

Then he proclaimed his poem:

The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eyes are opened; the oracle of one who hears the sayings of God and has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls into a trance with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a sceptre will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites. Edom will become a possession; Seir will become a possession of its enemies, but Israel will be triumphant. One who comes from Jacob will rule; he will destroy the city's survivors.

(Numbers 24:15–19)

## Introduction

Andy Williams famously sang about Christmas being “the most wonderful time of the year.” At Christmastime, he sang, we can hear “kids jingle belling and everyone telling you be of good cheer.” He sang of “holiday greetings” and “happy meetings when friends come to call.” The song is a celebration and description of activities associated with the Christmas season, focusing primarily on get-togethers between friends and families—albeit in a very Northern Hemisphere setting.

But while Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to get together and celebrate with family and friends, it's always good, at least in a South African context, to start our Christmas Day as the gathered church, reminding ourselves of the real significance of the day. Christmas, we know, is about far more than gift-giving, decorations, and family reunions. Christmas is about the advent of Jesus Christ. It's about the fulfilment of God's promise to send the offspring of the woman to crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

The significance of Christmas was not first made known when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Long before the manger, Old Testament prophecies foretold the significance of his coming. One such Old Testament prophecy—from the lips of a pagan prophet—is located in Numbers 24, the text to which we turn our attention in this study.

The prophet Balaam is introduced to us in Numbers 22 merely as “Balaam son of Beor at Pethor.” We are not given much biographical background, but ancient extrabiblical inscriptions suggest that he was a prophet of international renown, famed for his divination abilities. He was well studied in ancient religions so that he was able to quickly discern which god to call upon in order to secure a blessing or a curse. He made his services available for a cost, and evidently made quite a good living from it.

When Moses and the Israelites, on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, came to the land of Moab, King Balak of Moab feared the worst. So terrified was Balak of Israel that he quickly decided

to hire Balaam to curse Israel. He sent a royal delegation to Balaam's home with a promise of rich reward for services rendered.

Balaam knew just what to do. Israel's god was Yahweh, who had proven himself quite capable of defeating foreign gods who opposed him. It was useless to invoke the name of other gods to curse Israel, for all other gods had proven impotent before the might of Yahweh. To secure a curse against Israel, therefore, it was necessary to secure Yahweh's curse.

Balaam invited Balak's delegation to spend the night and called upon Yahweh that night. This was probably something of a show and, given that he frequently consulted pagan gods who could not answer him, I can't imagine that he actually expected to receive an answer from a living God. Yahweh, however, spoke to him and refused him permission to curse Israel. This was a significant curve ball in the equation, and so, not quite certain how to proceed, Balaam sent the Moabite delegation packing the next morning, insisting that he could not go against the will of Yahweh.

Balak understood this to be a negotiation tactic. Unperturbed, he sent another delegation, comprising higher ranking officials with a greater financial incentive. He correctly assessed Balaam's greed for wealth and knew that he could play the negotiation game as well as Balaam could. Balaam repeated his line to the second delegation that he could not go against what Yahweh said but showed his true colours, and his hankering after money, by inviting the servants to stay another night while he asked Yahweh what he should do. This time, Yahweh told Balaam to go with the delegation to Moab—but only to speak what he commanded. Balaam eagerly arose the next morning, no doubt hoping that he would gain permission to curse Israel and thereby secure the bounty, but rather than cursing Israel, ended up delivering a threefold blessing upon the Israelites.

Balak was incensed.

Then Balak became furious with Balaam, struck his hands together, and said to him, "I summoned you to put a curse on my enemies, but instead, you have blessed them these three times. Now go to your home! I said I would reward you richly, but look, the LORD has denied you a reward."

Balaam answered Balak, "Didn't I previously tell the messengers you sent me: If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go against the LORD's command, to do anything good or bad of my own will? I will say whatever the LORD says. Now I am going back to my people, but first, let me warn you what these people will do to your people in the future."

(Numbers 24:10–14)

This brings us to the text before us—Balaam's fourth oracle to King Balak. It may seem a strange text for a Christmas Day service, but Balaam's warning includes a prophecy of the coming of Christ—the very event that we celebrate at Christmas—and highlights a twofold significance of that coming.

## Christmas is about Deliverance

First, we learn that Christmas is about deliverance: “I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a sceptre will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites” (v. 17).

## Distant Deliverance

We must notice something about the timing of the prophecy: “I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near” (v. 17).

Balaam lived 1,400 before the birth of Christ. As Yahweh opened his eyes (v. 15) and ears (v. 16) to see what lay ahead, he made it clear that this prophecy had a distant fulfilment. There is none of the language here of the Olivet Discourse (“this generation”) or the book of Revelation (“soon,” “at hand”). This prophecy was certain but would not be realised for a long time to come.

As we think about the fulfilment of this prophecy, therefore, we must consider its fulfilment to be centuries after the giving of the prophecy. A significant event would take place centuries after Moses and Balaam lived, which would fulfil this vision.

But notice also that the fulfilment would not be in a generic event but would be tied to a specific person: “him.”

## Divine Deliverance

The deliverance foretold in this prophecy would be divine in nature: “A star will come from Jacob, and a sceptre will arise from Israel” (v. 17).

Balaam was a diviner—one who recognised, among other things, the stars as gods. For a diviner, one who came from the stars carried divine authority. The Bible recognises the association of pagan gods with the stars. Amos spoke of Kaiwan as the “star god” that the Israelites worshipped in his day (Amos 5:26; cf. Acts 7:43). The king of Babylon, who considered himself a god, was addressed by Isaiah by the self-given title of “shining morning star” (Isaiah 14:12). The imagery of a star carries overtones of divinity.

The prophesied deliverer would also be a sceptre, an image of authority. As with the star, the sceptre is frequently associated in Scripture with divine authority (see Psalms 2:9; 45:6; 60:7; 108:8; 110:2; etc.).

The language here unmistakably points to the divine nature of the promised deliverer. He would come as a star and a sceptre—one with divine authority. He would specifically be a descendant of Jacob—a divine Israelite.

### Dominating Deliverance

The promised divine Israelite deliverer would come to exercise dominion: “He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites” (v. 17).

Balaam had been called by King Balak to curse Israel as the Moabites waged war against God’s people. “Moab” therefore stands here for all that opposes Yahweh and his people. The distant, divine deliverer would “smash” and “strike down” his enemies, none of whom would escape his domination.

Again, there are overtones here that take us back to that early prophecy in Genesis 3:15. There, we are told that the coming offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. Here, we are told that the coming deliverer would smash the forehead of those who oppose him. There would be those who would try to dominate him, but he would ultimately bring them to utter ruin.

I trust that you can see the significance that this text has for us at Christmastime. Who fits the bill of a God-sent deliverer, with divine authority, promising to crush all that opposes Yahweh and Yahweh’s people? Can this be any other than Jesus Christ?

Consider the Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ. Before her and Joseph came together in marriage, the virgin Mary discovered that “she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18) and that the child in her womb was the fulfilment of the Old Testament Emmanuel (“God with us”) prophecy (Matthew 1:23). Is that not the very definition of one sent by God?

Sent by God, Jesus had come to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Does this not fit the bill of one sent to deliver God’s people from that which ultimate opposes Yahweh and his people?

Was not a star associated with Jesus birth and did not wise men from the east come to worship him in recognition of his royal authority (Matthew 2:1–2)? Did they not bring him gifts fit for a king (Matthew 2:11)?

The star of Jacob, whom Balaam saw in his distant future, was none other than the baby born in a manger more than two thousand years ago. And he was sent by God, with divine authority, to deliver his people from their sins and to crush his enemies, which brings us to our second point.

### Christmas is about Dominion

The deliverer whom Balaam foresaw would come as one exercising dominion: “Edom will become a possession; Seir will become a possession of its enemies, but Israel will be triumphant. One who comes from Jacob will rule; he will destroy the city’s survivors” (Numbers 24:18–19).

According to these verses, the “one who comes from Jacob” would come to exercise dominion, and he would do so in one of two ways.

## Dominion through Possession

First, some would come under his dominion through possession: “Edom will become a possession; Seir will become a possession of its enemies, but Israel will be triumphant” (v. 18).

Edom was a foreign nation, distantly related to Israel, which had forbidden Israel to pass through its territory on the way to the Promised Land. Seir was the land that the Edomites inhabited. Israel was forbidden from attacking Edom during the time of Moses, but the prophecy here is that Israel would eventually prove “triumphant” over Edom. A time would come when Edom and Israel would go to war, and Edom would not come out on top.

But utter destruction is not here pictured. Instead, through Israel’s triumph, Edom and its land would eventually become the possession of the promised deliverer and his people. Edom’s resistance to Israel and Israel’s God would not persist forever, for the deliverer would take possession of the people.

## Dominion through Destruction

Second, there were those who would experience the Star’s dominion by destruction: “One who comes from Jacob will rule; he will destroy the city’s survivors” (v. 19).

This one who would come from Jacob is, of course, the Star from Jacob and the Sceptre from Israel mentioned in v. 17. His enemies would not ultimately withstand his rule. They might resist for a while but, ultimately, all who would not bow to him would fall under his judgement as he exercised his divine authority to rule.

Balaam’s own story tragically foreshadowed this ultimate destruction. Though he recognised the blessing of Israel through its God, and though he longed to “die the death of the upright” so that “the end of [his] life” would “be like theirs” (23:10), that was not his ultimate destiny.

The New Testament reveals that Balaam so loved money (2 Peter 2:15) that he found a way to secure a curse on Israel. Unable to curse Israel directly, Balaam suggested to Balak that he tempt the Israelites with idolatry and sexual immorality (Revelation 2:14). The outcome of that story is recorded in Numbers 25.

While Israel was staying in the Acacia Grove, the people began to prostitute themselves with the women of Moab. The women invited them to the sacrifices for their gods, and the people ate and bowed in worship to their gods. So Israel aligned itself with Baal of Peor, and the LORD’s anger burned against Israel.

(Numbers 25:1–3)

Balak got what he wanted: Israel came under Yahweh’s curse. Balaam got what he wanted: the bounty that Balak had offered. This unfolded, not because Balaam cursed the people, but because he taught Balak a sure-fire way to secure Yahweh’s own curse against his people. If the Israelites could be tempted to idolatry and sexual immorality, Yahweh’s anger would burn against them.

Moses reveals Balaam's fate just a few chapters later: "[Israel] waged war against Midian, as the LORD had commanded Moses, and killed every male. Along with the others slain by them, they killed the Midianite kings—Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword" (Numbers 31:7-8). He did not die the death of the upright but died in rebellion to Yahweh.

### Christmas is about Decisions

Perhaps you are wondering what this ancient prophecy, fulfilled some two thousand years ago, has to do with Christmas in the 21st century. The realisation that this particular prophecy was fulfilled in Christ places before us an important decision.

Jesus was the Star of Jacob and the Sceptre of Israel sent by God to deliver his people from sin and to exercise dominion in the world. The baby in the manger was indeed the newborn king, of whom we sing in the favourite Christmas hymn. He came as a baby with a mission: to reconcile sinners to God. And how would he do that?

He would do that by living a perfect, God-honouring, law-keeping life. He would perfectly do everything that God expected so that those who would believe in him could have his perfection credited to them. Despite the fact that he never sinned, he would go to the cross in our place, taking the wages of sin upon himself, so that we could find life in him. He would rise from the dead, proving that he conquered sin and death and ascend to the right hand of his Father on high, where he rules and reigns from heaven until the appointed day when he will return to judge the living and the dead.

At judgement day, everybody who has ever lived will stand before the Star of David and the Sceptre of Israel. On that day, there will be one of two destinies: Either, Christ will own you as his own possession, having delivered you from the curse of sin by his death and resurrection; or you will face eternal destruction as his enemies are cast into the lake of fire. Your destiny depends on your decision in this life.

Jesus Christ was born to deliver his people from sin and Satan and he did so by dying on a cross in their place and rising from the dead three days later. Now, he extends his free offer of salvation to all who will repent of their sins and, by faith, embrace his offer of forgiveness and eternal life. If you wish to die the death of the righteous, as Balaam so longed for, the only way is to place your trust fully in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Resisting him will result in destruction. Instead, submit to him now and find eternal life in the age to come.

For those who will not do so, destruction is your certain destiny. But it doesn't have to be. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

AMEN