numerous people come out of Egypt; and as marauders, wandering hordes, freebooters, etc., were frequent in those days, he might take them at first for such spoilers, and the more readily go at Balak's request to consult God concerning them.
7. That so conscientiously did he act in the whole business, that as soon as he found it displeased God he cheerfully offered to return; and did not advance till he had not only the permission, but the authority of God to proceed.
8. That when he came in view of the Israelitish camp he did not attempt to make use of any means of sorcery, evocation of spirits, necromantic spells, etc., to accomplish the wish of Balak.
9. That he did seek to find out the will of the true God, by using those means which God himself had prescribed, viz., supplication and prayer, and the sacrifice of the clean beasts.
10. That though he knew it would greatly displease Balak, yet he most faithfully and firmly told him all that God said on every occasion.
11. That notwithstanding his allowed covetous disposition, yet he refused all promised honors and proffered rewards, even of the most extensive kind, to induce him to act in any respect contrary to the declared will of God.
12. That God on this occasion communicated to him some of the most extraordinary prophetic influences ever conferred on man.
13. That his prophecies are, upon the whole, clear and pointed, and have been fulfilled in the most remarkable manner, and furnish a very strong argument in proof of Divine revelation.
14. That notwithstanding the wicked counsel given to the Midianites, the effects of which are mentioned in the following chapter, on which account he probably lost his life, (Numbers 31:8), the badness of this man's character has been very far overrated; and that it does not appear that he was either a hypocrite, false prophet, or a sorcerer in the common acceptance of the term, and that he risked even life itself in following and fulfilling the will of the Lord!
15. That though it is expressly asserted, Numbers 31:16, and Revelation 2:14, that Israel's committing whoredom with the daughters of Moab was brought about by the evil counsel given by Balaam to cast this stumbling-block in their way, yet it does not appear from the text that he had those most criminal intentions which are generally attributed to him; for as we have already seen so much good in this man's character, and that this, and his love of money (and who thinks this a sin?) are almost the only blots in it, it must certainly be

consistent with candour and charity to suggest a method of removing at least some part of this blame.

16. I would therefore simply say that the counsel given by Balaam to Balak might have been “to form alliances with this people, especially through the medium of matrimonial connections; and seeing they could not conquer them, to endeavor to make them their friends.” Now, though this might not be designed by Balaam to bring them into a snare, yet it was a bad doctrine, as it led to the corruption of the holy seed, and to an unequal yoking with unbelievers; which, though even in a matrimonial way, is as contrary to sound policy as to the word of God. See the notes on Numbers 25:3 and Numbers 25:6 (note).

17. That it was the Moabitish women, not Balaam, that called the people to the sacrifice of their gods; and it argued great degeneracy and iniquity in the hearts of the people on so slight an invitation to join so suddenly so impure a worship, and so speedily to cast off the whole form of godliness, with every portion of the fear of the Almighty; therefore the high blame rests ultimately with themselves.