

NUMBERS 24:15–17a. (EHV)

Balaam took up his oracle and said:
The declaration of Balaam son of Beor,
the declaration of the man whose eye is open,
the declaration of the one who hears the words of God,
who receives knowledge from the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
who is falling down, but his eyes are wide open:
I see him, but not now.
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob.
A scepter will rise up out of Israel.

It can happen when you're having a stroke or a complex migraine. You open your mouth to say one thing, but something completely different comes out.

Balaam son of Beor sort of knew that feeling. Except in the case of a stroke or complex migraine, what comes out is usually unintelligible. When Balaam opened his mouth, what he said was perfectly clear. It's just not what he was planning to say, not what he wanted to say. And on top of that, he said things pertaining to Jesus.

The Israelites were finally on the verge of entering the Promised Land for good. The first time they had gotten this close, they did not believe that the Lord could give them victory over the inhabitants of the land and they ended up wandering in the wilderness for another forty years. But now here they were, camped on the Plains of Moab along the east side of the Jordan River across from the city of Jericho, which lay in the Promised Land.

But Balak, the king of Moab, saw the Israelites camped on his land. He not only saw that they were very numerous; he was also aware of past victories they had over other nations. So he and his people were afraid of them. But Balak had a solution. He knew of a diviner for hire up by the Euphrates River, named Balaam son of Beor. Balaam was known for being able to pronounce curses and blessings on people that apparently worked. So Balak sent messengers to this Balaam with payments for his occult practices and asked him to come and curse the Israelites.

But before accepting their offer, Balaam told them that he was going to consult the Israelite God and see what he said. (He may have done this as a regular practice, consulting the so-called gods of the people he was to curse or bless, to make sure that he would not get into hot water with them. Of course, if he actually made real contact with the other world in those other cases, he was not actually receiving messages from those gods, but from the devil and his demons.) Even though he was under no obligation to do so, the true God allowed himself to be contacted by this diviner for hire. God told him not to go with the messengers and not to curse the Israelites, because they were blessed. So Balaam, to his credit, refused their offer.

But Balak wouldn't give up that easily. He sent his messengers back with an even more lucrative and generous offer. Balaam consulted the Israelite God again, and this time God told him to go with the men, but to do only what he told him to do.

But then we're told that God's anger burned because Balaam was going with them, even though God had told him to go with them. So God must have seen something in Balaam's heart,

that he was plotting a way to curse his people and get rich at their expense. So the Angel of the Lord, who is the Son of God before he took on human flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary, stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam's donkey saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the road with his drawn sword in his hand, but Balaam did not. The donkey turned off the road and went into a field, so Balaam beat his donkey to make it turn back to the road.

Then the Angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. The donkey once again saw the Angel, but with little room to maneuver, he pressed against the wall and squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall. So Balaam beat his donkey again.

Then the Angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in an even narrower place where there was no room to turn right or left. When the donkey saw the Angel this time, having nowhere to go, he simply lay down under Balaam. Balaam was now furious with his donkey and beat him angrily.

But now something happened, the likes of which had not really ever happened before, though you could say something similar happened in the Garden of Eden. The Lord opened the donkey's mouth so that it could speak its mind. It said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beat me these three times?"

And Balaam was so furious at his donkey that he wasn't even shocked. He immediately responded, "I beat you because you made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand so I could kill you right now!"

The donkey replied, "Am I not the donkey that you have always ridden? Am I accustomed to acting this way?"

"No," Balaam had to admit. At this point the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, so that he could see the Angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand. The Angel told Balaam that he had come out to oppose him, because he was acting recklessly, and that if the donkey had not turned away from him those three times, he would surely have killed Balaam and let the donkey live.

Balaam apologized and said that if his venture was displeasing, he would go back. But the Angel of the Lord told him to go with Balak's messengers, but to speak only the words that he would speak to Balaam.

When Balaam arrived in Moab, King Balak took him to three different places from where he could see the encamped Israelites, so that Balaam could curse them there. But each time Balaam blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them, which greatly angered Balak. But Balaam kept telling him, "I have to speak whatever the Lord puts in my mouth." Balaam would have liked to pronounce a curse on God's people and to make a lot of money, but he knew he would not escape with his life if he said anything but what the Lord gave him to say.

The words I read in the First Lesson [see top of p. 1] are actually words that Balaam spoke said after Balak finally lost patience with Balaam and told him to go home without any pay. Balaam told Balak, "Yes, I am going back to my people, but pay attention now—I will tell you what this people will do to your people in days to come."

He then begins this fourth oracle nearly the same way he began the third. "The declaration of Balaam son of Beor, the declaration of the man whose *eye* is open, the declaration of the one who *hears* the words of God, who receives *knowledge* from the Most High." Notice how he refers to his sight, his hearing, and his mind—all of them are attune to God's word.

Balaam also says that he is one “who sees the vision of the Almighty” and that he is “falling *or* sinking down, but his eyes are wide open.” Apparently the vision God gave Balaam drove him to his knees, like someone knocked unconscious, but Balaam is not unconscious. His eyes are wide open.

And the first thing Balaam says is, “I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob *or* will march forth from Jacob. A scepter will rise up out of Israel.”

When we hear those words today, on Epiphany Sunday, we immediately think that Balaam is prophesying either about the star the wise men from the East saw, since it seemed to literally march forth in front of them from Israel, or at least that it is a direct prophecy about Jesus. But we must be careful. First, Balaam is employing a technique that other Israelite and Middle Eastern poets employed, namely parallelism. That’s when you say something in one line, then say the same thing or a similar thing in different words in the next line. This technique is all over the psalms, and it’s actually a very helpful technique. Oftentimes if you’re not sure what something means, you only have to read the next line to have it explained. For instance, in Psalm 103, the psalmist says, “Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding.” Without the line about the angels, we might not know what “the mighty ones who do [God’s] bidding” refers to. With the line about the angels, the line about the mighty ones who do God’s bidding tells us something about the angels.

So too here. When Balaam says that “a star will march forth from Jacob,” we might initially think that he is saying something about an actual star in the sky. But then he goes on to say, “A scepter will rise up out of Israel.” So now we know that the star and the scepter refer to the same thing, just as Jacob and Israel are both names for God’s chosen people in the Old Testament who were descended from Jacob, whom God also named Israel. The scepter obviously refers to a ruler, while the star makes it clear that he will be a particularly notable ruler in a positive way, just as we notice and enjoy looking at a twinkling star on a clear night. A star also has the connotation of guidance and direction, since if we are familiar with the night sky, a star will tell us which direction we are facing, what time of night, and what time of year it is.

So Balaam is clearly talking about a person, not an inanimate object, using the scepter to refer to the one holding the scepter. That might lead us to say, “Okay, he must be talking about Jesus then.” But we still can’t rush to Jesus right away. If I had read on in Numbers 24, you would have heard about how this scepter was going to smash the foreheads and skulls of the people of Moab. (Remember that the king of the Moabites is listening to this.) That would seem to indicate that Balaam is not talking about Jesus, since Jesus did not subdue the Moabites during his life and ministry on earth.

But here is where we need to understand prophetic perspective. Often it is as if the prophets are looking at a peak in a distant mountain range. Just as we might think we are looking at a single mountain from a distance, only to find out when we get closer that what we saw before actually consisted of multiple peaks separated by miles and miles, so also what the prophets foresaw as one person or event often had multiple fulfillments—one or more intermediate fulfillments, and then an ultimate fulfillment. Balaam’s words as they read were fulfilled in King David, who defeated and subdued the Moabites and forced them to bring him tribute (2 Samuel 8:2).

But especially when we hear about the scepter, we can't help but think about an earlier prophecy made about Judah, one of the sons of Jacob: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until the one to whom it belongs comes. He will receive the obedience of the peoples" (Gen. 49:10). Clearly that was a prophecy about Jesus, who owns the scepter, no matter who might be holding it on earth, and who has used the gospel to win trusting and obedient subjects for his kingdom from all the peoples.

We also need to keep in mind that Moab is used in the prophets as a stereotypical enemy of God's people, not only because the Moabites wished evil on them and fought against them, but also because they seduced many of the Israelites and led them into sin. So in that sense, we can see King David as an intermediate fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy, but Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of his prophecy—the ultimate star, the ultimate scepter, the ultimate victor over the enemies of God's people.

The account of Balaam teaches us a number of things. It tells us that God is so desirous to communicate his word of blessing that he will even use an unbelieving occult practitioner to do so, if necessary. It tells us that no one has the power to curse those whom God had decided to bless, and that no one can oppose his word. It tells us that God knows the future and has it under control. But it also tells us about Jesus. He is a star, the ruler we should pay the most attention to, a kind and gracious ruler, a ruler who leads and guides us in a dark and confusing world. He is a scepter who will eventually smash and crush all the enemies of the holy Christian Church. Under his rule, as those who trust in him, there is no one and no thing that we need to fear.

He who was in the future and far away from Balaam's perspective has now appeared and made himself known, not only to his own people, and not only to the Gentile wise men from the East, but to Gentiles throughout the world, including you and me. Unlike Balaam, we do see him now, we do behold him near, on the pages of his word and in the sacraments. His rule of grace, comfort, and forgiveness is our light and our salvation now and forever. Amen.