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# Balaam the Seer Is Recast as a Villain

### The oldest biblical sources see Balaam as a great seer, but as time goes on, biblical texts portray him in an increasingly negative light. The key to this shift lies in Deuteronomy’s attitude to Israel and gentiles.

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Balak asks Balaam to curse the Israelites.  Print 59 from Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments, Amsterdam 1700, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

## Hero or Villain?

Asimple reading of the Balaam story (Num 22:2–24:25) paints the protagonist as a kind of hero.[1] Despite being pressured by King Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites, and being offered silver, gold, and prestige, Balaam sticks to his claim that he may only say what YHWH tells him, and he blesses Israel three times. In fact, the third blessing comes directly from Balaam’s own thoughts, without YHWH prompting him.

The story ends with Balaam cursing Israel’s enemies, including the Moabites who brought him and honored him, and he leaves Moab no richer or more powerful than before. Undoubtedly, the overall effect of the story would give the ancient Israelite reader positive feelings toward Balaam, a gentile prophet who also saw Israel’s unique mission and place in this world as a people loved by YHWH.

And yet, elsewhere in the Bible, Balaam is described as Israel’s enemy: a wicked man who wished to harm Israel and was stopped by God. Certainly when we look at rabbinic sources, this is the dominant image of Balaam, and whatever good he did is held in suspicion.

How are we to understand the relationship between these two very different portrayals of Balaam in Israelite and then Jewish literature? I suggest that if we track the various descriptions of Balaam, we will see the hero Balaam was slowly but surely transformed into a villain.

##  A Man with True Vision (10th/9th cent.)

Scholars have long argued that the oldest parts of the Balaam tradition are the collection of poems about Israel and its neighbors in Numbers 24.[2] In these speeches, Balaam is described as someone who stands on a very high level of prophecy. He describes himself as שְׁתֻם הָעָיִן, “a man whose eye is true” or “clear” (24:3, 15), meaning that he can see far, in space and time.

He also refers to himself as שֹׁמֵעַ אִמְרֵי אֵל, “one who hears God’s speech” (24:4, 16), וְיֹדֵעַ דַּעַת עֶלְיוֹן “one who obtains knowledge from the Most High” (24:16), and מַחֲזֵה שַׁדַּי יֶחֱזֶה “who beholds visions of Shaddai” (24:4, 16). In other words, he has unique spiritual powers that allows him to perceive what is occurring in the divine realm, even without receiving a direct revelation.

This is the import of the ancient seer (רֹאֶה), who can see across space and time (1 Sam 9:6). This is what Balaam states in the opening to his speech about Moab:

במדבר כד:טז אֶרְאֶנּוּ וְלֹא עַתָּה אֲשׁוּרֶנּוּ וְלֹא קָרוֹב…

Num 24:16 What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not near at hand…

This is the same way Balaam is referred to in the Deir ‘Alla inscription, as “a man who was a divine seer” (אש חזה אלהן) and one who can describe in detail what was said in a gathering of the divine council.[3]

The ancient Israelites in the early monarchic period believed in such seers. This is clear from a gloss in Samuel about the time when Saul and his attendant went to ask Samuel about the whereabouts of his father’s lost donkeys:

שמואל א ט:ט לְפָנִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּה אָמַר הָאִישׁ בְּלֶכְתּוֹ לִדְרוֹשׁ אֱלֹהִים לְכוּ וְנֵלְכָה עַד הָרֹאֶה כִּי לַנָּבִיא הַיּוֹם יִקָּרֵא לְפָנִים הָרֹאֶה.

1 Sam 9:9 Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he would say, “Come, let us go to the seer,” for the prophet of today was formerly called a seer.

It is to this same early period that the speeches in Numbers 24 should be dated, based on their content: One poem blesses future Israel with a king who would be greater than Agag (וְיָרֹם מֵאֲגַג מַלְכּוֹ; 24:7), king of Amalek during the time of Saul. This only makes sense during a time when such a person was known or remembered as a great and powerful king. Similarly, the mention of Amalek and the Kenites as relevant peoples that need to be cursed by Balaam on behalf of Israel (24:20–21) makes little sense in the period after the United Monarchy, after which both peoples essentially disappear from the pages of history.

## A Dream Seer Who Can Relay Messages from YHWH (8th cent.)

The prose story of Balaam, which makes up most of the Torah’s Balaam account, moves Balaam’s prophetic level down a notch. First, Balaam here is reliant on a nighttime vision. This is not necessarily a later form of prophecy, since Balaam also receives nighttime visions in the Deir ‘Alla inscription, as does the seer Samuel in the book of Samuel (1 Sam 3:1–20, 15:11, 16), but it is a lower prophetic level than “seeing.”

More significantly, even the blessings that Balaam gives only come to him once YHWH happens upon him following very specific ritual preparations (23:1-5, 14-16, 29-30). The story makes Balaam entirely reliant on the will of God in order to speak the words that YHWH will put in his mouth.

This drop in prophetic level comes with a concomitant drop in his status as a friend of Israel. To be sure, the story does not disparage Balaam per se, but it does present him as willing to curse Israel in exchange for a large reward. Even so, he does state upfront that his words are not really in his own power, and that he will not attempt to go, even once, against the will of YHWH.

### Pre-Deuteronomistic

It is difficult to estimate precisely when this story might have been composed, though the absence of Deuteronomic language and Priestly terminology suggests that it was composed before the seventh century B.C.E. In fact, the eighth-century prophet Micah still describes Balaam as someone who reversed the plans of Balak ben Zippor:

מיכה ו:ה עַמִּי זְכָר נָא מַה יָּעַץ בָּלָק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב וּמֶה עָנָה אֹתוֹ בִּלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר…

Mic 6:5 My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted against you, and how Balaam son of Beor responded to him…

Balak wished to curse Israel and go to war against them, while Balaam was a supporter of the Israelites and a tool in the hands of YHWH to disrupt these plans. Thus Micah’s Balaam is very similar to the core Balaam story in Numbers.

Another text that has a similar approach to Balaam is the LXX version of Joshua 24:9–10. Though the LXX translation is much later than the eighth century, here it likely reflects an older, hypothesized Hebrew text (what scholars call a *Vorlage*). This *Vorlage*, I argue, predates the extant Masoretic text which has been redacted by a Deuteronomic editor:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **LXX** | **Hebrew *Vorlage***[4] | **Translation** |
| Jκαὶ ἀνέστη Βαλακ ὁ τοῦ Σεπφωρ βασιλεὺς Μωαβ καὶ παρετάξατο τῷ Ισραηλ καὶ ἀποστείλας ἐκάλεσεν τὸν Βαλααμ ἀράσασθαι ὑμῖν | ויקם בלק בן צבור וילחם בישראל, וישלח ויקרא לבלעם לקלל אתכם. | And Balak the son of Sepphor, king of Moab, rose up and set himself against Israel, and he sent and invited Balaam to curse you. |
| καὶ οὐκ ἠθέλησεν κύριος ὁ θεός σου ἀπολέσαι σε καὶ εὐλογίαν εὐλόγησεν ὑμᾶς ἐξείλατο ὑμᾶς ἐκ χειρῶν αὐτῶν καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτούς. | ולא אבה י־הוה אלהיך להשחיתך ויברך ברך אתכם ויצל אתכם מידיהם ויכניעם. | And the Lord your God would not destroy you, and he (Balaam) blessed you with a blessing and thus, he (God) rescued you out of their hands and delivered them. |

This text presents Balaam in a neutral light; he blesses Israel based on YHWH’s commands. The text lacks the description of Balaam wishing to curse Israel on his own that we will see later in the MT, and is thus, likely, the earlier text.[5] The eighth century B.C.E. is the most likely date of composition for this account, and for the core of the book of Judges whose worldview fits with that of the prophet Hosea.[6]

## Deuteronomic Balaam (7th Century)

The attitude of Israelites toward Balaam clearly shifts with the appearance of the Deuteronomic school in the seventh century B.C.E. For example, Deuteronomy explains why Ammonites and Moabites may never enter the community of Israel:

דברים כג:ה עַל דְּבַר אֲשֶׁר לֹא קִדְּמוּ אֶתְכֶם בַּלֶּחֶם וּבַמַּיִם בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם וַאֲשֶׁר שָׂכַר עָלֶיךָ אֶת בִּלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר מִפְּתוֹר אֲרַם נַהֲרַיִם לְקַלְלֶךָּ. כג:ו **וְלֹא אָבָה יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לִשְׁמֹעַ אֶל בִּלְעָם**וַיַּהֲפֹךְ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְּךָ אֶת הַקְּלָלָה לִבְרָכָה כִּי אֲהֵבְךָ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Deut 23:5 because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram- naharaim, to curse you. 23:6 **But YHWH your God refused to heed Balaam**; instead, YHWH your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for YHWH your God loves you.

This passage reflects a comprehensive reinterpretation of the role of Balaam in the story of the curse turned blessing. Here he is described as an enemy of Israel who tries to curse Israel, only to be refused by YHWH. Moreover, the use of the verb ויהפך, “and he turned,” implies the changing of an element that was already in existence. In Deuteronomy’s version, Balaam already had the curses laid out in his head, but YHWH did not allow him to enunciate them, and in place of these curses, blessings came out of Balaam’s mouth against his will.

This same attitude towards Balaam appears in the MT version of Joshua 24:9–10, where instead of seeing how God protected Israel and Balaam blessed them, we hear again how God ignores Balaam and saves Israel from him:

יהושע כד:ט וַיָּקָם בָּלָק בֶּן צִפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב וַיִּלָּחֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיִּקְרָא לְבִלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר לְקַלֵּל אֶתְכֶם. כד:י וְלֹא אָבִיתִי **לִשְׁמֹעַ** **לְבִלְעָם** וַיְבָרֶךְ בָּרוֹךְ אֶתְכֶם וָאַצִּל אֶתְכֶם מִיָּדוֹ.

Josh 24:9 Thereupon Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, made ready to attack Israel. He sent for Balaam son of Beor to curse you,24:10 **but I refused** **to listen to Balaam**; he had to bless you, and thus I saved you from him.[7]

It is likely that the MT here reflects a later version than the Hebrew text that served as the basis for the LXX, which was revised to comport with Deuteronomy 23:6.

This same view is reflected in the much later Book of Nehemiah, which is explicitly paraphrasing Deuteronomy’s anti-Ammonite and Moabite law:

נחמיה יג:ב כִּי לֹא קִדְּמוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּלֶּחֶם וּבַמָּיִם וַיִּשְׂכֹּר עָלָיו אֶת בִּלְעָם לְקַלְלוֹ וַיַּהֲפֹךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַקְּלָלָה לִבְרָכָה.

Neh 13:2 since they did not meet Israel with bread and water, and hired Balaam against them to curse them; but our God turned the curse into a blessing.

### Only Israel Is YHWH’s Chosen

This change in attitude towards Balaam is easily explainable against the backdrop of Deuteronomistic theology. This school of thought, whose foundational belief was that YHWH chose Israel to be a holy nation, could no longer accept that outsiders could play an active, positive role in Israel’s history or destiny, since Israel’s special place in this world is revealed in YHWH’s unique relationship with them.

For this reason, Jethro’s role in establishing Israel’s judicial system (Exod 18:13–26) was erased entirely in Deuteronomy’s version of events (Deut 1:9–18),[8] and Deuteronomy makes no mention of Hovav the Midianite/Kenite functioning as a guide for the Israelites in the wilderness (Num 10:29–32 compared with Deut 1:33).

In Deuteronomic thinking, non-Israelites have only one function when it comes to Israel: to be passive witnesses to the righteous acts of YHWH and speak about them in awe to the greater glory of Israel and their God. This is the reaction of Rahab and the Gibeonites (Josh 2:10–11, 9:9–10) as well as the reaction of “all the people of the land” (Deut 28:10, Josh 4:24, 1 Kgs 8:43, 60).

This is even truer when it comes to prophecy. True prophecy, according to Deuteronomy (18:13–20) is designed to continue the legacy of Moses and communicate God’s will to the people. It can only be accomplished by another Israelite מקרבך “from among you” (v. 15), מאחיך “from your brethren” (v. 15), מקרב אחיהם “from among their brethren” (v. 18). Among the other nations, prophets are merely קוסמים ומעוננים “diviners and conjurers” (v. 14), both abominations to YHWH.

Accordingly, if the Deuteronomist inherited traditions about Balaam, who abides by the word of YHWH, and “who speaks the words that God puts in his mouth” (Num 22:38, 23:5), he would need to interpret this anew to fit his worldview. Thus, he changed Balaam into an enemy, one who spoke against Israel and tried to convince YHWH to destroy them, and to one who was on the brink of cursing Israel until YHWH changed the curses into blessings, essentially forcing Balaam to bless Israel instead of cursing them.

## Post-Deuteronomic Balaam: A Diviner (6th Cent.)

The Deuteronomic conception of prophecy as uniquely Israelite, and as an extension of the revelation at Sinai, was accepted and developed by Deutero-Isaiah (the author of Isaiah 40–55) in the mid-sixth century. This prophet also contrasts the prophets of YHWH with diviners, and perhaps even with *bārû* (“divining”—the term is Akkadian) priests,[9] declaring that YHWH will confuse their minds:

ישעיה מד:כדכֹּה אָמַר יְ־הוָה גֹּאֲלֶךָ וְיֹצֶרְךָ מִבָּטֶן אָנֹכִי יְ־הוָה עֹשֶׂה כֹּל נֹטֶה שָׁמַיִם לְבַדִּי רֹקַע הָאָרֶץ (מי אתי) [מֵאִתִּי]. מד:כהמֵפֵר אֹתוֹת בַּדִּים וְקֹסְמִים יְהוֹלֵל מֵשִׁיב חֲכָמִים אָחוֹר וְדַעְתָּם יְסַכֵּל. מד:כו מֵקִים דְּבַר עַבְדּוֹ וַעֲצַת מַלְאָכָיו יַשְׁלִים…

Isa 44:24 Thus said YHWH, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: It is I, YHWH, who made everything, who alone stretched out the heavens and unaided spread out the earth; 44:25 Who annul the omens of diviners, and make fools of the augurs; who turn sages back and make nonsense of their knowledge; 44:26 But confirm the word of My servant and fulfill the prediction of My messengers…

For him, a pagan diviner is not merely an abomination, but the stuff of nonsense. For Deutero-Isaiah, the competition between the prophet of YHWH and the pagan diviner becomes the ultimate proof of YHWH’s uniqueness in this world, as it contrasts starkly with inability of the gods of other nations להשמיע את הבאות “to tell the future” (Isa 41:22), and concomitantly, לא ייטיבו ולא ירעו “to help or to harm” (Isa 41:23). With that, Israel consigned gentile prophecy then and forever to oblivion.

During this same period, the story of Balaam’s donkey and the angel were added into the Balaam account. As I discuss in my “[The Account of Balaam’s Donkey: A Late Polemical Burlesque](https://thetorah.com/the-account-of-balaams-donkey-a-late-polemical-burlesque/)” (*TheTorah.com*, 2019), this story was designed to call into question all of Balaam’s best qualities, such as his unique vision and understanding of YHWH, in a burlesque manner designed to elicit laughs from the reader at the prophet’s expense.

The addition of the anecdote into the otherwise complimentary Balaam account weakens the character’s heroic status and lays the groundwork for the Deuteronomic interpretation of the story discussed above. With this background, the description of Balaam in all post-Deuteronomistic biblical literature is easy to understand.

## Priestly Balaam: The Tempter (6th Cent.)

The Priestly authors designate Balaam as a diviner (הַקּוֹסֵם; Josh 13:22), describe him as a Midianite (Num 31:8 [compare Num 22:7]), the people who צֹרְרִים הֵם לָכֶם בְּנִכְלֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר נִכְּלוּ לָכֶם “assailed you (Israel) with the trickery with which they tricked you” (Num 28:18). When explaining why the Midianite women must be killed, Moses accuses Balaam of being the cause of their having led Israelite men astray (Num 31:16):

במדבר לא:טז הֵן הֵנָּה הָיוּ לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּדְבַר בִּלְעָם לִמְסָר מַעַל בַּי־הוָה עַל דְּבַר פְּעוֹר וַתְּהִי הַמַּגֵּפָה בַּעֲדַת יְ־הוָה.

Num 31:16 Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against YHWH in the matter of Peor, so that YHWH’s community was struck by the plague.

This tradition is absent in previous sources, and is the creation of the Priestly writer. For leading Israelite men astray after Midianite women, the Israelites paid him back according to his deeds and killed him during their battle of revenge against the Midianites (Num 31:8; Josh 13:22).

The foundations established by the Deuteronomist—the description of a mantic foreign prophet as a diviner, the negation of Balaam’s status as a prophet, and the accusation against him of plotting against Israel in an attempt to get YHWH to turn against them—all these elements were incorporated into the Priestly account in one way or another, and even extended.

## Postbiblical Balaam: An Archetype for Wickedness

Out of all the presentations of Balaam in the Bible, the Sages specifically developed the image of Balaam as wicked in character, plotting against Israel.[10] The Mishnah uses him as the archetype for wicked people (m. *Avot* 5:19):

עין רעה ורוח גבוה ונפש רחבה מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע

Anyone who has an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a broad appetite is among the students of the wicked Balaam.

It further closes the door of the afterlife on him (m. *Sanhedrin* 10:5). The Babylonian Talmud picks up on the Deuteronomic idea that God changed the curse to a blessing, and attempts to tease out what the original curse must have been (b. *Sanhedrin* 105b).

אמר רבי יוחנן: מברכתו של אותו רשע אתה למד מה היה בלבו,

R. Yohanan said: “From the blessings of that wicked man you may learn his intentions.[11]

Similarly, the midrashim, where possible, offer negative homilies on virtually every verse in this *parasha*. For example, *Midrash Tanchuma*, (Balak 1, Buber ed.) states:

ראה מה בין נביאי ישראל לנביאי אומות העולם, נביאי ישראל מזהירים את האומה על העבירות, וכן הוא אומר צופה נתתיך לבית ישראל (יחזקאל ג יז), ונביא שעמד מן האומות, העמיד פירצה לאבד הבריות מן העולם הבא,

Look at the difference between Israel’s prophets and gentile prophets: Israel’s prophets warn the nation to avoid sins, as it says (Ezek 3:17) “I have made you a seer for the house of Israel.” Whereas the prophet who arose among the gentiles created a breach with which to ruin people’s chances for entering the next world.

ולא עוד אלא כל הנביאים היו במדת רחמים על ישראל ועל אומות העולם… וזה אכזרי עמד לעקור אומה שלימה על חנם, על לא דבר, לכך נכתבה פרשת בלעם להודיע למה סילק הקדוש ברוך הוא רוח הקודש מאומות העולם שזה עמד מהן וראה מה עשה.

Not only this, but all the [Israelite] prophets dealt mercifully with the Israelites and the gentiles… but this cruel person wished to uproot an entire nation for no reason, and for no cause. This is why the Balaam passage was written, to teach the reason that the Holy One removed the holy spirit from among the gentiles, since this man [Balaam] arose from among them and look how he behaved.[12]

All this, I suggest, flows directly from the later biblical material.

## How the Mighty Have Fallen

In short, Balaam begins as a powerful seer but is soon downgraded to a purveyor of divine messages. These are the images we find of Balaam in the core narrative of Numbers 22:2–24:25, which was composed in the latter period. Once the Deuteronomic school became prominent, however, the idea of a righteous gentile prophet became problematic, and the story was reinterpreted to be about how God forced him to bless Israel against his will.

Once this change happened, it wasn’t long before Balaam was recast as a diviner, and eventually, as the instantiation of wickedness itself. It is quite striking how tradition can keep reworking a single individual, transforming him so completely over time!

[Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/balaam-the-seer-is-recast-as-a-villain)

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1. Editor’s note: For one version of this argument, see part 2 of David Frankel, [“The Prehistory of the Balaam Story,”](http://thetorah.com/the-prehistory-of-the-balaam-story/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
2. Editor’s note: For more on this inscription, see Carl Ehrlich, [“Balaam the Seer: From the Bible to the Deir ‘Alla Inscription,”](https://thetorah.com/balaam-the-seer-from-the-bible-to-the-deir-alla-inscription/) *TheTorah.com* (2018); Seth Sanders, [“Balaam and the Problem of Other People’s Revelation,”](http://thetorah.com/balaam-and-the-problem-of-other-peoples-revelation/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
3. This is a suggested retroversion; no such text is extant.
4. The LXX version here reflects the basic storyline of the gathering in Shechem in Joshua 24 before Deuteronomistic edits entered both versions of the text (MT and LXX). See Alexander Rofé, “The Composition of the Introduction of the Book of Judges” [in Hebrew]. *Tarbiz* 35 (1966): 204 [n9, n13]; Alexander Rofé, “Ephraimite versus Deuteronomistic History,” in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers and J.G. McConville (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 462–474, trans. of original in *Storia E Tradizioni di Israel*, ed. J. Alberto Soggin (Flero: Paideia Editrice Brescia, 1991), 221–236.
5. Compare Charles F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), xlv.
6. Editor’s note: For a very different understanding of the textual history of this passage, which assumes that Balaam was added in as a redactional supplement, see part one of David Frankel, [“The Prehistory of the Balaam Story,”](http://thetorah.com/the-prehistory-of-the-balaam-story/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
7. Editor’s note: See discussion in David Frankel, [“Sefer Devarim’s Jewish Democratic Egalitarian Agenda,”](http://thetorah.com/sefer-devarims-jewish-democratic-and-egalitarian-agenda/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
8. Some have argued that the unusual term *badim* in Isa 44:25 is an example of *dalet*/*resh*confusion, and that it should say *barim*, i.e., *bārû*priests; others have suggested that the term *badim* (people who speak deceitfully) is meant as word play on *barim*.
9. This is not a purely rabbinic phenomenon; rather, the words of Josephus and Philo regarding Balaam prove that this was a relatively ancient approach. See discussion in Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Aggadic Stories,*2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 127–177; Herbert Donner, “Balaam Pseudopropheta,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie:* *Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 112–123.
10. The text continues (Soncino trans. with adjustments):

ביקש לומר:

He wished to curse them:

שלא יהו להם בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות – מה טבו אהליך יעקב,

That they should possess no synagogues or school houses – “How fair are your tents, O Jacob” (Num 24:5);

לא תשרה שכינה עליהם – ומשכנתיך ישראל,

That the Shechinah should not rest upon them – “Your dwellings, O Israel” (Num 24:5);

לא תהא מלכותן נמשכת – כנחלים נטיו,

That their kingdom should not endure – “Like streams that stretch out” (Num 24:6);

לא יהא להם זיתים וכרמים – כגנת עלי נהר,

That they might have no olive trees and vineyards – “Like gardens beside a river” (Num 24:6);

לא יהא ריחן נודף – כאהלים נטע ה’,

That their odor might not be fragrant – “Like aloes planted by the Lord” (Num 24:6);

לא יהיו להם מלכים בעלי קומה – כארזים עלי מים,

That their kings might not be tall – “Like cedars beside the water” (Num 24:6);

לא יהיה להם מלך בן מלך – יזל מים מדליו,

That they might not have a king the son of a king –­­ “Their boughs drip with moisture” (Num 24:7);

לא תהא מלכותן שולטת באומות – וזרעו במים רבים,

That their kingdom might not rule over other nations – “Their roots have abundant water” (Num 24:7);

לא תהא עזה מלכותן – וירם מאגג מלכו,

That their kingdom might not be strong – “Their king shall rise above Agag” (Num 24:7);

לא תהא אימת מלכותן – ותנשא מלכתו.

That their kingdom might not be awe-inspiring – “Their kingdom shall be exalted” (Num 24:7).

אמר רבי אבא בר כהנא: כולם חזרו לקללה, חוץ מבתי כנסיות ומבתי מדרשות. שנאמר ויהפך ה’ אלהיך לך את הקללה לברכה כי אהבך ה’ אלהיך, קללה, ולא קללות.

R. Abba b. Kahana said: All of them reverted to a curse, excepting the synagogues and schoolhouses, for it is written, ‘But the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you’ – ‘the curse’ but not ‘the curses.’”

1. This midrash is discussed in Ephraim E. Urbach, “דרשות חז”ל על נביאי אומות העולם ועל פרשת בלעם לאור הוויכוח היהודי-נוצרי” [Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories], *Tarbiz 25* (1956):*272–289,*where he argues that the rabbis turned Balaam into the archetype of all gentile prophets, and thus he is described with the imagery utilized by other nations to describe their chief prophets, whether pagan, Christian, or Gnostic, in short, any group with which the rabbis came into contact.