BALAAM’S FOURTH ORACLE (NUMBERS 24:15–19)
ACCORDING TO THE ARAMAIC TARGUMS

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Introduction

In the biblical narratives, the character of Balaam is presented in two ways that are diametrically opposed. In the so-called Balaam pericope (Numbers 22–24), he is portrayed as an obedient servant of the Lord, and as a man who has special prophetic qualities (Num 24:16: ‘Word of him who hears God’s speech, who obtains knowledge from the Most High’). In other biblical texts, however, there is a negative view of Balaam. In two of them, Deut 23:4–6 and Josh 24:9–10, it is suggested that Balaam intended to curse the Israelites, but that God converted his curses into blessings. Still other biblical traditions portray him as one of those who were slain by the Israelites (Josh 13:22; Num 31:8), and in Num 31:16, he is charged with the plan to persuade the Israelites to trespass against the Lord and to worship Baal-Peor.

As might be expected, the ambivalence towards Balaam continues in the subsequent exegetical and commentary literature. On the one hand, Balaam is praised as a true servant of the Lord, and as the author of impressive prophetic oracles, and on the other hand, he is slated as a villain, who sought to curse the people of the Lord, and who undermined their morality.

In this article, we will concentrate on one specific genre of post-biblical literature, namely the Targums. Within this genre, we will...
focus especially on the interpretation of Balaam’s fourth oracle, which is
best-known from the famous words ‘A star rises from Jacob. A scepter
comes forth from Israel’ (Num 24:17).

The fourth oracle can be divided into two main parts. The first part,
Num 24:15–16, introduces and characterises Balaam. In the second
part, Num 24:17–19, the content of the oracle is given. This paper
will follow this division. We start with a section on the speaker (§1),
followed by a section on the content of the oracle (§2). At the end of
each section, we will summarise our findings.

§1. Introduction to the Speaker (Num 24:15–16)

Who was Balaam? Reading the book of Numbers, one has already
learned quite a lot about Balaam before coming to the fourth oracle.
At this point in the story, it is known that Balaam is the son of Beor,
that he came from Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, ‘in the land of
his kinsfolk’ (Num 22:5); and that Balak, king of Moab, asked him
repeatedly to curse the Israelites, which he was unable to do, because
God prevented him. In Num 24:3–4, as an introduction to the third
oracle, a detailed characterisation is given of Balaam’s prophetic quali-
ties. At the start of the fourth oracle the same introduction is repeated
almost literally:

(15a) He took up his parable, and said: (15b) ‘Word of Balaam son of
Beor, (15c) word of the man whose eye is true, (16a) word of him who
hears God’s speech, (16b) who obtains knowledge from the Most High,
(16c) and beholds visions from the Almighty, prostrate, (16d) but with
eyes unveiled’.

Fragment Targums (as a group), FTP = Fragment Targum recension P, FTV =
Fragment Targum recension V, PsJon = Pseudo-Jonathan. The texts that are given in
the Aramaic synopsis are derived from the following editions: TO = A. Sperber,
The Bible in Aramaic, Vol. 1: The Pentateuch, Leiden 1992 (1959); Neof = A. Díez Macho,
Neofyti 1: Targum Palæstinense ms. de la Bibliothèque vaticana, T. IV, Números, Madrid 1974;
FTs = M.L. Klein, The Fragment Targums of the Pentateuch According to Their Extant Sources,
Rome 1980; PsJon = E.G. Clarke et al. (eds), Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch:

5 On the interpretation of this verse and its relation to traditions that connect
Balaam to the Midianites, Moabites, Ammonites, or to the land of Amau (mentioned
in the Idrimi inscription), see Levine, Numbers 21–36, 145–49; on the crux interpretum
wm[yn b ra, see S.C. Layton, ‘Whence Comes Balaam’ Num 22,3 Revisited’ Biblica
6 Whereas we generally follow the New js Translation (Philadelphia & Jerusalem
1983), we decided here to use the word ‘parable’ instead of ‘theme’ because the word
‘parable’ seems more fitting to the context.