‘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

¹ An exhaustive study of the Church Fathers’ reception of the Balaam character and/or of Numbers 22–24 does not exist to date. The general survey by Karpp in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (RAC) is already old and the valuable contribution by Baskin did not aim at completeness either (H. Karpp, ‘Bileam. Kirchenväter’, in: RAC 2 [1954] 366–73; J.R. Baskin, *Pharaoh’s Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* [Brown Judaic Studies 47], Chico CA 1983, 75–115).

² ‘Wen wir die altchristliche Literatur durchblättern, können wir mit Erstaunen feststellen, dass der Prophet mit der sprechenden Eselin, der verfluchen wollte aber doch segnen musste, nicht nur gut bekannt, sondern geradezu eine beliebte Persönlichkeit ist’ (E. Kirschbaum, ‘Der Prophet Balaam und die Anbetung der Weisen’, *Römische Quartalschrift* 49 [1954] 129–171 at 130).

analysis of Numbers 22–24 that has come down to us from the patristic period.³ 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, save for some scholia, there is not much else.⁴

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.⁵ 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.

³ Origène: *Homélies sur les Nombres. II. Homélies XI–XIX*, texte latin de W. Baehrens (GCS), nouvelle édition par Louis Doutreleau s.j. (Sources Chrétiennes 442), Paris 1999, 116–373.

⁴ See the survey in J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Sources bibliques), Paris 1972, 51–2.

⁵ See F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, Cambridge 1997.

2. Num 24:17 in the Fathers: foretelling the incarnation⁶

In his fourth oracle, Balaam prophesies: 'a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (RSV). The survey of Kevin Cathcart shows that messianic interpretations of this Hebrew text are evidently reflected in its Greek, Syriac, Latin and Aramaic renderings. In this regard the renderings of the words 'star' and 'sceptre' are particularly significant. 'Star' is rendered as 'king' in the Peshitta and in three Targum texts. In the Greek versions it is the word 'sceptre' that is the most important one. In the Septuagint⁷ it is translated by ἄνθρωπος and in a version transmitted by Justin Martyr as ἡγούμενος—leader, which becomes *dux* in the Latin translation of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*.⁸ We also find similar renderings of this text in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Pseudepigrapha.⁹

It is noteworthy that in the Vulgate the most faithful rendering of the Hebrew is offered, without messianic overtones at all: *oriatur stella ex Iacob et consurget virga de Israel*. By the time Jerome prepared this translation, a messianic interpretation of this verse had already firmly imposed itself. One of the earliest testimonies of such an interpretation is to be found in Justin Martyr's *First Apology*. In the context of his exploration of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, Justin discusses Old Testament passages that foreshadow the incarnation. Num 24:17 is evidently one of them:

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. For, by God's power, He was conceived by a virgin who was a descendant of Jacob, who was the father of Judah, the above-mentioned father of the Jewish race; and Jesse was His forefather according to this prophecy, and He was the son of Jacob and Judah according to their lineage.¹⁰

⁶ On the patristic interpretation of this verse, see G. Dorival, 'Un astre se lèvera de Jacob: L'interprétation ancienne des Nombres 24,17', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 13/1 (1996) 295–352.

⁷ According to the Göttingen edition of the Septuagint the text of 24:17cd is ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐξ Ἰακώβ καὶ ἀναστήσεται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ Ἰσραήλ.

⁸ Cf. K.J. Cathcart, 'Numbers 24:17 in Ancient Translations and Interpretations', in: J. Krasovec (ed.), *Interpretation of the Bible: The International Symposium in Slovenia*, Sheffield 1998, 511–20, esp. 512.

⁹ Cathcart, 'Numbers 24:17 in Ancient Translations and Interpretations', 513–16.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Apologia* I.32 (translation taken from T.B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* [Fathers of the Church 6], Washington 1948, 69–70).

It is striking that the quotation from Num 24:17 is mixed up with one from Isaiah and that the whole text is ascribed to the latter prophet. One should, however, not make too much out of this since in his somewhat later *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin mentions that He (Christ) 'was called Joseph and Judah and a Star by Moses'.¹¹ The star-prophecy ascribed to Moses here clearly refers to Num 24:17.

After Justin Martyr we turn to Origen. In the context of his exegesis of Balaam's fourth oracle, in which he pays special attention to verse 17, Origen dwells at length on the link between the star-prophecy and the incarnation. He formulates the identification of the star to Christ as follows:

But let us see what he [sc. Balaam] says in what follows: '*I will show him, though not immediately; I will bless him and he is not nearby*'. In other copies, however, one reads '*I will see him, though not immediately*'. If the latter variant is to be accepted, one will find it easier to understand that it is Christ—about whom he says in what follows '*a star comes forth from Jacob and a man will rise from Israel*'—that it is Christ whom must be seen.¹²

It is also evident to the authors of the fourth century that the 'star' in Num 24:17 must be identified with Christ. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius of Alexandria refutes the Jews' unbelief in the cross and the incarnation by using their own scriptures against them:

The unbelieving Jews have their refutation from the books which they also read; from beginning to end all through each inspired book proclaims these things, just as the words themselves are obvious. For the prophets previously foretold the miracle of the Virgin and the birth from her, saying: 'Behold a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel, which is, interpreted, "God with us"' (Isa 7:14). And Moses, that truly great man who is believed by them to be truthful, considered the saying concerning the incarnation of the Saviour as most momentous, and recognising it as true, phrased it thus: 'A star will rise from Jacob and a man from Israel, and he will break the princes of Moab'.¹³

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 126.1 (trans. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, 343).

¹² Origenes, *In Numeros homiliae* XVIII.4. In a passage from the second book of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, the same connection is made: 'But now... let us also adduce from the second prophecy of Balaam the passage that refers to Christ. A star, he says, shall rise out of Iacob and a man shall come forth from his seed...' (R.P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies* [Ancient Christian Writers 26], Westminster MD/London 1957, 156).

¹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 33 (edn. and trans. R.W. Thomson, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* [Oxford Early Christian Texts], Oxford 1971, 214–15).

I continue with two testimonies from Christmas sermons. Ephrem the Syrian's so-called *First Christmas Hymn* presents proof texts from the Old Testament, foretelling in beautifully vigorous poetry Jesus' messianic office. The first stanza, of which the following fragment is taken, stresses the continuous repetition of the word 'today', the celebrative atmosphere, and demonstrates that the Christmas-event is none other than Christ's incarnation foreshadowed already in the Hebrew Bible:

The word that Micah spoke was realised today,
for a shepherd went out from Ephrata, and his staff herded souls. (Mic 5:2; 5:1 Pes.)
Behold, a star shone forth from Jacob and a prince arose from Israel.
The prophecy that Balaam spoke found its meaning today. (Num 24:17)
The hidden light descended and its beauty shone forth from a body;
the dawn of which Zechariah spoke lights up Bethlehem today. (Zech 2:5).¹⁴

In his *Christmas Homily*, Amphilochius of Iconium (second half of the fourth century AD) also sings the praise of the day of Christmas:

O day, worthy of a thousand songs of praise; the day on which a star from Jacob shone forth to us, on which a heavenly man from Israel was seen and on which the strong God came to us.¹⁵

Similar texts can also be found in less evident places. In the middle of the sixth century, for instance, we read in the *Topographia Christiana* of Cosmas Indicopleustes:

Moreover, he [sc. Moses] wrote down what had been said by Balaam: 'A star will rise from Jacob and a man from Israel, and he will break the princes of Moab and subject all the sons of Seth'. With 'the sons of Seth' the whole world is meant and his words can only be fittingly applied to Christ.¹⁶

On the basis of this sample of texts, to which many more could be added, it is clear that a messianic interpretation of Num 24:17 is present in the writings of the Church Fathers and that it is linked to the incarnation.

¹⁴ Ephrem, *In Nativitatem I* (trans. K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* [Classics of Western Spirituality], New York NY 1989, 64).

¹⁵ Amphilochius of Iconium, *In Christi natalem* 3 (edn. C. Datema, *Amphilochii Iconiensis opera* [Corpus Christianorum; Series Graeca 3], Turnhout 1978, 7, lines 87-9; my own translation).

¹⁶ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana* V.112 (edn. and trans. W. Waskonius [Sources Chrétiennes 159], Paris 1970, 171; my own translation).

3. The 'star' of Num 24:17 and the star of the Magi

The largest cluster of patristic texts revolving around Num 24:17 are connecting Balaam's star to the Magi of the Matthean Infancy Narrative (cf. Nicklas's contribution to this volume). Irenaeus is the first to make this connection in book III of the *Adversus Haereses*:

Therefore there is one and the same God, who was proclaimed by the prophets and announced by the Gospel; and His Son, who was of the fruit of David's body, that is, of the virgin of [the house of] David, and Emmanuel; whose star also Balaam thus prophesied: 'There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a leader shall rise in Israel.' But Matthew says that the Magi, coming from the east, exclaimed 'For we have seen His star in the east, and have come to worship Him'; and that, having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped; myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold, because He was a King, 'of whose kingdom is no end'; and frankincense, because He was God, who also 'was made known in Judea', and was 'declared to those who sought Him not'.¹⁷

Irenaeus is arguing here that the Christian God is the only true god. Balaam's star-prophecy evidently refers to Christ in this context, but the author also connects this to the star which led the Magi from the East to Bethlehem. In other words, Balaam's prophecy of Num 24:17 brings us into the Matthean narrative of the journey of the Magi, their presence at the crib and their bringing of presents all of which are interpreted symbolically. It is clear that still early in the patristic period, the identification of Balaam's star with that of the Magi is evident already in Irenaeus.

Matthew's report of the events thus raised the following question: how did the Magi—who were pagans!—know that the star they had seen announced the incarnation? The Fathers' answer to this question is that they knew by a gift of divine grace. Besides this supernatural cause, they also point to a second more mundane reason: the Magi knew Balaam's prophecy and hence were enabled to interpret the star they saw as an announcement of the birth of the Messiah.¹⁸

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III.9.2 (trans. taken from *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* [The Ante-Nicene Fathers 1], Edinburgh 1996 [= 1884], 422–3).

¹⁸ See e.g. Leo Magnus, *Sermo* 34 4.2.

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This solution of course leads to the following question: how did the Magi know Balaam's prophecy at all? The Fathers' answer is in general twofold: they point to the common geographical background of Balaam and the Magi: both are 'from the East' and/or they point to their common profession: both Balaam and the Magi were in the field of divination and the practice of soothsaying. These two elements were gradually interwoven and the Magi were relatively early described as 'relatives' or 'descendants' of Balaam. This is already the case in Origen's *Homilies in Numeri*, but on the basis of introductory formulations such as 'it is considered', it is fair to assume that he did not invent it himself but rather hands over an already existing tradition.¹⁹

This tradition is continued after Origen.²⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea qualifies the Magi, much as Origen had done, as *diadochoi* of Balaam.²¹ Gregory of Nyssa styles Balaam as the προπάτωρ, the ancestor, of the Magi.²² Diodore of Tarsus styles the Magi in his treatise *De fato* as ὁμοτέχνοι of Balaam.²³ Ambrosius of Milan refers to 'some story' (*historia quaedam*) according to which the Magi were the descendants of Balaam²⁴ and Jerome, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, repeats that the Magi were Balaam's descendants.²⁵ Two centuries later, at the very end of the patristic period, John Damascene, an eager collector of the theological tradition of the previous centuries, still echoes that the Magi were ἀπογόνου, descendants, of the son of Beor.²⁶

Furthermore, the Fathers were not insensitive to the irony of history: Balaam, a pagan, foretold in his oracle the birth of the Christian Saviour, who came forth from the Jewish people. This message was preserved in the Hebrew Bible: the content of it was lost to the Jews, who rejected Christ but who, as it were involuntarily, transmitted the announcement of the Messiah's birth to the pagans who did receive it and became Christians. In other words, the pagan prophet Balaam transmitted the message of the incarnation to other pagans through the Hebrew Scriptures. This theme is of course teased out with great

¹⁹ Origenes, *In Numeros homiliae* XIII.7.4.

²⁰ See Dorival, 'Un astre se leva de Jacob', 315-16.

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio evangelica* IX.1.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem natalem Christi* (edn. F. Mann, *Sermones* [Gregorii Nysseni Opera X.2], Leiden 1996, 245.3-246.2, esp. 245 line 16).

²³ Diodore of Tarsus, *De fato* 53.

²⁴ Ambrosius, *In Lucam* II.48.

²⁵ Hieronymus, *Commentarium in Matthaeum* (ad Matt 2:2).

²⁶ Joannes Damascenus, *In Nativitatem* 6.

¹⁸ *ic Fathers with Justin*
[= 1884], 422-3).

enthusiasm by the Church Fathers, most notably, again, in their Christmas sermons. The earliest source is Origen who ascribes it to a felicitous intervention of divine Providence in his *Fourteenth Homily on Numbers*:

We have to do here with a miraculous and great dispensation: since the prophet's words, who were confined to the Israelite sphere, could not reach the pagans, the mysteries (*mystēria*) about Christ were carried to them through Balaam, in whom all people had trust, and this great treasure was brought to them not so much through the heart and the senses but through the spoken word.²⁷

The final consequence of this argument is, of course, that the Christians themselves, for whom the Church Fathers were writing, were inheriting the message the Magi had received from Balaam. Ultimately they themselves were, through the Magi, the heirs of Balaam's prophecy. This final step is only taken relatively late. We find it for the first time in Augustine's *Sermon on Epiphany*, but also in later writings.²⁸ Perhaps the most unequivocal formulation is to be found in the anonymous sixth-century *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*:

O blessed Magi, who from all pagan people merited to become the firstlings of the faithful! The reason is that these Magi carried already the form of what was to be the Church (*forma futurae Ecclesiae*). For, just as they were, in belief, seeking and confessing their faith in the King, whom they had never seen, in the same manner are we—who come forth from pagan people—also daily seeking in belief the Lord, whom we have never seen, and we confess his power.²⁹

The author continues by making the connection between the star of the Magi and the star-prophecy of Balaam. He also quotes Num 24:17. The Magi were the firstlings of Christianity. Through their intervention, which was the result of the fact that they were following not only their own but also Balaam's star, the latter became a sort of founding father of Christianity. It goes without saying that this does injustice to the historical roots of Christianity in Judaism but it should, I think, be understood as a testimony to Christianity understanding itself exclusively as an *ecclesia ex gentibus*. In this sense it can be said that the reception of Balaam contributed to the formation of a Christian identity *vis-à-vis* other religions of Late Antiquity.

²⁷ Origenes, *In Numeros homiliae* XIV.3.

²⁸ Augustinus, *Sermo* 200 and *Sermo* 202; Leo Magnus, *Sermo* 32 2.4.

²⁹ Ps-Chrysostomus, *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum homilia* II.2.

4. *Balaam's star and the Church Fathers' polemic against astrology*

One of the religious practices deeply entrenched in paganism was belief in the *fatum* and, coupled with that, various sorts of divination, including the practice of astrology. Throughout the patristic period the leaders of the late antique Christian communities consistently argued against these practices.³⁰ Particularly from the fourth century onwards, bishops had to respond to this pressing matter of undesirable behaviour within their own congregations as more and more semi-Christians joined the Church. In his *Fourteenth Festal Letter*, for instance, written in 426 AD, Cyril of Alexandria strongly warns his flock against believing that they could foretell the future from consulting the stars. These are all false predictions and the people practicing it are false prophets. Sometimes their predictions are proven right, but this is only pure luck on their part. Moreover, only a small share of these predictions do indeed come true. The validity of these practices is also clearly contradicted by the fact that repeatedly these people have proven to be unable to predict even their own future, let alone that of others.³¹ Besides some scriptural arguments, the bishop of Alexandria also spent the lions' share of his yearly letter to a vehement refutation of these undesirable practices. By means of this, two things are clear: astrological practices were widespread and the battle to eradicate them in his time was also far from won.

In the Church Fathers' critical reflections regarding astrological practices, the star of the Magi plays a predominantly positive role. In some other passages, however, Balaam's star-prophecy is at least implicitly present as an authoritative argument in favour of astrology. This created a problem: how can one be against astrology when a diviner uttered an oracle which in the end proved to be the prediction of the birth of Christ? Dorival presents some material in which this tension is addressed.³² Of this especially a text of Basil of Caesarea merits consideration.

³⁰ These anti-astrological writings and arguments of the Fathers are described and analysed in D. Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'antiquité grecque: recherches sur la survivance de l'argumentation morale antifataliste de Carnéade chez les philosophes grecs et les théologiens chrétiens des quatre premiers siècles* (UCL; Recueil de travaux d'histoire et de philologie, Série 3 19), Louvain: Bibliothèque universitaire Louvain, 1945.

³¹ Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistula festalis* XIV.128-303.

³² Dorival, 'Un astre se lèvera de Jacob', 345-9.

In a long passage from Basil of Caesarea's *Homily on the Holy Generation of Christ*,³³ Balaam is present a few times and Num 24:17 is quoted just before the anti-astrological argumentation *stricto sensu* starts. In this argument Basil strongly argues that 'the rising of the star' (sc. of Balaam) had nothing at all to do with predicting the future or with the belief that the specific configuration of stars at the time of someone's birth would influence the course of this person's life. Moreover, this idea is not applicable to the situation at the time of the Saviour's birth. We know of two sorts of heavenly bodies: those who are permanently moving (the planets) and those who are never moving (the stars). The star of the Magi, however did both: first, it led them from the East, whence they came, to Bethlehem, and when they had found the place where the child was, the star stood still above the place. Hence it was a very special star, announcing an exceptional event, and can in no way be made into an argument in defence of astrological practices which are only related to ordinary stars.

5. *Balaam: An ambiguous character*

What has been said thus far about Balaam's portrayal in the Church Fathers was all very positive. He was a prophet who announced the incarnation. He was put on par with the Magi—yes, even became their forefather—and was, all in all, a beloved character who was always mentioned in Christmas sermons or sermons on Epiphany. Yet, there was also a dark side to the Fathers' appraisal of Balaam: he was a prophet of the central event of Christian doctrine, but at the same time he remained a *pagan* prophet. Karp formulates it as follows: 'Bileam ist ein Stück heidnisches Altertums innerhalb der Bibel selbst'.³⁴ Moreover, he was a pagan prophet about whom the Scriptures recorded some highly questionable deeds. Origen brought the following things forward against him:³⁵ he went to the king even while God forbade him to do so; he built altars and demanded divine counsel through magic; he was avaricious.

Some patristic authors gave way to their hostility to this false prophet and simply evaded the problem by denying him the status of a true

³³ Basilus of Caesarea, *In generationem Christi* 6.

³⁴ Karpp, 'Bileam', 366.

³⁵ Origenes, *Homiliae in Numeros* 15.1 with reference to 14.3.1.

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prophet.³⁶ In most cases however this ambiguity has been part and parcel of the Church Fathers' description of Balaam. At the end of the patristic period, it has been summed up in a sermon on Mark 6:1-4 by Peter Chrysologus, bishop of Ravenna in the first half of the sixth century:

Balaam blesses with a mouth bent on cursing, and although hired for wickedness he speaks all the mysteries of truth. And just like a rose amidst thorns, that is, as on a prickly shrub little flowers with wondrous aromas are grown, so too sometimes the perceptions of the worst people are triggered against their will by the impulse of divinity for the good, such that what they say derives not from their merit but from the [particular] mystery.³⁷

Origen, roughly three centuries before this quotation, had already expressed the argument that Balaam was overcome by divine superiority, that the 'impulse of divinity for the good' outweighed the prophet's bad disposition. He was the first to address the problem of this 'double face' of Balaam at length. One sees him wrestling with this throughout his *Homelies* on the Balaam pericope and finally come to a solution which has influenced the later tradition and the nuanced character of which has never been superseded. This interpretation of Balaam is closely connected to Origen's understanding of prophecy.³⁸ Contrary to many authors before him, Origen did not think that the divine inspiration of the Spirit removed or made useless the prophet's normal human rational faculties. In addition, when the prophet is inspired, he still retains his individual character. Moreover, in Origen's allegorical exegesis, the diviner Balaam with his talents in the field of magical practices is considered to be in contact with evil spirits and as fighting against Israel. In Baskin's words, '[Origen] portrays the battle between Balaam and Israel as a microcosm of the larger universal struggle between good and evil'. The challenge then was to reconcile this idea of prophecy with this portrayal of Balaam. There was an easy way out: Origen could have argued, like some of his predecessors, that the prophet's individual character was not involved in his prophetic acts, that the prophet was only the medium through which the Spirit delivered his

³⁶ Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*, 102-3. Examples: Athenagoras, *Legatio* 9.1; Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1.36.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI.18.

³⁷ Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermo* 49 (trans. W.B. Palardy, *Saint Peter Chrysologus: Selected Sermons*, vol. 2 [Fathers of the Church], Washington 2004, 190-1).

³⁸ Here I follow Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*, 104-9.

message. This was, however, contrary to Origen's ideas of prophecy and hence he had to show how this soothsayer, despite his wicked alliance with evil forces, became one of the prophets of the incarnation. As in the quotation from Peter Chrysologus, the pivotal point of the argument is divine intervention. According to Origen, God had understood that Balaam's gifts of divination were not good in themselves, but could be made useful to the plan of salvation. Indeed, 'Balaam's skills at divination made him an appropriate vehicle of God's word', and made his testimony about Christ the more convincing to the pagans.³⁹

The following question must thus be posed: was this man a true prophet? Origen answers it in the negative. However important his oracles may have been, they did not come from his heart. They came only due to divine intervention. Moreover, Balaam's absence in virtues, in particular, did not match with what can be expected from a prophet. In sum, Balaam was good enough a medium for the goal he had to serve but nothing more than that. He definitely did not deserve to be put on par with great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Remarkably enough this does not lead to Origen's complete dismissal of Balaam. On the contrary, while he refuses to acknowledge Balaam as a true prophet, Origen does acknowledge his merit as medium for the message of salvation in Christ. He was definitely an unworthy person, but in Origen's view Balaam must have reached a certain measure of salvation because of the following three things: he was the medium of the announcement of the coming of Christ; what he announced came true; and he was the forefather of the Magi.

All in all we find in Origen a nuanced, moderate view on the ambiguous Balaam. A similar but on the whole somewhat more negative opinion on Balaam is expressed in some passages in the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Augustine distinguishes between true and false prophets and is unwilling to compromise in this regard. Somebody who utters a prophecy—even when it comes true—is not necessarily a prophet. 'It is impossible to be a prophet and lack charity', Augustine says.⁴⁰ Being a prophet has also to do with one's personal disposition, with one's character, with one's embodiment of essential virtues. To Augustine charity is a crucial virtue for everybody and, hence, a fortiori, for a prophet. Balaam is thus in the eyes of the bishop of Hippo not

³⁹ Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*, 105.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* II.8–9.

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a real prophet. But if a prophet is not a true prophet and yet clearly is able to utter prophecies, just as Balaam did, how does he do that? Augustine provides a similar answer as the one provided by Origen: Balaam and other false prophets were only able to do what they did due to divine intervention. This divine intervention uses the person as a sort of medium for a short time and for a specific purpose. In a particularly well-crafted passage, he formulates it as follows:

There is as great a distance between the prophecy of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and that transitory passing prophecy as appeared in Saul, as the distance when humans speak and speech as it appeared in Balaam's ass. And that instance only occurred because God found it necessary to demonstrate his will to Balaam; it was not an indication that the beast was permanently to be able to speak with men. If God can make an ass speak, he can certainly make an ungodly man submit to the spirit of prophecy for a short time.⁴¹

The dismissive tone and the argument are clear: people like Balaam are not real prophets; at best they are, says Baskin, 'God's unwilling mouthpiece'.⁴² Up to this point Augustine's opinion differs more in tone than in content from that of Origen. Origen's view on prophecy was a bit more nuanced but he too made a clear distinction between true and false prophets. Contrary to Origen, however, Augustine does not see much hope of salvation for Balaam. He even goes as far as to refuse to connect him with the Magi. In this regard Augustine is an exception in patristic literature. We have seen that most Church Fathers in their Christmas sermons or sermons on Epiphany, referred to Balaam. This is not so with Augustine. He dwells many times at length on the Magi and their importance of proclaiming the Gospel in the entire *oikoumene*, including the pagans, but unlike other authors there is in Augustine's mind no room for Balaam in this picture.

⁴¹ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* II.2. Translation taken from Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*, 110.

⁴² Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*, 111.