

Balaam's Prophecy

The prophecy of Numbers 24:17 proves Balaam was a true prophet of Christ *at one time*. Numbers 24:17 reads, Balaam speaking:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh; there shall ***step forth a star out of Jacob***, and a ***scepter [?]*** shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite through the corners of Moab, and break down all the sons of tumult. (ASV) [Question mark is mine].

The last part on “break down sons of tumult” was interpreted by Jews as meaning “rule the world.” As a result, the Dead Sea Scrolls from 200 B.C. called this prophecy the “*World Ruler Prophecy*.”¹ In the *Shiloh* document among the Dead Sea Scrolls, they “interpreted it [*i.e.*, the Star Prophecy] in terms of a singular ‘Messiah of Righteousness, the Branch of David.’”²

Friedman, in the modern Jewish translation, renders the first key part “a star has ***stepped from Jacob....***” (*Commentary on the Torah, supra*, at 511.) The Septuagint reads “a star ***shall arise*** from Jacob....”

As to the second significant prediction in Balaam's prophecy, Jerome in the 4th Century apparently had a significantly varying Hebrew text than the modern Masoretic text. In the Latin Vulgate, he has next “et consurget [future tense] virga de Israel.” This means “he will stand up from the virgin/maiden of Israel.” The Septuagint of 400 B.C. reads in accord, saying “a man will arise from Israel.” Yet, the Masoretic text has “scepter.” Thus, the translation in this second part is either *virgin, maiden, man* or *scepter*.

We get some insight to the answer from the *Targum of Onkelos*, the Aramaic interpretation of the Law from the first half of the second century A.D. It restates this passage to mean: “a king shall arise from the house of Jacob, and be annointed the Messiah out of Israel.” (*See, Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge*.) So in this *Targum to Onkelos*, the *star* corresponds to *king*, and the *one from a maiden of Israel/man* means *Messiah*. This suggests that the Septuagint and Vulgate is closer to the original text: a *man born of a maiden* shall emerge.

What is also significant from this *Targum* and from the Dead Sea Scrolls of 200 B.C. is that Numbers 24:17 was deemed a Messianic prophecy by Jews long before Jesus.³

1. Robert Eisenman, *James: The Brother of Jesus, supra*, at 253.

2. Eisenman, *James: The Brother of Jesus, supra*, note 94 at 1002. While the War Scroll has a unified figure in view, there appears to be *two* Messiahs envisioned in the DSS. For example, the *Damascus Document* in the DSS at 7.18-21 says “And the star is the seeker of the Law who came to Damascus, because it was written ‘A star has came forth out of Jacob and a scepter has risen out of Israel. The scepter stands for the prince of the congregation. At his coming he shall break down all the sons of Sheth....’” Unless the *prince of the congregation* is also the star, this sees Balaam's prophecy as covering two messiahs.

3. The oracle of Balaam is quoted four times in the Dead Sea scrolls in conjuncture with Messianic prophecies. It appears in the War Scroll (1QM 11.6-17), the Damascus document (CD 7.19-21), the Messianic Testimonia (4Q175 1:9-13), and the Priestly Blessings for the Last Days (1QSb 5:27). (See Wise, Abegg, & Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*).

Balaam Later Apostasized

Despite Balaam uttering a Messianic prophecy, and thus prophetically knowing Christ, Balaam was found later to apostasize by teaching Jews they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and fornicate. (Num. 31:8, 16; Rev. 2:14.)

What About The Magi's Belief in Balaam's Prophecy?

Another spiritual lesson grows from the Balaam prophecy. The Star Prophecy is precisely what Matthew wants you to understand is what explains the presence of the Magi (Matthew 2:1, Greek *magos*) at Bethlehem. Most every commentator agrees. The Magi followed the Star to Bethlehem. The title *Magi* was a distinct term that Matthew was using; it meant followers of Zoroaster. "Wise-men" is an improper translation, but the trend of modern translations is to use this *obscuring* label.

What Matthew is reporting is how the Magi had kept alive the Star Prophecy of one of their own, Balaam who came from East of the Euphrates.

Yet, how precisely did they keep alive a prophecy of 1290 B.C. by Balaam that was part of the Jewish heritage? Zoroastrianism started in Persia and dominated Babylon. How did Balaam's Star Prophecy become so important to the Magi of Zoroaster?

It is a fact that in 604 B.C. the prophet Daniel was appointed "chief over the Magi" at Babylon. (Dan. 2:48.) (Robertson, *Word Pictures* on Matt. 2:1.) Some translations obscure this by saying Daniel became chief of the 'wise-men.' However, there is no need to disguise the truth. For the Bible clearly reveals that Nebuchadnezzar gives a decree invoking thanks to the true God, telling his people that from now they are to follow the true God of Daniel. (Dan. 4:2-3, 31.) Thus, the Book of Daniel reveals Babylon was now following the God of the Jews for a time. However, Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar returns to practices of idolatry and profanation of items taken from the temple of Jerusalem. (Dan. 5:1-18.) The Magi thus were probably taken back toward Zoroastrian practices.

But how did the Star Prophecy of Balaam pass into the memory of the Zoroastrian Magi of Babylon through Daniel and down to the Magi of Matt. 2:1? If the Magi are lost men who come from a religion that makes an adulterated mix of Judaism and paganism, why does Matthew mention them as believing in a Biblical-Messianic prophecy about a star?

An Oxford Professor, Thomas Hyde, in his masterpiece of 1700 A.D. entitled *Historia religionis veterum Persarum*, wrote a scholarly account of the Persian Zoroastrian religion. In it, he explains how the Star Prophecy survived through the centuries from Daniel forward. He quotes and cites a Christian historian, Abulfaragius,¹ in his *Historia Dynastiarum* from the 14th Century. Abulfaragius says that Zoroaster, the Persian, was a student of Daniel the Prophet, and that he predicted to the Magians (who were the astronomers) that when they should see a new star appear it would notify the birth of a mysterious child, whom they were to adore. It is further stated in the *Zend Avesta* of Zoroaster that this new star was to appear in the sign of the Virgin (Virgo). Zoroaster's embellishment on the Star prophecy was:

'A virgin should conceive and bear a son, and a star would appear blazing at mid-day to signalize the occurrence. When you behold **the star**,' said he to his followers, 'follow it whithersoever it leads you. Adore the mysterious child, offering him

1. An Arab Christian historian who lived 1226-1286.

gifts with profound humility. He is indeed ***the Almighty Word*** which created the heavens. He is indeed your Lord and everlasting King.’¹

Of course, Abulfaragius was an Arab Christian, and some scholars claim he invented this story. It may be Abulfaragius embellished the story to some degree. However, what independently confirms the gist of Abulfaragius’ story is similar proof from Suetonius. This Roman historian writing in 110 A.D. verifies a strong Eastern belief in the Star Prophecy. Talking of events in 70 A.D. at Jerusalem, Suetonius says there was in the “East” (typically meaning Babylon, Persia, etc.) an “old established belief” that a “man [was] coming from Judea to rule the world.” Suetonius wrote in his *Lives of the Twelve Emperors*:

There had spread over all the ***Orient an old and established belief*** that it was fated at that time for ***a man coming from Judaea to rule the world***. This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome, as it turned out, the Jews took to themselves, and they revolted accordingly [in 66 A.D.]. (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 4.5.)

Thus, Abulfaragius was telling the essential truth, even if he possibly embellished the story. Abulfaragius’ account perfectly explains how the Balaam Star Prophecy of 1290 B.C. was passed down in 604 B.C. by Daniel to the Magi who still held onto it in 3 B.C. It explains perfectly why they were following a star to find Jesus. (Matt. 2:1 *magos*). After all, the Bible says that in 604 B.C. the Prophet Daniel became the head of the Magi. (Dan. 2:48) As a result, his Magi friends only had to count the 490 years to Messiah from the order to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24-27), then travel to Judea at that time, and they knew they would see a star to direct them to the Messiah.

1. George Stanley Faber (1773-1854)(Anglican theologian), *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence* ([London] F & C. Rivingtons, 1816) Vol. 2 at 92.