

# The Star and Scepter of God's People

Text: Numbers 24:17-19

Scripture Readings: Numbers 22:1-6, 24:1-5, 15-19 • Matthew 2:1-12

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*Balaam and the Ass, by Rembrandt, 1626 (Numbers 22:22-35)*

## Introduction

After Israel escaped from Egypt, they traveled to Sinai, where God first gave them the law. The book of Numbers details the Israelites' 40 years of wanderings in the wilderness as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, then finally to the plains of Moab on the banks of the Jordan River just east of the Promised Land.

The story in chapters 22-24 of Numbers involving Balak and Balaam happened as Israel was encamped in the plains of Moab. Balak was the king of Moab who saw that his small nation is no match against the great number of Israelites. He also heard how they destroyed the Amorites on their way to Canaan. Without hope of military victory, he summoned Balaam, a pagan magician and false prophet, for help.

Balaam came from the land of Mesopotamia, east of Canaan, the land from where the Magi of the Christmas story came. It is also the same place where God revealed himself to Abraham. Since Abraham, Balaam and the Magi all came from the same region, it is possible that this pagan magician also had some knowledge of the God of Israel even as he came from a pagan land. As well, Balaam may have been summoned by Balak because he was the most well-known among all of Mesopotamia's magicians.

Knowing the futility of fighting Israel, Balak wanted Balaam to come and curse Israel. If Israel was cursed by God, maybe Moab could defeat them. Balak offered Balaam a great amount of money if he could do this. However, Balaam was not able to curse Israel; four times, he opened his mouth to curse them, but the Spirit of God overpowered him causing his lips to speak blessings on, instead of curses against Israel. Every human plot against God's people utterly fails.

In a portion of his last oracle in Numbers 24:15-25, Balaam prophesied another blessing to Israel, saying, "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (verse 17). In the following verses, Balaam also foretold of the destruction of Israel's enemies, including the Moabites, Edomites, Amalekites, Kenites, Assyrians and the people of Eber. Historically, the defeat of these enemies spanned many centuries from the conquest of Canaan to the coming of Christ.

Who is this "star of Jacob" and "scepter of Israel" that God promised to Israel? In our study of the text, we will see that God gives the "star" and "scepter" not only to Israel, but ultimately to all his people throughout the ages:

1. **The Star to Light the Darkness**
2. **The Scepter to Rule in Righteousness**
3. **The Star Revealed**
4. **The Scepter Revealed**

### **The Star to Light the Darkness**

The story of Israel is a story of people who frequently walked in darkness. The Scriptures generally picture a contrast between light, representing good, and darkness, representing evil.

Balaam foretold of a “star” out of Jacob. Stars shine with brightness, and were placed by God in the night sky to light the darkness. Darkness is often symbolic of judgment from God when the lights of the sky, the sun, moon and stars, will not give light. Darkness was one of the plagues God sent to Egypt to force Pharaoh to free Israel from slavery (Exod 10:21-22). In God’s judgment of Babylon, Isaiah says, *“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light”* (Isa 13:10). The day of the Lord is described as a dark day, *“The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining”* (Joel 3:15).

Israel under God’s punishment is described as a people walking in darkness. But judgment against God’s people is always followed by a promise of restoration. This is why Balaam foretold of a “star” that would come to give light to a people in darkness: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined* (Isa 9:2). And again, *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you* (Isa 60:1-2).

Already in the Old Testament, the prophets foretold of the restoration, not only of Israel, but of Gentiles as well. God will make his faithful servant *“as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth”* (Isa 49:6). And this light will attract the nations, *“And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”* (Isa. 60:3).

### **The Scepter to Rule in Righteousness**

A crown, a royal robe, and a royal ring are symbols of royalty. In addition, a king also holds a scepter in his hand as a symbol of his power and authority over his people. Thus, Balaam’s prophecy of a “scepter” from Israel is clearly a revelation from God that a king shall arise out of Israel.

Balaam’s words echo the prophecy of Genesis 49:10 about the tribe of Judah, *“The scepter shall not depart from Judah.”* This was fulfilled when David became king and God made a covenant with him, *“And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever”* (2 Sam 7:16). The Lord tells David that he *“sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!”* (Psa 110:2). King David the Scepter of Israel and his descendant will rule in righteousness over his enemies forever.

The prophet Malachi later bridges Balaam’s “star” and “scepter” prophecy: *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings”* (Mal 4:2). The “star of

Jacob," who holds a "scepter of righteousness" (Psa 45:6), is also Malachi's bright "sun of righteousness."

### **The Star Revealed**

In Balaam's prophecy, he sees this "star," "but not now" and "but not near." He says that this "star" will rise, but in a faraway time and place. Centuries will separate Balaam's time from the time of the appearing of the "star." The place of the "star's" rising will also be distant from where Balaam prophesied.

One thousand five hundred years after Balaam's prophecy, we read of a Light that came to the world. All of Isaiah's prophecies about this Light that will rise to shine on Israel and the nations are fulfilled on a dark night in Judea. On that night, Jesus, a descendant of Jacob was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Wise men from Mesopotamia followed The Star of Jacob seeking to worship "the Morning Star" (2 Pet 1:19) who was born. "The Bright Morning Star" (Rev. 22:16) is so bright that the heavenly city will not need a sun or moon or stars because the Star of Jacob shines his light on it (Rev 21:23).

Why was The Star of Jacob born? First, he was born a descendant of Jacob to save both Jews and Gentiles from the darkness of sin and death. He will *"give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death"* (Luke 1:79), and *"the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (John 1:5).

Second, he was born to give his people true knowledge of God, *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:30-32). And this Light *"has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"* (2 Cor 4:6).

Third, he was born to guide his people in walking in the paths of righteousness. Jesus declares to us, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12). He warns his people to walk in this guiding Light while there is still time, *"Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you... While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light"* (John 12:35-36). And Paul reminds God's people who they were before The Star came, *"for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light"* (Eph 5:8).

Are you in the light of the Son of God born to save you from the darkness of sin and death? Do you have the light of Christ who is the only Star who can give you true knowledge? And if you say you are in the light of Christ, do you live your life to glorify God so that others may "see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"?

### **The Scepter Revealed**

Because he died, King David did not sit on his throne and hold his scepter forever. It was his descendant Jesus, born in Bethlehem the city of David, who was the Scepter of Israel in Balaam's prophecy. The writer of Hebrews connects this Scepter to the Son of God, *"But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom'"* (Heb 1:8). The writer is quoting from Psalm 45:6, a psalm describing the majestic coronation of Israel's King.

As the Scepter of Righteousness, Jesus rules in justice and righteousness. When he comes, *“He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”* (Psa 98:9). God *“has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness”* (Acts 17:31). When he returns, the Scepter of Israel will be riding on a horse as a Warrior, and will be called *“Faithful and True,”* and *“in righteousness he judges”* (Rev 19:11). The Scepter will also be called *“King of Kings”* (Rev 19:16), and after he judges the world, he will finally make his vanquished enemies his footstool (Psa 110:1, 2; Heb 1:13).

Do you put your hope in the appearing of The Scepter of Righteousness who has *“laid up for [you] the crown of righteousness”* (2 Tim 4:8)? Or are you one of those who fear his coming because *“your hard and impenitent heart... are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed”* (Rom 2:5)?

## **Conclusion**

A popular Christmas story is that of the coming of the three wise men, or Magi, to worship the baby Jesus born to be our Savior. This story has several parallels – and contrasts – to the story of Balak, Balaam and Israel:

- Jesus himself is the new Israel, the Son of God, The Star and Scepter of the people of God.
- Balak, the evil king of Moab, wanted to destroy Israel; Herod, the evil king of the Jews, wanted to kill the new Israel.
- Balaam, the evil prophet, wanted to curse Israel; the Magi wanted to worship the new Israel.
- Balaam was condemned as a false prophet by The Star (Rev 2:14); the Magi followed the star of the One whom they sought to worship.
- Balaam was later killed by Israel for conspiring with Israel’s enemies (Num 31:8); the Magi escaped from the wicked plan of Herod, the evil king of the Jews.

Balaam prophesied that all of the enemies of The Star and Scepter of Israel will be defeated, not knowing that he himself will be killed by Israel. When Jesus first came 2,000 years ago, he conquered Satan, sin and death, but not yet the rebellious kings of the earth. But when he returns on Judgment Day, he will destroy all his enemies and judge all the nations in righteousness.

This Christmas season, remember a couple of gifts God has given you:

God has given you the righteousness of Christ. Because Christ is The Sun and Scepter of Righteousness, you who have faith in Christ will also be counted as righteous in Christ. And if you have put your trust in Christ, you do not have to fear his coming in judgment!

And since you have Christ’s righteousness, God has also given you a glorious future. Instead of judgment, you will receive your reward. Instead of destruction, you will receive a glorious resurrected body, a body whose glory will be like the glory of the stars in heaven (1 Cor 15:40-41). Then, like Christ the Bright Morning Star, The Sun of Righteousness, you will *“shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”* forever and ever (Matt 13:43). *AMEN.*