

**A STAR WAS BORN...****ABOUT THE BIFOCAL RECEPTION HISTORY OF  
BALAAM**

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**Abstract**

*Balaam counts among the most enigmatic characters within the Old Testament. Not everyone has the privilege of meeting an angel, and being addressed by a donkey. Moreover, the Biblical Balaam, as he is presented in Num. 22-24, has given rise to multiple interpretations: did the biblical authors want to narrate about a pagan diviner, who intended to curse the Israelites, but who was manipulated – against his will – by God in order to bless them, or was he rather considered to be a real prophet like Elijah or Isaiah? Anyway, that is at least the way he has been perceived by a segment of Christianity, considering him as one of the prophets who announced Jesus as the Christ?*

*In the first section of this contribution, which I warmly dedicate to Professor Hendrik ‘Bossie’ Bosman – we first met precisely twenty years ago during a research stay at Stellenbosch University in August 1997 – I will present the ambiguous presentation of Balaam that is given in Numbers 22-24 concisely. Secondly, I will concentrate on Balaam’s presentation in the other books of the Bible. Being aware of the fact that the reception history of the Pentateuch is one of Bossie’s fields of interest, in the last section I will show how the bifocal Biblical presentation of Balaam has left its traces on the reception of this personage in Christian arts.*

**Key Words:** Balaam; Numbers 22-24; Prophets; Reception History; Bible and Arts

**Balaam in Num. 22-24**

The presentation of Balaam in the Old Testament is not at all unison. On the contrary, two main ways of presentation can be found within the corpus of the first part of the Christian Bible. Besides some texts seem to evaluate him rather positively, some texts judge him scathingly. The most complex text, however, is the extensive pericope in Num. 22-24 in which Balaam plays first fiddle.

Within Num. 22-24, the image of Balaam is forthrightly positive. Already Balak, the king of Moab,<sup>1</sup> presents him as an extraordinarily reliable character, whose blessings or curses in general have the desired effect (Num. 22:6).<sup>2</sup> When the messengers of Balak come to summon Balaam to curse the Israelites so that Balak can defeat them, the non-Israelite Balaam does not simply comply with Balak’s request to travel to Moab.<sup>3</sup> Although he is never called a prophet (נביא), nor a seer (ראה or חזה) nor a man of God (איש אלהים), before accompanying the king’s officials, he wants to hear the word of YHWH. It is at least remarkable that the author of this narrative accentuates that a non-Israelite seer consults the

God of Israel, whom he moreover calls by his name, YHWH: “Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the LORD speaks to me” (Num. 22:8).<sup>4</sup> So, already from the very first words he speaks – which moreover will become a *Leitmotiv* throughout the whole Balaam pericope (Num. 22:18, 38) – Balaam makes a strong impression. He immediately makes it clear to Balak’s messengers that he cannot simply give a positive or negative response to their request. He first has to wait for YHWH’s reaction. As such, Balaam cannot be distinguished from other YHWH prophets who similarly want to be the mouthpieces of God only. On the contrary, the encounter between YHWH and Balaam is even expressed much strongly than for other prophets. Twice, it is said that YHWH *came* (בִּיאָה) to Balaam and spoke to him (Num. 22:9, 20). Nowhere else does the Old Testament speak of an encounter between God and a human being in a similar manner. It does not surprise, therefore, that this apparent familiarity between Balaam and YHWH has often been used to label Balaam as a *verus propheta*.<sup>5</sup> Even if Balak’s messengers accentuate that it was Balaam who refused to accompany them – “Balaam refuses to come with us” (Num. 22:14) – Balaam himself, in communicating God’s refusal to let him go with Balak’s messengers, explicitly refers to God’s will: “Go to your own land, for YHWH has refused to let me go with you” (Num. 22:13).

During a second, more extensive and more distinguished mission, Balak promises Balaam that he will reward him handsomely if he curses the Israelites. However, Balaam again reacts firmly. He will not act against YHWH’s will, in whatever circumstances: “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God, to do less or more” (Num. 22:18). Similar to his answer to the first delegation, Balaam invites Balak’s officials to stay overnight. And for a second time, God ‘comes’ to Balaam. Contrary to the first time, God gives permission now to accompany the officials to their homeland, but with one restriction: Balaam can only do what YHWH tells him to do (Num. 22:20).<sup>6</sup> The next morning, it is told that Balaam saddles his donkey and that he, accompanied by Balak’s messengers and two boys, departs for Moab.

Even if the narrative – until now – may have been composed of different sources or traditions,<sup>7</sup> Num. 22:1-21 does not really pose serious problems: Balaam, a non-Israelite with a strong reputation to be able to bless or curse, is presented as a loyal and obedient character. From v. 22 on, however, the tenor of the story changes. Even if YHWH explicitly allows Balaam to accompany Balak’s messengers to Moab, v. 22 mentions that “God’s anger was kindled because he went”.

Although the pericope on the talking donkey (vv. 22-35) is closely linked to the surrounding verses – in v. 22 Balaam is not explicitly mentioned as the subject of the verbal form וַיִּקַּם; v. 36, that can be read as the continuation of v. 21, and can also be read as the continuation of v. 35, and equally the mention of the שָׂרֵי בִלְקַם (v. 35) makes a clear link to Num. 22:1-21 – and although this pericope as such does not cause difficulties, its relationship with the surrounding verses (Num. 22:1-21, 36-40) is extremely complex, and has given rise to numerous hypotheses. One of the problems is linked to Moab’s messengers. Although they are mentioned in v. 35 (“So Balaam went with the princes of Balak”), they don’t play any role in the narrative nor is their reaction to what’s happening mentioned. Also Balaam’s ‘two servants’ (נְעָרִים), being introduced in v. 22, do not have a role at all in the story.<sup>8</sup>

Within Num. 22:22-35, three times an angel of YHWH blocks Balaam’s road, having a sword in his hand. Contrary to what one would expect, the renowned Balaam does not see the angel – the verb רָאָה plays a key role in Num. 22:22-35. It is the donkey that sees the

threatening angel and succeeds in avoiding him twice (vv. 23, 24-25). The third time, however, the angel of YHWH completely blocks the road. At the moment when no escape is possible anymore, God intervenes, making the donkey talk and finally opening Balaam's eyes, seeing the angel and his drawn sword. Out of fear, Balaam falls to the ground and confesses: "I have sinned" (v. 34). What Balaam's sin consists of precisely is not at all clear, and has given rise to various interpretations. His only shortcoming seems to have been that he did not notice the angel: "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me" (v. 34). Interpreting the event as a sign that God is ultimately against his journey, he proposes to return home (v. 34). However, the angel's reaction to Balaam's confession is surprising. Finally, as in v. 20 – it is said once more that Balaam may only say what God instructs him to say – Balaam receives divine permission to travel to Moab (v. 35).

Tying in with v. 21 – vv. 22-34 can easily be skipped – vv. 36-40 continue by reporting the meeting between Balaam and Balak, even if the text of these verses is very complicated.<sup>9</sup> After some preparations, as expected, Balaam does not curse the Israelites. Instead, "inspired by God" (Num. 24:2), he speaks words of praise and blessing over Israel, and continues to repeat that he can only speak God's word.<sup>10</sup> His most famous 'prophecy' can be found in Num. 24,17, one of those Old Testament verses that, even if not intended as such originally, have been interpreted later in a messianic way: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not close at hand. A star will march forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre will rise out of Israel".

Within Num. 22-24, Balaam's overall presentation is positive: he is presented as an extraordinarily obedient, even naïve, character. He complies almost blindly with what God desires. Even Balaam's harsh treatment of his donkey has to be seen against this background: after all, he wants to arrive in Moab as soon as possible in order to speak the words that God prompts him to speak. When God has opened his eyes, thus seeing who is in front of him, he immediately proposes to break off his enterprise. And when God finally instructs him to continue his journey, then Balaam once again obeys blindly. Only within the donkey scene, does one meet a Balaam who is made ridiculous: being a renowned seer, he does not even see what a donkey is able to see.<sup>11</sup>

### **Balaam in the Old and New Testament**

Outside the Balaam pericope in Num. 22-24, Balaam is mentioned only in Num. 31:8, 16; Deut. 23:5; Josh. 13:22; 24:9; Mic. 6:5; Neh. 13:2.<sup>12</sup> However, only one single text, namely Mic. 6:5, seems to be entirely compatible with the account of Num. 22-24. In a context of a lawsuit (ריב) between Israel and God, God asks his people to remember that He rescued Israel out of Egypt, his sending of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, as well as "what King Balak of Moab devised", and "what Balaam son of Beor answered him." All positive (re)actions within the negative experiences of Egyptian slavery and journey through the desert are called to be צדאות יהוה (v. 5). In Mic. 6:5, Balaam's response to Balak's threat is evaluated unambiguously as one of these positive elements.

In all the other Old Testament texts that refer to Balaam, he is presented in a very negative way. The most negative presentation is found in the book of Numbers itself. Num. 31:16, a verse that appears in the context of a story of an expedition by Israel against Midian, tells of Moses being outraged when he notices that the Israelites have killed exclusively the Midianite men, but have spared the women. It was, according to this verse, after all the Midianite women, who, "on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the LORD in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the

congregation of LORD". By explicitly linking Balaam to Israel's expedition against the Midianites, Num. 31:16 seems to refer to Num. 25:6-18, which, according to Noort, already is a *Fortschreibung* of Num. 25:1-5, that deals with Israel's adultery with Baal-Peor at Moab.<sup>13</sup> Num. 31:16 argues that the Midianites seduced Israel on Balaam's advice, even if he is not mentioned anywhere in Num. 25, and even if Balaam never gives the Midianites such advice within Num. 22-24.<sup>14</sup> According to Noort, Balaam's 'counsel' – it should be noticed, however, that within Num. 31:16, the lexeme דבר is used – refers to Num. 24:14, where the lexeme יעץ ('to counsel') is used.<sup>15</sup>

According to Num. 31:8 and Josh. 13:22, Balaam was killed by the Israelites during their anti-Midianite campaign. These verses do therefore also suggest that Balaam had joined up with the Midianites against Israel and – being a foreign 'diviner' (Josh. 13:22: הַקֹּסֵם) – seduced Israel to worship other Gods. Being such a 'prophet', Israel had no other choice than killing him, as Deut. 13:9 commands.

Also Deut. 23:5-6 gives a negative evaluation of Balaam, even if, within the recapitulation of Israel's journey through the desert, as it is narrated in Deut. 1-3, no reference at all is made to the Balaam episode.<sup>16</sup> Deut. 23:5-6, being part of a text about the purity of the Israelite community, states that Ammonites and Moabites – just as "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off" (v. 1), as well as "those born of an illicit union (...) even to the tenth generation" (v. 2) – cannot belong to the community of YHWH. This exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites is legitimised as follows: "Because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you" (v. 4). Although the indication that Balak 'hired' Balaam corresponds to Num. 22:7, 17-18; 24:11-13, Num. 22-24 does not at all attest that Balaam *de facto* cursed Israel. On the contrary, within Num. 22-24, Balaam does not stop accentuating that he will speak only the words that God will put into his mouth. Nevertheless, Deut. 23:5-6 suggests that Balaam indeed cursed Israel, but that "the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam" and "turned the curse into a blessing for you" (v. 5).

Neh. 13:2 seems to follow Deut. 23:5-6 almost literally, thus giving the same arguments for forbidding the Ammonites and Moabites to enter the assembly of God: because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them (and how God turned his curse into a blessing). As in Deut. 23, Josh. 24:9-10 makes a somewhat similar statement, although these verses even increase Balak's hostility towards Israel: "King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand." As in Deut. 24:5-6, Josh. 24:9-10 suggests that Balaam's words of curse have been changed by God into a blessing.

These deviating conceptions of Balaam from Num. 22-24 within the Old Testament, have been explained by various scholars on different grounds, often with attempts to reconstruct a diachronic evolution of the presentation of Balaam. From a foreign seer who aimed to bless Israel, he became a false prophet who wanted to curse Israel, but whose curse was transformed into blessings. When he did not succeed, he told Balak to seduce the Israelites in order to achieve his goal. On the one hand, it has been suggested that the authors of Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua transformed the originally positive image of Balaam for the sake of nationalistic motives. For a Deuteronom(ist)ic author, it was after all unacceptable that a non-Israelite seer could appear as an ideal prophet, being in a position to communicate directly with God. According to Deut. 18:9-22, true prophecy was an

exclusively Israelite privilege.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that the negative image of Balaam reflects another Balaam tradition, which considered him an ally of the Moabites.

Looking at the way Balaam is presented in the Old Testament, outside Numbers 22-24, one should be careful in denoting this usage as 'reception history'. Indeed, from a diachronic perspective it is not always clear at which stage each of the Old Testament passages that refer to Balaam have to be situated.

The overall negative presentation of Balaam, as it becomes present in the fragmentary remarks in the Old Testament also seems to have influenced the perception of Balaam by the New Testament authors. Parallel to Num. 31, Rev. 2:14 connects Balaam to the idolatry into which the Israelites were seduced in Midian: "You have some who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication."

As the prototype of a false prophet, Balaam is furthermore presented in 2 Pet 2:15-16: "They have left the straight road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness". Also Jude 11 states that false teachers "abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain".

Reaching beyond this inner Biblical presentation of Balaam, which presents him both positively and negatively, it is also very enriching to observe the way in which this ambiguous character has made his way in the reception history of the Bible.

### **Balaam in the Bible's Visual Reception History**

Indeed, and remarkably, the Balaam narrative has played an important role within the reception history of the Bible. Even if, within the rabbinic tradition, Balaam is presented in a very negative way,<sup>18</sup> within Judaism he also has been treated in a positive manner. In particular thanks to his 'prophecy' in Num. 24:17 ("a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel"), Balaam's role should not be underestimated within the context of Messianic belief during the Second Temple period. Even if it is rather doubtful that this verse has been intended as a Messianic text, there is little doubt that it was interpreted as such in Judaism during the Second Temple period, as is testified by its reception in the Septuagint<sup>19</sup> and in some of the Dead Sea scrolls.<sup>20</sup> It does not surprise, therefore, that also within early Christianity outside the Biblical tradition, Balaam has played a specific role. Already in the early Christian period, two iconographic representations of Balaam can be distinguished. Both are borrowed from the Biblical Balaam narrative, as it can be found in Numbers 22-24. Besides the portrayal of the episode of Balaam and his donkey, Balaam is often represented as one of those 'prophets' who announced the venue of the Messiah by his saying in Num. 24:17.

It is generally accepted that one of the oldest representations of the Virgin Mary is closely linked with Balaam. In the catacomb of Priscilla at the Via Salaria in Rome, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century fresco is preserved that represents a woman with a child on her lap.<sup>21</sup> At her right side a figure points to a star. The identification of this figure with Balaam is logical.<sup>22</sup> As has already been mentioned, Balaam's proverb in Num. 24:17 – "a star shall come out of Jacob" – has already been considered within Judaism as having a Messianic connotation. Also in early Christianity, Balaam's star in a very early stage has been considered as a symbol of Jesus, proclaimed as the Messiah. There can hardly be any doubt that the author of the gospel of Matthew, in introducing the scene of the 'wise men' following the star in order to find the place where the Messiah has been born (Matt. 2:1-12), was referring to the motif.<sup>23</sup> Also according to Matt. 2:1, the wise men are coming from the east (ἀπὸ

ἀνατολῶν), using an identical vocabulary as Num. 23:5, where Balaam says about himself that he comes ἀπ' ἀνατολῶν (Num. 23:5). Moreover – even although a different vocabulary is used – Matthew accentuates that the wise men return to their home (ἀνεχώρησαν εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν – Matt. 2:12), just like Balaam went off to his place (ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς ἑαυτόν – Num. 24:25). Finally, the fact that the protagonists are called μάγοι in Matt. 2:1, 7 probably refers to Balaam, who, in particular by Philo in his *De vita Mosis* (1.276) was already characterised as a 'magician'.<sup>24</sup> Even if it is difficult to prove that Matthew alluded to Num. 24:17,<sup>25</sup> several Church Fathers have correlated Matthew's story about the magi and star with Balaam and his oracle, in particular pointing to its messianic connotation.<sup>26</sup> In his *First Apology*, Justinus Martyr, for example, intertwined Num. 24:17 with Isa 11:1, attributing both quotations to Isaiah and considering them as announcing Jesus as the Messiah, standing in the line of David.<sup>27</sup> Also the Church Father Origen makes a clear link between Balaam's oracle and Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> He even assumed that the magi were descendants of Balaam.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Matthew does not refer explicitly to Balaam, undoubtedly has been caused by the very negative interpretation Biblical tradition has given to the figure of Balaam.

Within Christian art, this link between Balaam and the magi has become explicitly clear. For example, at the Western facade of the Amiens cathedral, Balaam is presented as the one who teaches three men – undoubtedly the magi – pointing to the star.<sup>30</sup> In a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the *Biblia pauperum* (MMW, 10 A 15 fol. 22r) in the Meermanno collection in The Hague, Balaam frames, accompanied by Isaiah and David, the scene of the three magi, who visit the newly-born Jesus.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Balaam is accompanied by Isaiah and David makes it clear that he is considered one of the foretellers of Jesus as the Messiah. Also a 16<sup>th</sup> century terracotta statue of Balaam by Tommaso Porlezza della Porta, made as a preliminary study for the *Basilica della Santa Casa* (the basilica of the holy house) in Loreto in Central Italy points in that direction. According to the tradition, the house in Nazareth, where the angel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary, has been moved by angels to Loreto, when it became threatened by the Turks.<sup>32</sup> Once more, Balaam seems to be interpreted as the foreteller of Jesus as the Messiah.

Not often, the star to which Balaam points, has been replaced by a banderole he is holding, containing – mostly in Latin – the quotation of Num. 24:17: "oriatur stella ex Iacob". As such, however, he is represented for example at the Chartres cathedral, holding a banderole in his left hand and a sword in his right. Moreover, Balaam is presented here standing on a donkey as his pedestal.<sup>33</sup> This leads to the other presentation of Balaam in Christian iconography.

Besides the conceptualisation of Balaam as foreteller of Jesus as the Messiah, the episode with the speaking donkey has also been a very rewarding subject for the visual arts.<sup>34</sup> After all, it is not illogical that artists became inspired by a fairy-tale about a talking donkey that is able to see an angel. Here, Balaam's role as announcing the Messiah seems to be completely absent. The oldest known representation of this type can be found in the Roman catacombs. In cubiculum B of the hypogeum – underground tombs – at the Via Dino Compagni, at the corner of the Via Latina which was discovered in 1955, a 4<sup>th</sup> century wall painting represents the encounter of Balaam and the angel.<sup>35</sup> Here, the angel is represented as a human being, having no wings, and holding a small dagger in his hand. He seems to approach Balaam, who, holding a small rod, is sitting on his donkey. Both characters look in opposite directions. Only the donkey seems to have the angel in view.

The reason that the episode about Balaam and his donkey has been portrayed in the catacombs and has been playing an important role within Christian iconography is hard to

fathom. Contrary to the scene about Balaam pointing to the star, which undoubtedly was inspired by the Messianic interpretation of Balaam's oracle in the Second Temple period and in early Christianity, a typological link with a theme that plays a role within Christianity can hardly be found. Apparently, this was not a necessary condition for depicting an Old Testament episode within the catacombs. Anyway, Gregory Snyder's hypothesis of an "interanimation between paintings", supposing that "a spectator's response to the arrangement of paintings throughout the catacomb would have owed more to Christian homiletic practice than has generally been realized",<sup>36</sup> is difficult to imagine with regard to the depiction of the Balaam motif within the catacombs. Or one should accept that Balaam and his donkey have been regarded by early Christianity as a prefiguration of Jesus, who entered Jerusalem riding an ass (Mk 11:1-10 and parallels). In this way, István Chachesz suggests that "Numbers 22 may have influenced the formation of this narrative, where Jesus 'comes in the name of the Lord' to restore David's glorious kingdom, just as Balaam was sent by YHWH to foretell Israel's glory".<sup>37</sup> However, it seems more logical to me that the authors of the gospels did have Zach 9:9 in mind ("your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey"), when they let Jesus enter Jerusalem, sitting on a donkey. According to James Hall, Balaam's 'vision of the angel, which results in his conversion, can be regarded as a prefiguration of Christ's manifestation to Thomas, which brings him to belief (John 20:24-29).<sup>38</sup> These explanations, however, cannot surpass the level of mere hypotheses.

Both motifs – the donkey scene and the star – are sometimes combined, as on the ceiling of the 13<sup>th</sup> century church of Saint Mary in Lyskyrchen (Cologne, Germany). Here the image of Balaam riding his donkey, is accompanied by a banderole with the Latin text of Num. 24:17 ("Orietur stella ex Iacob").<sup>39</sup> Also in a 14-15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (MMW 10C23 fol. 7r), preserved at Meermanno museum in The Hague, the image of Balaam and his donkey is accompanied by the text "Balaam praenuntiauit ortum marie in stella", thus, on a textual level, referring clearly to the Messianic star.<sup>40</sup> A very similar representation can be found in another manuscript of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (MMW 10B34 fol. 4r), which, also in the accompanying text, refers to Mary as the mother of the Messiah.<sup>41</sup>

An article meant as a modest tribute to Prof. Hendrik Bosman cannot be complete without referring to his close alliance with the city of Leuven. On several occasions Bossie has visited the city, doing research at the university that it hosts, and enjoying, often together with his lovely wife Daléne, the Belgian culture. At the facade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Leuven town hall, 173 corbels, originally carved in Avesnes stone, are decorated with Biblical motifs, as well as with scenes that are often taken from Flavius Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*.<sup>42</sup> As it is typical for mediaeval art, at the lower levels, scenes from the Old Testament are represented, whereas the corbels of the upper level represent almost exclusively New Testament scenes, thus stating that the Old Testament is not only the basis for the New, but also suggesting that the New surpasses the Old.

At the entrance of the northern facade of the Leuven town hall, two corbels represent Balaam. The left corbel seems to depict Balaam's departure for Moab, as narrated in Num. 22:21-22. At the left side of the corbel two men are portrayed, clothed in a similar way. They seem to represent the two servants who, according to Num. 22:22, accompanied Balaam on his journey. Besides them, a bearded and headed man seems to give something to Balaam, who is sitting on his donkey.<sup>43</sup> He probably represents one of Balak's delegates. His hand and Balaam's hand seem to touch each other. Does the scene suggest that Balaam is accepting the remuneration Balak is willing to pay him according to Num. 22:(7,) 17?

Anyway, the purse hanging at Balaam's belt seems to confirm this suggestion, which could also have been inspired by the New Testament presentation of 2 Pet 2:15-16, where Balaam is blamed for having accepted Balak's wage to curse Israël. Anyway, the purse hanging at Balaam's belt is also a prominent feature on the right corbel, which depicts the scene narrated in Num. 22:27-28. The donkey lies down beneath Balaam, and starts speaking to Balaam who has just struck her for the third time. At the right side of the corbel, a long-haired, winged angel is standing in front of them with a sword in his hand. A similar representation of Balaam, sitting on his donkey which he is beating, can be seen on the western entrance of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ten Poelkerk in Tienen, some 20 kilometers east of Leuven.<sup>44</sup>

The scene of Balaam and his donkey has also inspired several painters. In particular from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, some paintings have been made, inspired by the strange Biblical story about a speaking donkey and the encounter of a 'prophet' with a divine messenger. The most famous is undoubtedly the painting by the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1626). This oil painting on panel (63 x 64,5 cm), which is preserved in Paris at the Museum Cognac-Jay,<sup>45</sup> is one of Rembrandt's early works. Nevertheless, his particular accentuation in the incidence of light is already noticeable in it. Rembrandt is supposed to have been basing his painting on the basis of a portrayal by Pieter Lastman (1622).<sup>46</sup> The panel seems to render the moment Balaam has hit his animal for the third time – the donkey is lying down beneath Balaam, who has his rod still lifted in his hand. Behind them stands the – winged – angel, who has the sword lifted in his hand. The mouth of both Balaam and his donkey are open, which suggests that they already started their conversation (Num. 22:27-28). Besides the angel, Balaam and his donkey, four other people are represented. The two people sitting on a horse – only one horse is visible – represent Balak's messengers. In front of the horse, two boys are visible (Num. 22, 22). Remarkable is the bag, hanging around the donkey's neck. Besides a cylindrical object, some manuscripts can be seen. Some written characters, undoubtedly imitating the Hebrew alphabet, are written on it. Rembrandt was probably referring to Balaam's oracles. Amazing is Rembrandt's presentation of the eyes of both Balaam and the donkey. The former's are almost invisible; they are dark spots, lying deep in their sockets, thus evoking Balaam's incompetence to see the angel. The donkey's large eyes, on the contrary, are liquid and clear, thus accentuating her ability to notice God's messenger.<sup>47</sup> In representing both protagonists this way, Rembrandt completely succeeded in rendering one of the core elements of the Biblical narrative: Balaam, the 'prophet' is not able to see, what his donkey, whom he reproaches to be stubborn, notices: the angel of YHWH, blocking his road.

## Conclusion

The Biblical presentation of Balaam is not univocal. On the one hand, Num. 22-24 presents a rather positive Balaam representation: he is very obedient to God. It is the presentation of a rather capricious God which is much more problematic for the reader of this pericope. In order to forgive God his capriciousness, people have always been trying to make excuses for God.<sup>48</sup> There must have been a reason for this whimsical behaviour. And that reason should have been a disobedient Balaam. This negative image of Balaam has been dominating almost the complete Biblical tradition, as an overview of the texts, referring to Balaam in the Old and New Testament has made clear. Nevertheless, although the New Testament has unanimously depicted Balaam in a negative way, it is beyond doubt that it was thanks to the New Testament story about the magi and the star that Balaam has received an important role within Christian iconography, even if he has always been seen as

an awkward figure who was surpassed by a donkey. As multiple as the Biblical tradition is about Balaam, as multiple have the artists' perceptions been.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> By situating the Balaam story in Num. 22-24 in Moab, a nation to which Israel had a friend-foe relationship, a close link is made to Num. 25. Here, it is told that the Israelites "began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab" (Num. 25:1), which was at the origin of Israel's worship of Baal Peor (Num. 25:3), even if the leading role in Num. 25 seems to be taken by a Midianite woman, Cozbi, who had sex with the Israelite Zimri (Num. 25:6). It should be mentioned, however, that also in Num. 22, the Moabites and the Midianites are closely related (see Num. 22:4, 7). On the geographical setting of the Balaam narrative, see in particular Ed Noort, "Balaam the Villain: The History of Reception of the Balaam Narrative in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008), 3-23 (4-7). For the origins of Balaam, who, according to Num. 22:5 lives "at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw", see the interesting hypothesis by Johan Lust, "Balaam, an Ammonite," *ETL* 54 (1978):60-61: Lust suggests that the reading 'Amaw' is due to a misreading of the original text, which read 'Amon'. The noun נַחַר – which in most Bible translations is rendered as 'Euphrates' – thus refers to the Jabbok, the river *par excellence* in the land of Ammon. The fact that the famous Balaam inscription has been found at Deir 'Alla, situated near the Jabbok river, could be considered as an extra indication. See also Mathias Delcor, "Bala'am pātôrâh, 'Interprète de songes' au pays d'Ammon, d'après Num. 22,5. Les témoignages épigraphiques parallèles," *Sem* 32 (1982):89-91 (91), who, moreover, interprets the Hebrew lexeme פְּתוּרָה, that is often interpreted as a locative, as an indication of Balaam's function as an "interpreter of dreams", a 'diviner'. On this topic, see, moreover, Scott C. Layton, "Whence Comes Balaam? Num. 22,5 Revisited," *Bib* 73 (1992):32-61.
- <sup>2</sup> A reader who is familiar with the Torah will automatically relate this statement to God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3): Israel is blessed by God, and all who aim to curse the blessed people shall be cursed themselves.
- <sup>3</sup> According to Num. 22,7, Balak's messengers bring קְסָמִים with them. From a formal point of view, this is a plural of the noun קָסַם, which means 'divination'. Undoubtedly, under the influence of Num. 22:17, in which Balak's second mission promises to 'honour' (כָּבַד אֶחְבְּדֶךָ) Balaam, some recent translations (such as the NRSV) interpret the word as "fees for divination". In doing so, they follow the interpretation of the Vulgate: "*habentes divinationis pretium in manibus*". However, the most ancient Bible translation, the Septuagint, translates the Hebrew word קְסָמִים with μαντεία ('oracles'). The Hebrew text, as well as its Greek rendering, seem to imply that Balak himself wants to put the words of the curse to be spoken in Balaam's mouth. On this topic, see Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22-24). La prose et les «oracles»* (ÉBib 4; Paris: Gabalda, 1985), 62-6.
- <sup>4</sup> In this respect, Num. 22 closely resembles the account of the preparations for the conquest of Jericho in Joshua 2. Both Rachab and Balaam as non-Israelite characters are acquainted with YHWH, Israel's God (see Josh. 2:8). On this relationship, see in particular Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22-24). La prose et les «oracles»* (ÉBib 4; Paris: Gabalda, 1985), 31-2.

- <sup>5</sup> Compare to Num. 12:6-8. Cf. the title of the article by Meindert Dijkstra, "Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?," *JBL* 114 (1992):43-64.
- <sup>6</sup> This motif recurs in Num. 22:18, 20, 35, 38; 23:3, 5, 12, 16, 26; 24:13-14.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed overview of historical-critical hypotheses about the origin of Num. 22,1-21, see in particular Walter Gross, *Bileam. Literar- und formkritische Untersuchung der Prosa in Num. 22-24* (SANT 38; München: Kösel, 1974), 419-27. Mainly because of some repetitions within the narrative, and variations in the vocabulary – for example, in Num. 22:7, Balak's messengers are called זָקֵן, whereas Num. 22:8 speaks about שָׂרָא, Num. 22,1-21 has often been subdivided into J and E.
- <sup>8</sup> Once more, there seems to be a link with the Abraham narrative. In the story about Isaac's offering, Abraham and Isaac are also accompanied by two servants (Gen 22:3), who do not play any role in the narrative.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, it is not clear why Balak reproaches Balaam that he did not come to him (v. 37).
- <sup>10</sup> See Num. 23:12; 24:13.
- <sup>11</sup> On the arguments that has been given to consider the donkey narrative in Num. 22:22-35 as a secondary passage, see Hans Ausloos, "On an Obedient Prophet and a Fickle God. The Narrative of Balaam in Numbers 22-24," *OTE* 20 (2007):92-7.
- <sup>12</sup> In 1 Chr 6:55, the term בְּלֵעַם is also used. Here, however, there is no link to the person of Balaam. It refers to a levitical town of the territory of Manasseh.
- <sup>13</sup> Ed Noort, "Balaam the Villain: The History of Reception of the Balaam Narrative in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008), 14-5.
- <sup>14</sup> Moreover, in Num. 24:25, it is explicitly mentioned that Balaam returned to his place of residence, thus giving no single indication that Balaam was involved in the events about which Num. 25 speaks.
- <sup>15</sup> Against this background, it should be noticed that several *versiones* have inverted the content of Balaam's oracle in Num. 24:14. Instead of following the MT ("let me advise you what this people [= Israel] will do to your people [= Moab] in the days to come"), the Vulgate for example reads: "dabo consilium tibi quid populus tuus populo huic faciat" ("I will advise you what your people [Moab] will do to that people [Israel]"). This tradition can also be detected in several targumim and rabbinic commentaries, making a link with Num. 31:16. See in this respect Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22-24). La prose et les «oracles»* (ÉBib 4; Paris: Gabalda, 1985), 395-6 n. 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Here, it also can be mentioned that Israel does not play an active role either within Num. 22-24. Moreover, Moses is not mentioned at all within the Balaam pericope.
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22-24). La prose et les «oracles»* (ÉBib 4; Paris: Gabalda, 1985), 484-5.
- <sup>18</sup> See e.g. Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors. Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (BJS 47, Chico, CA: Scholars Press), 1983, 75-113 and Ronit Nikolsky, "Interpret Him as Much as You Want: Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008), 213-30.
- <sup>19</sup> The fact that in most of the Septuagint manuscripts, the eschatological King Gog takes the place of King Agag, points in that direction. See in this respect Johan Lust, "The Greek Version of Balaam's Third and Fourth Oracles. The ἄνθρωπος in Num. 24:7 and 17," in *Messianism and the Septuagint. Collected Essays*, ed. Katrin Hauspie (BETL 178; Leuven: University Press – Peeters, 2004), 69-86.
- <sup>20</sup> See Florentino García Martínez, "Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008), 72-82. See also Helen R. Jacobus, "Balaam's 'Star Oracle' (Num 24:15-19) in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Bar Kokhba," in *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi. Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy*, ed. Peter Barthel – George van Kooten (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2015), 399-429. A few manuscripts that were found in Qumran refer to Balaam in a positive way. 4Q175 (Testimonia) for example, clearly connects Balaam's utterance in Num. 24:17 with the coming of the Messiah.
- <sup>21</sup> [http://www.catacombepiscilla.com/visita\\_catacomba.html](http://www.catacombepiscilla.com/visita_catacomba.html) (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>22</sup> Also in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman catacomb of Saint Tecla, this representation of Balaam, pointing to a star, is present. On the representation of Balaam in the Roman catacombs, see in particular Engelbert Kirschbaum, "Der Prophet Bileam und die Anbetung der Weisen," *RQ* 49 (1954):144-64.

- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Annette Merz, “Matthew’s Star, Luke’s Census, Bethlehem, and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” in *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi. Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy*, ed. in Peter Barthel and George van Kooten (Brill: Leiden, 2015), pp. 463-95 (470-1) and Tobias Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 233-46 (237-41).
- <sup>24</sup> On Balaam within the works of Philo, see Louis H. Feldman, “Philo’s Version of Balaam,” *Hen* 25 (2003):301-19.
- <sup>25</sup> See in particular Tobias Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 233-46 (246): “I cannot give a safe answer to the question whether Matthew really used the Balaam oracle when he produced the magi scene and I think that such an answer is simply not possible. If there is a reference, Matthew did not mark it obviously enough”.
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Johan Leemans, “‘To Bless with a Mouth Bent on Cursing’: Patristic Interpretations of Balaam (Num 24:17),” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 287-99. See also Gilles Derival, “Un astre se lèvera de Jacob. L’Interprétation ancienne des Nombres 24,17,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 13 (1996):295-352.
- <sup>27</sup> Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* (Fathers of the Church 6; Washington, NY: Christian Heritage, 1948), 69: “Another prophet, Isaiah, expressing thoughts in a different language, spoke thus: ‘A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a flower shall spring from the root of Jesse, and in His arm shall nations trust’. Indeed, a brilliant star has arisen, and a flower has sprung up from the root of Jesse – this is Christ.”
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, his 18<sup>th</sup> homily on Numbers: “In aliis quidem exemplaribus legitur: ‘videbo eum, sed non modo’; quod si recipiatur facilius intellegi putabitur, ut Christus, de quo in consequentibus dicit: ‘orietur stella ex Iacob, et exsurget homo ex Istrabel...’” (quoted by Engelbert Kirschbaum, “Der Prophet Bileam und die Anbetung der Weisen,” *RQ* 49 [1954]:131).
- <sup>29</sup> See in this respect Tobias Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008):242.
- <sup>30</sup> [http://www.medievalart.org.uk/Amiens/West\\_Facade/InfancyCycle/AmiensWest\\_Quatrefoil\\_34U.html](http://www.medievalart.org.uk/Amiens/West_Facade/InfancyCycle/AmiensWest_Quatrefoil_34U.html) (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>31</sup> [http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi\\_mmw\\_10a15%3A022r](http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi_mmw_10a15%3A022r) (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/BK-2010-11> (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>33</sup> <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=26378> (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>34</sup> The Balaam narrative continues to inspire artists. As an example reference can be made to the title of the novel by Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (London: Black Spring Press, 1989).
- <sup>35</sup> On this catacomb, see H. Gregory Snyder, “Pictures in Dialogue: A Viewer-Centered Approach to the Hypogeum on Via Dino Compagni,” *J ECS* 13 (2005):349-86. Unfortunately, besides mentioning that Balaam appears “in two and perhaps three rooms within the catacomb (Rooms B, F, and O)” (371), the author doesn’t pay any attention to the Balaam representations. On this catacomb, see also Nicola Denzey Lewis, “The Crafting of Memory in Late Roman Mortuary Spaces,” in *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity*, ed. Karl Galinsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 268-83. Balaam and his donkey are also represented on a sarcophagus from the San Sebastian catacomb in Rome. See in this respect Luciano Debruyne, “Sarcofago cristiano con nuovi iconografici scoperto a S. Sebastiano sulla via Appia,” *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 16 (1939):247-70. For an image, see [http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/it/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-cristiano/sarcofagi\\_a-fregio-continuo/fron-te-di-sarcofago-con-scene-bibliche.html#&gid=1&pid=1](http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/it/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-cristiano/sarcofagi_a-fregio-continuo/fron-te-di-sarcofago-con-scene-bibliche.html#&gid=1&pid=1) (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>36</sup> H. Gregory Snyder, Pictures in Dialogue: A Viewer-Centered Approach to the Hypogeum on Via Dino Compagni, 13 (2005):380.
- <sup>37</sup> István Czachesz, “Speaking Asses in the Acts of Thomas: An Intertextual and Cognitive Perspective,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Themes in Biblical Narrative 11; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 281.
- <sup>38</sup> James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art. Revised Edition* (London: Murray, 1979). See also James Hall, *Hall’s Iconografisch Handboek. Onderwerpen, symbolen en motieven in de beeldende kunst* (vertaald door T. Veenhof; Leiden: Primavera, 1992) 46.
- <sup>39</sup> <http://www.romanische-kirchen-koeln.de/index.php?id=753> (access 13 July 2017).

- <sup>40</sup> [http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi\\_mmw\\_10c23%3A007r\\_min\\_2](http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi_mmw_10c23%3A007r_min_2) (access 13 July 2017). On the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, see Bert Cardon, *Manuscripts of the Speculum Humanae Salvationis in the Southern Netherlands (c. 140-c.1470). A Contribution to the Study of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Book Illumination and of the Function and Meaning of Historical Symbolism* (Corpus van verluchte handschriften uit de Nederlanden 6; Corpus van verluchte handschriften 9; Leuven, Peeters, 1996)
- <sup>41</sup> [http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi\\_mmw\\_10b34%3A004r\\_min\\_2](http://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/byvanckb%3Amimi_mmw_10b34%3A004r_min_2) (access 13 July 2017).
- <sup>42</sup> The iconographic program of the facade from the Leuven town hall has been drawn up by Jacob Schellewaerts, who was Doctor in Theology, and Jan der Phalisen, who was parish priest of the Saint-Peter's church, opposite the town hall. See Bert Cardon, "Een gevel voor het stadhuis. De representatie en legitimatie van de stedelijke macht," in *Een Leuvense Bijbel in steen*, ed. Maria Gilleir, Gilbert Huybens, and Paul Reekmans (Jaarboek van de geschied- en oudheidkundige kring voor Leuven en omgeving 37; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 3. Due to the fact that Avesnes stone ('Avendersteen') hardly withstands the North-European climate, the original corbels had to be substituted by copies during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the history of the Leuven town hall, see Véronique Vandekerckhove, "Het stenen boek van het Leuvense stadhuis: een verhaal zonder einde," in *Een Leuvense Bijbel in steen*, ed. Maria Gilleir – Gilbert Huybens – Paul Reekmans (Jaarboek van de geschied- en oudheidkundige kring voor Leuven en omgeving 37; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 10-27.
- <sup>43</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century sketch of the 15<sup>th</sup> century corbel, the bearded and headed man is making the sign of a blessing with his right hand. It is possible that he represents God, who is allowing Balaam to start his journey to Balak, thus representing Num. 22:20. A reproduction of 19<sup>th</sup> century sketches of the Balaam corbels, originally published by Adolphe Everaerts, *Monographie de l'hôtel de ville de Louvain 1448-1872* (Louvain: Ickx et Ferdinand, 1872), can be found in Maria Gilleir – Gilbert Huybens – Paul Reekmans (eds), *Een Leuvense Bijbel in steen* (Jaarboek van de geschied- en oudheidkundige kring voor Leuven en omgeving 37; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 59-60.
- <sup>44</sup> On this corbel, see Hans Ausloos, "'Jacques de Gobertange' of 'Bileam de Ammoniet'?" Kanttekening bij een kraagsteen op de westgevel van de Tiense Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ten Poelkerk," in *Jaarboek van de heemkundige kring van Groot-Glabbeek* 5 (1998):67-76.
- <sup>45</sup> <http://musecognacjay.paris.fr/fr/la-collection/lanesse-du-prophete-balaam#> (access 13 July 2017)
- <sup>46</sup> Franklin W. Robinson, "A Note on the Visual Tradition of Balaam and his Ass," *Oud Holland* 84 (1969):238-44; Ben P.J. Broos, "Rembrandt en zijn eeuwige leermeester Lastman," *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* 26 (1972):76-84.
- <sup>47</sup> For example, the donkey episode also has been painted by the Dutch artist Bartholomeus Breenbergh (1634) – for a picture of the canvas, conserved at the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, see [http://collection.nmwa.go.jp/artizewebeng/search\\_4\\_art.php](http://collection.nmwa.go.jp/artizewebeng/search_4_art.php) (access 13 July 2017) and, two centuries later, in 1836, by the German painter Gustav Jaeger (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balaam#/media/File:Gustav\\_Jaeger\\_Bileam\\_Engel.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balaam#/media/File:Gustav_Jaeger_Bileam_Engel.jpg) – access 13 July 2013), who depicted a repentant Balaam, bowing his head before the angel, he just noticed (Nu 22:31).
- <sup>48</sup> See, in this respect, for example John Henry Newman, "Obedience Without Love, as Instanced in the Character of Balaam," *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, ed. John Henry Newman (London – Oxford – Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1873), 18-36.