

Balaam's Oracles

Numbers 23—24

Numbers 23:7-10	Balaam's 1 st Oracle
⁷ And Balaam took up his discourse and said, “From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains: ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!’ ⁸ How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? ⁹ For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! ¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!”	<i>God will not go back on His covenant promise to bless the nations through blessing Israel (Gen. 12:3)</i> <i>Israel is “set apart” as a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6) to display God’s character to the nations</i> <i>God promised that Abraham would become a great nation, like the “dust” of the earth (Gen. 13:16; 28:14)</i>
Numbers 23:18-24	Balaam's 2 nd Oracle
¹⁸ And Balaam took up his discourse and said, “Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor: ¹⁹ God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? ²⁰ Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. ²¹ He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. ²² God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. ²³ For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought!’ ²⁴ Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.”	<i>God’s promise to bless (Num. 22:12) is a settled fact, which cannot be changed</i> <i>The word “misfortune” [אַוֶּן] is the standard Hebrew word for “iniquity.” Even Israel’s failure (Num. 11—21) cannot threaten God’s covenant plan bless the nations through the family of Abraham.</i> <i>God delivered Israel, plural, from slavery in Egypt, but this plural noun will shift to singular soon...</i> <i>Israel, as a whole, is described in language from Jacob’s blessing of Judah as a “lion’s cub” (Gen. 4:9), but, again, this plural reference will turn singular...</i> <i>Israel’s defeat of her enemies (cf. Gen. 22:17; 49:8) is a dominant motif in Balaam’s oracles</i>

Numbers 24:3-9	Balaam's 3 rd Oracle
And the Spirit of God came upon him, ³ and he took up his discourse and said, “The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, ⁴ the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: ⁵ How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! ⁶ Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. ⁷ Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. ⁸ God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox; he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows. ⁹ He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”	<i>Balaam's first explicit messianic oracle opens with an extended introduction and reference to the Spirit's activity</i> <i>Israel is described as an Eden-like garden in the wilderness, with abundant water</i> <i>Israel's "seed" [זרע], is the promised "seed" [זרע] of the woman who will crush the head of the snake (Gen. 3:15), who, like Moses (Exod. 2:3), will pass through "waters"</i> <i>"Agag" may be a dynastic name for kings of Amalek, defeated first by Saul (1 Sam. 15:8), and then Mordecai (Esth. 9:24-25), but ultimately in the form of "Gog" [LXX] by the messiah (Ezek. 48—49)</i> <i>God is going to rescue a singular king from Egypt (Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1) in a future, exodus-like deliverance</i> <i>Jacob's blessing of Judah as a lion's cub (Gen. 49:9) ultimately pointed to a single coming king (Rev. 5:5)</i> <i>Explicit reference to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3; 27:29) establishes context of messianic prophecy</i>
Numbers 24:15-19	Balaam's 4 th Oracle
¹⁵ And he took up his discourse and said, “The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, 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 with his eyes uncovered: ¹⁷ I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. ¹⁸ Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. ¹⁹ And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!”	<i>Balaam's second messianic oracle likewise opens with a matching extended introduction</i> <i>The coming of this messianic king is set in the distant future</i> <i>Reference to this king as a "star" is elsewhere reserved for the NT (Matt. 2:2; Rev. 22:16))</i> <i>Jacob's blessing of Judah likewise referenced this coming lion-king as a "scepter" [שֵׁבֶט] (Gen. 49:10)</i> <i>While the specific Hebrew language is different, the reference to "crushing the head" is doubtless significant (Gen. 3:15)</i> <i>David defeated Moab (2 Sam. 8:2), as the Greater-David will defeat all His enemies</i>

Numbers 24:20		Balaam's 5 th Oracle	
²⁰ Then he looked on Amalek and took up his discourse and said, "Amalek was the first among the nations, but its end is utter destruction."		<i>Amalek, Israel's oldest enemy (Exod. 17:14-16), recently defeated a rebellious Israel (Num. 14:45)</i> <i>Defeated first by Israel (Exod. 17:13), then Saul, and David (1 Sam. 15:18; 30:17) before their final destruction in Hezekiah's day (1 Chron. 4:43)</i>	
Numbers 24:21-22		Balaam's 6 th Oracle	
²¹ And he looked on the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said, "Enduring is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock. ²² Nevertheless, Kain shall be burned when Asshur takes you away captive."		<i>The Kenites are related to the Midianites (Judg. 1:16; 4:11) who recently allied with Moab against Israel (Num. 22:4; 25:17-18)</i> <i>These Midianites will be defeated by "Asshur," which refers either to Assyria in the 8th century or a small desert tribe (Gen. 25:3; 2 Sam. 2:9) in an earlier time</i>	
Numbers 24:23-24		Balaam's 7 th Oracle	
²³ And he took up his discourse and said, "Alas, who shall live when God does this? ²⁴ But ships shall come from Kittim and shall afflict Asshur and Eber; and he too shall come to utter destruction."		<i>Descendants of Javan, the coastland people (Gen. 10:4-5; cf. Ezek. 27:6), Kittim may refer either to the distant Greeks or Romans (Dan. 11:30) or to the more contemporary Philistines (Josh. 13:2)</i> <i>These coastal peoples will defeat Asshur and Eber, likely in reference to Israel herself (Gen. 10:21)</i>	

"It is difficult in this context not to think of texts like Genesis 10:2–4, where the Kittim are associated with nations such as Magog, Tubal, Media, and Meshech, nations which figure prominently in the later prophetic books (e.g., Ezek. 38:2–3), and of Daniel 11:30, where the Kittim are again mentioned in reference to the last great battle. In any case, this last oracle of Balaam appears to place the scope of his oracles too far in the future to be a reference to the reign of David." (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 409)