‘TO BLESS WITH A MOUTH BENT ON CURSING’:
PATRISTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF BALAAM (NUM 24:17)

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1. Introduction

The contributions in this volume abundantly demonstrate that the prophet Balaam occurs explicitly or implicitly in a surprisingly large and diverse body of texts. Besides the ‘core text’ of Numbers 22–24 and several other passages of the Hebrew Bible the prophet is, *inter alia*, present in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and the Targumim. Turning to the patristic inheritance, the available amount of sources is simply overwhelming and defies any form of exhaustive presentation.¹ A quick glance at the patristic interpretations of Numbers 22–24 reveals that Balaam was to the Church Fathers a beloved scriptural character.² It is also immediately clear that, as far as the number of occurrences is concerned, Num 24:17cd towers above all others: ‘a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel’ (RSV). In this contribution, I will thus focus on the Church Fathers’ reception of this text.

The variety of texts in which Num 24:17cd occurs is striking. They comprise in the first place commentaries and sermons that offer an exegetical interpretation of the biblical text. Here the harvest is limited to writings by Origen and Augustine. In his *Homilies XIII–XIX on Numbers*, extant in Rufinus’ Latin translation, Origen offers the only detailed

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analysis of Numbers 22–24 that has come down to us from the patristic period. In what follows, his work will be prominent. Besides Origen’s writings, some chapters of Augustine’s *Quaestiones ad Heptateuchum* also deal with our text but, safe for some scholia, there is not much else.

Yet, all writings produced by the Early Church were thoroughly scriptural. The role of the Bible in the Church Fathers’ culture and their practice of ‘exegesis’ itself went far beyond explaining the sacred text. Indeed, according to the writers of the patristic period, the Bible was the word of God, meaning that God’s message and truth was proclaimed in every single verse and sentence. Moreover, the Scriptures constituted an essential element of their cultural and hermeneutical framework. Recourse was continuously taken to the Scriptures, but often very fragmentarily. Allusions to or quotations from the Scriptures flew effortlessly out of the Fathers’ pen, regardless of whether the content of their work was historical, apologetical, dogmatic, catechetical, homiletic, biographical, monastical or strictly exegetical. No wonder then that these writings often resemble a mosaic of scriptural quotations and allusions. Consequently, the raw material on which the following survey of the patristic interpretations of Num 24:17 draws, largely presents itself as *sparsa collecta*: isolated and often short passages that are scattered all over patristic literature.

In what follows I will present the main lines of the reception of Balaam and of Num 24:17. I start with the most prominent feature: Num 24:17 as foretelling the incarnation. In a second section I will discuss the link between this verse and the Matthean story of the Magi. Thirdly, I will indicate the role of Num 24:17 in the polemic of the Church Fathers against astrological practices. I will show further that the Church Fathers also highlighted negative aspects of Balaam’s character and how they address the tension with his undeniably positive contribution to the history of salvation.

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