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CHAPTER SIX

“PROBLEMS IN THE BALAAM
TRADITION OF JOSHUA 24:9 –10”

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

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VI

PROBLEMS IN THE BALAAM TRADITION OF JOSHUA 24:9–10

The “Book of the Wars of Yahweh” in Numbers 21:14–15 speaks of violence in Moab, but it is not the violence of Israelite warriors. Rather, Yahweh was believed to have utilized the violence of nature to secure Israel’s passage to Pisgah. Following several of the suggestions of Christensen (1974: 359–360) the short poem can be read as follows:¹

The Benefactor came in a storm.
Yea, He came² to the wadis of the Arnon,
He caused the wadis to rush forth.³
He marched (in an) earthquake to destroy Ar.⁴
Then we easily entered the very borders of Moab!⁵

This non-military action is in general agreement with Deut 2:9–29, which speaks of a non-violent, commercial interaction with the Moabites—noted particularly in verses

- 2:9 “And Yahweh said to me, ‘ Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the sons of Lot for a possession.’”
- 2:18–19 “This day you are to pass over the boundary of Moab at Ar; and when you approach the frontier of the sons of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the sons of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.”
- 2:27–29, “Let me (Israel) pass through your (the king of Heshbon) land; I will go only by the road, I will turn aside

neither to the right nor to the left. You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat, and give me water for money, that I may drink; only let me pass through on foot, as the sons of Esau who live in Seir and the Moabites who live in Ar did for me, until I go over the Jordan into the land which Yahweh our God gives to us.”

These verses agree with Jephthah’s rhetorical questions in Judges 11: 25, “Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them?” But they disagree with (1) Josh 24:9, “Then Balak . . . king of Moab arose and fought against Israel and sent and invited Balaam,” and with (2) the violence against Moab anticipated by Balaam in Num 24:17,

דָּרָךְ כּוֹכַב מִיַּעֲקֹב וְקֶם שֶׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל
וּמַחֲזֵן פְּאַתֵי מוֹאָב וְקִרְקַר כָּל-בְּנֵי-שֶׁתַּח

a star shall come forth out of Jacob
and a comet⁶ shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead⁷ of Moab,
and break down all the sons of Sheth.⁸

Nehemiah (13:1–3) reworked the traditions about Balaam and concluded that Balaam had cursed Israel (contrary to Num 23: 8, 11, 25; 24: 8–9, 19), and he asserted that Moab did not sell water to the Israelites (contrary to Deut 2:18–19, 27–29).⁹ Deut 23:3–5, likewise, reflects a reworking of the tradition about Balaam, stating that Balaam had in fact cursed Israel—resulting in the call for Israel’s eternal enmity with Moab.

Moreover, according to Num 31:16 Balaam was responsible for the Israelite treachery against Yahweh (לְמַסְרֵי-מַעַל) (בִּיהוּדָה) at Baal-Peor, and, according to Num 25:1–3, their

“playing the harlot¹⁰ with the daughters of Moab” (וַיִּחַל הָעָם) (לְזָנוֹת אֶל-בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב)—even though Num 24: 25 stated that “Balaam had returned to his place” (i.e., to Pethor, along the Sajur River, near the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw which at one time had been ruled over by the king of Alalakh [Num 22:5]). For this alleged evil Balaam was killed in a battle in which all Midianite males were killed (Num 31:7–20 and Joshua 13:22).

Balaam’s name became a pejorative in 2 Peter 2:15 (“they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing”), Jude 11 (“they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error”), Rev 2:14 (“you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel”), and Pirque Aboth 5:22 (“If he has an evil eye, and a boastful soul and a haughty spirit, he is of the disciples of Balaam the wicked. The disciples of Balaam the wicked inherit Gehenna and go down to the pit of destruction”), associating Balaam with Baalzebub.

An ambiguity in the text in Josh 24:9–10, no doubt, contributed to Balaam’s deprecation in Israelite, Jewish, and Christian traditions. The ambiguity came from the לֹא, which could be either the negative particle לֹא “not” or the emphatic particle לֵא “surely, indeed.”¹¹ With these two definitions of לֹא in focus, and by carefully identifying the antecedents of the suffixes and the subject of the verb וַיִּבְרָךְ in Josh 24:10, the text of 24:9–10 can be read and translated as follows:

וַיִּקְרָם בְּלֶק בֶּן-צְפוּר מִלֶּךְ מוֹאָב וַיִּלְחָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיִּקְרָא לְבַלְעָם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר
לְקַלֵּל אֶתְכֶם: וְלֹא אָבִיתִי לְשִׁמְעַ לְבַלְעָם

וַיִּבְרַךְ בָּרוּךְ אֶתְכֶם וְאַצֵּל אֶתְכֶם מִיָּדוֹ:

Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose
and warred against Israel,
and he sent and called Balaam the son of Beor
to curse you [Israelites].

I [Yahweh] was indeed willing to listen to Balaam,
and he [Balaam] blessed you greatly.
I delivered you out of his [Balak's] hand.¹²

This interpretation resonates well with Num 22:18, לֹא
אֵיכָל לְעֵבֶר אֶת־פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי “I am not able to go beyond
the word of Yahweh my God,” and the following notices:

- Yahweh had declared לֹא תֵאָר אֶת־הָעַם כִּי בָרוּךְ הוּא “you shall not curse the people [of Israel] for he is blessed” (Num 22:12),
- Balaam had promised, “I will bring back word to you as Yahweh speaks to me,” and
- in Num 23:11 Balak charged Balaam with having blessed the Israelites (וַיְהִי בִּרְכַת בָּרוּךְ) instead of cursing them as he had requested and for which he was willing to pay dearly.

Balaam acknowledged that Yahweh was his God (Num 22:18) and that he hears the utterances of God (24:4) and “knows the knowledge of the Most High” (24:16). The Israelites acknowledged that he was in dialogue with Yahweh and had passed the test of obedience to Yahweh given by the angel of Yahweh who had “*sataned*” him (Num 22: 20–35). The prophet Micah (6:4) recognized him favorably.

Josh 24:10 appears to be find its echo in Deut 23:6,

וְלֹא־אָבָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמַע אֶל־בְּלַעַם
וַיִּהְיֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת־הַקְּלָלָה לְבִרְכָה
כִּי אָהַבְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Yahweh your God would not hearken to Balaam;
but Yahweh your God turned the curse
into a blessing for you,
because Yahweh your God loved you.

Although the rule is that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other, there are exceptions when it comes to Hebrew homographs. For example, the *הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה* “the man Moses” of Exo 11:3 is not the equivalent of the *הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה* in Num. 12:3, which should be read as *הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה*, meaning “Moses was made to despair.”¹³ For contextual reasons—such as God’s turning a curse into a blessing—the negative *לֹא* must be retained in Deut 23:6. Thus, the *וְלֹא־אָבָה יְהוָה* of 23:6 is not an echo of the *וְלֹא אָבִיתִי* in Josh 24:10.

Once Balaam was killed in battle by the Israelites whom he had actually blessed, it became necessary for some Israelites to legitimate the killing of a fellow Yahwist. Simply by changing one vowel in the Balaam tradition—the shift from *לֹא* “indeed” to *לֹא* “not”—it was possible to make Yahweh say, “I was *not* willing to listen to Balaam,” implying that something was radically wrong with Balaam.¹⁴ Once it could be claimed that Yahweh was indeed dissatisfied with Balaam, apologists—past and present—were free to deprecate Balaam as a sinner deserving death. Thus, Balaam’s transformation from a “prophet for Yahweh” to an infidel was accomplished by just one vowel change.¹⁵

TEXTUAL VARIANTS IN NUMBERS 24:7

Balaam’s blessing of Israel in Num 24:5–9 includes a very enigmatic phrase in 24:7 which has been translated in radically different ways in the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Peshitta, and the Targum of Onkelos. In the following citations of the verse in the MT and the versions, it will become obvious that (1) the first word of the MT, יִזַּל, was read as the verb נָזַל “to flow” or the verb אָזַל “to go” (with the elision of the א here as in Jer 2:36, where תִּאֲזַלִּי appears for תִּזַּלִּי), and (2) the second word, מַיִם “water” must have been read as מַת or מַתו “a man” (a singular noun as in the names of Methushael “man of God” and Methuselah “man of the sword”) in the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint and the Peshitta.¹⁶

NUM 24:7 MT

יִזַּל-מַיִם מִדִּבְרֵי וְזָרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים
וְיָרֵם יְמֹאֲנֵג מֶלְכוֹ וְתִנְשֵׂא מַלְכָּתוֹ

KJV

He shall pour the water out of his buckets,
and his seed *shall be* in many waters,
and his king shall be higher than Agag,
and his kingdom shall be exalted

NEW JPS TRANSLATION

Their boughs¹⁷ drip with moisture,
Their roots have abundant water.
Their king shall rise above Agag.
Their kingdom shall be exalted.¹⁸

LXX

ἐξελεύσεται ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτοῦ
καὶ κυριεύσει ἐθνῶν πολλῶν
καὶ ὑψωθήσεται ἢ Γωγ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ
καὶ αὐξηθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ

THOMSON'S LXX

There shall come a man from his seed,
And he shall rule over many nations;
And the kingdom greater than Gog shall be raised up,
And his kingdom shall be enlarged.

PESHITTA

ⲙⲁⲛ ⲉⲃⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ
ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ
ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ
ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ

A man shall rise up from his sons
and his offspring by many waters;
he shall be exalted more than Agag the king,
and his kingdom shall be exalted.

VULGATE

*fluet aqua de situla eius
et semen illius erit in aquas multas
tolletur propter Agag rex eius
et auferetur regnum illius.*

DOUAY RHEIMS

Water shall flow out of his bucket,
and his seed shall be in many waters.
For Agag his king shall be removed,
and his kingdom shall be taken away.

TARGUM ONKELOS

יִסְגִי מַלְכָא דִּיתְרַבָּא מִבְּנוֹהֵי
 וַיִּשְׁלוּט בְּעַמְּמִין סְגִיָּין
 וַיִּתְקוֹף מֵאַגַּג מַלְכִּיהָ וְתִינַטַל מַלְכוּתֶיהָ

A king, who will become greater than his sons,
 shall grow great and he shall rule many nations;
 and he will become more powerful than Agag his king;
 and his kingdom will be exalted.

The third word of the MT, מִדְּלָיו, is probably the most enigmatic of all the words in this verse. As pointed in the MT it is a dual form with a 3ms suffix of דְּלָי “bucket” (the cognate of the Arabic دلو (*dalw*) “bucket” [Lane 1867: 908–909] and the Persian دول (*dúl*), which Golius [1669: 280] defined as “*Urna haustoria. Vas ligneum lacti continendo idoneum : aut quo aqua domi servatur & ex quo petitur*”). But, of all the version cited above, only the Vulgate with its *situla eius* “his bucket” approximates the MT דְּלָיו “his two buckets.” It is also noteworthy that the Vulgate’s *et semen illius erit in aquas multas*, “and his seed shall be in many waters,” matches perfectly the MT וַיִּזְרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים.

In contrast to the Vulgate’s approximation of the MT, the Septuagint had a different *Vorlage*. The Greek ἐξελεύσεται ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτοῦ, “there shall come a man out of his seed,” reflects a Hebrew text which read יִזְל מִן זֶרְעוֹ. This suggests that the third and fourth words of the MT, מִדְּלָיו וַיִּזְרְעוּ, became transposed in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Septuagint. If so, the καὶ κυριεύσει ἐθνῶν πολλῶν, “and he shall rule over many nations,” corresponds

to the MT **וַיִּדְרֹל בְּאֵמִים רַבִּים**... **מִדְּלָיו**, which must have appeared in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the translators as **וַיִּדְרֹל בְּאֵמִים רַבִּים**.¹⁹ At first glance the translation of **מִדְּלָיו** by *κυριεύω* “to rule over” seems unlikely, for the **דל** would seem to be restricted to the verbs **דָּלָה** “to draw (water)” or **דָּלַל** “to hang, be low, to languish” and the nouns **דֶּלֶת/דְּלָה/דֶּלֶת** “door,” **דֵּלִי** “bucket,” **דְּלִית** “branch,” or the adjective **דָּל** “poor, weak.” But the hollow verb **דָּוַל** needs to be restored in the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew. It is the cognate of the Arabic **دال/دول** (*dûl/ dâla*) which in form IV means “to give someone ascendancy or superiority, to make victorious, to grant victory, to let someone triumph”—with the noun **دولة** (*dawlat^{um}*) meaning “a turn or change of fortune from bad to good, a change to predominance, mastery, or victory” (Lane 1867: 934–935). Castell (1669: 674) defined this cognate as “*fortuna mutatio, conversio temporis, ac fortunæ : pec infelicitate, prosperitas : aut prim. in pugna, victoria.*” In post-classical times the Arabic noun came to signify “a monarchy, a dynasty, or an empire” (Wehr 1979: 348–349). The Septuagint translators were obviously aware of this rare Hebrew stem when they translated the **דל** of MT **מִדְּלָיו** by *κυριεύω*.²⁰

One other variant in the Septuagint of Num 24:7 requires comment. It is the reading of Gog for Agog. The Greek phrase **ὕψωθήσεται ἢ Γωγ**, “he shall be raised up (more) than Gog,” should probably be read—with the reduplication of the **η** which was lost by haplography—as **ὕψωθήσεται ἢ ἠγωγ** (or **Ἡ ἩΓΩΓ**), “he shall be raised up (more) than Agog.” The variation would shift from the different *names* Gog and Agog to simply a different *spelling* of the one name: Agog or Ēgōg.

Although Gray (1903: 365) rightly concluded with reference to Num 24:7 that the “MT. must be corrupt,” he was wrong in his conclusion that “**Ⓔ** is unfortunately paraphrastic . . . and its evidence in consequence less certain with regard to the original.” Gray’s conjecture that the “*ἄνθρωπος* is probably a paraphrase for *water* and *σέριματος* for *bucket*” is less than convincing.²¹

The Hebrew *Vorlage* used by the Septuagint translators can be reconstructed as

יֵאָזֵל מִתּוֹ מִן זְרַעוֹ וַיִּדּוֹל בְּאֲמִים רַבִּים
וַיֵּרָם מֵאַגַּג מְלָכּוֹ וְתַנְשֵׂא מְלָכְתּוֹ

A man from his (Jacob’s) seed shall go forth,
and he (Jacob) shall become superior
by means of many tribes;
and his (Israel’s) king shall be higher than Agag,
and his (Israel’s) kingdom shall be exalted.

This reconstruction, with support from the Peshitta, is far more likely to reflect the original Hebrew text than Cheyne’s emendation (1899: 401) of the MT **וַיִּלְ-בְּמִים מִדְּלִיּוֹ** to **וַיִּלְ-בְּמִים מִחִילוֹ** “Let people tremble at his might,” which was adopted by Gray (1903: 360). As reconstructed here, 24:7 expresses the same idea as that found in 23:10a, “Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth of Israel?” The “reversal of fortune” which is expressed by **וַיִּדּוֹל** appears in 24:20, “Amalek was the first of the nations, but in the end he shall come to destruction.” Adoption of the reconstructed *Vorlage* given above makes gratuitous all attempts to wrench some meaning from the MT with its “water flows from his two buckets” and “his seed is in many waters.”

The Peshitta followed the Septuagint in reading **מתו/מת** “man” in lieu of the MT **מַיִם** “water.” But the MT **מִדְּלִיּוֹ** “from his two buckets” became **מִבְּנֵי** “from his sons” in Syriac. Once the prepositional **מִ** and the possessive suffix **וֹ** of the MT **מִדְּלִיּוֹ** were removed, the remaining **דְּלִי** was obviously inverted (or read from left to right) to become **יֶלֶד** “child, boy, son.” The balance of 24:7 in the Peshitta follows the MT quite closely, with all of its ambiguity.

The Septuagint translators were not the only ones aware of the rare Hebrew root **הָיַל** “to reverse one’s fortune, to become prosperous, to rule over, etc.” The translators of Targum Onkelos were seemingly aware of the multiple meanings of **הָיַל**, which would account for the following five Aramaic translations of this one Hebrew word:

- (1) **יִסְגִּי** “he will become great,” which reflects the idea of “good fortune, prosperity, and superiority coming to someone”;
- (2) **יִתְרַבָּא** “he shall grow great,” which also reflects the idea of “the transition of wealth, blessing, and good to someone”;
- (3) **מְלָכָא** “the king,” which mirrors the idea of “monarchy, mastery, and becoming victorious”;
- (4) **יִשְׁלוּט** “he will rule,” which also mirrors the idea of “monarchy and mastery”; and
- (5) the **מִבְּנֵי** “from his sons” matched the Peshitta in translating the MT **מִדְּלִיּוֹ** as though the text were **מִיֶּלְדֵי**.

Although Onkelos has these five different interpretations of

the MT **מַדְלִיּוֹ**, it has nothing for the MT **וַיִּזְרְעוּ . . . יַגְל־מִים**. But in the second half of 24:7 the Targum reflects the MT perfectly.

The unusual use of **מַתְוִי** / **מַתְוִי** in the singular and the use of the *hapax legomenon* **דַּגְלִל** can be explained by Balaam's speaking in a dialect which did not conform completely to the lexical options of the Judean Hebrew dialect.²² The fact that the translators of the Septuagint and Targum Onkelos recognized Balaam's dialectal Hebrew highlights the limitations of later lexicographers, translators, and exegetes who did not recognize dialectal Hebrew.

THE STAR AND COMET IN NUMBERS 24:17

Milgrom (1989: 207–208), in his commentary on *Numbers* mentioned that Alexander Yannai (103–76 B.C.E.) had imprinted a star on some of his coins to symbolize that *he* was the conquering star that rose from Jacob. In ancient Near Eastern mythology, the gods Resheph, Nergal, and Apollo direct shooting stars or comets to destroy their enemies.

He indicated that **כּוֹכַב** can also mean a “host,” like its Arabic cognate **كوكب** (*kawkab^m*) “star, multitude, host [of an army].” (Lane [1885: 2623] noted that this Arabic quadrilateral stem “is an arabicized word, from the Hebrew **כּוֹכַב**; and that ignorance of its being so caused the Arabs to dispute respecting its formation [whether the **ו** (ו) or the **כ** (כ) was the anomalous fourth radical].) Lane's definitions include “constellation, chief, lord, prince,” as well as “mass, bulk [of an army].”

Milgrom concluded that שֵׁבֶט “scepter, ruler, tribe” can also mean “comet, meteor,” based on the Akkadian cognate *šibtu* and Talmudic Aramaic, reflecting the same suggestion made by Staerk (1922: 28, 65) and Gemser (1924: 301), who are cited in KBS (1994: vol. 4: 1389). Staerk stated, “Der Apokalyptiker hat Num 24₁₇ nicht שבט im Sinne von שֵׁבֶט ‘Szepter’ gelesen, wie noch immer viele Exegeten, sondern = שְׁבִיט (שְׁבִיט) ‘Stern, Komet’, und so muß übersetzt werden.” In full agreement Gemser concluded “. . . glaube ich, daß Staerk im allgemeinen Recht hat, und daß man speziell in Num 27₁₇ dieses Wort nicht als ‘Stab’, sondern als ‘Komet’ aufzufassen hat.” Milgrom reinforced his argument by a citation from a stela of Thutmose III (1504–1450 B.C.E.), “where the god Amen-Re proclaimed: I let them see your majesty as a shooting star, that scatters fire as it sheds its flame.”

The passage from the Babylonian Talmud which Gemser quoted (in German) and Milgrom referred to is *Berakôt* 58^b. It reads as follows:

מאי זיקין אמר שמואל ככבא דשביט ואמר שמואל
 נהירי לי שבילי ושמיא כשבילי דנהרדעא
 לבר מככבא דשבת דל ידענא מאי
 (Goldschmidt 1933: 216)

What are זיקין? Samuel said: A comet. Samuel also said:
 I am familiar with the paths of heaven
 as with the streets of Neharde^a,
 with the exception of the comet about which I am ignorant.
 (Simon and Epstein 1948: 361)

Rabbi Samuel’s knowledge that זיקין “comets” meant שְׁבִיט reflects his excellent knowledge of Aramaic/

Hebrew vocabulary; and lexicographers since Rabbi Samuel have had no problem with זיק. (Jastrow [1903: 395] defined it as “sparks, burning arrows, meteors, shooting stars [or comet]”; and Payne Smith [1903: 115] has “shooting star” for the Syriac زيق [zīqā]).

But the שביט in Rabbi Samuel’s answer was a different matter. As recognized by Staerk, Gemser, and Milgrom, this שביט is *not* the שבט meaning “scepter, ruler, tribe,” nor is it related to Šabaṭu, a Babylonian loanword, for the eleventh month of the Jewish calendar. Rather it is the cognate of the Arabic سبط (*sabiṭ/sabaṭ*) and سباطة (*sibâṭat/sûbâṭat*), all meaning “lank, loose, long hair” (Lane 1872: 1294; Wehr 1979: 458; Hava 1915: 306–307). Thus, Rabbi Samuel’s ככבא דשביט meant literally “a star having long hair,” similar to the well attested use in Arabic of نجم ذو ذنب (*najmu ḏu ḏanab*) “a star having a tail.” (Levy [1924: 496] cited the Arabic سبط (*sabiṭ/sabaṭ*) but gave no definition for it—although he noted for ככבא דשביט “*der Planet Schebit. Raschi erklärt das W. vom vorg שביט: der Stern, dessen Schweif wei ein Stab herabhängt.*”)

Support for interpreting ככבא דשביט as “a star having long hair” comes from the analogous origin of the English word “comet.” It is derived from the Greek κομή/κομήτης—defined by Liddell and Scott (1966: 975) as (a) “hair/long hair,” (b) foliage, and (c) the luminous tail of a comet.” *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2000 CD Version, s. v.) includes the following notice.

This figurative name [comet] is recorded first in the works of Aristotle, in which he uses *komē*, the Greek word for “hair of the head,” to mean “luminous tail of a comet.” Aristotle then uses the derived word *komtēs*, “wearing long

hair,” as a noun meaning “comet.” The Greek word was adopted into Latin as *comētēs*, which was refashioned in Late Latin and given the form *comēta*, furnishing Old English with *comēta*, the earliest English ancestor of our word *comet*.

Thus, Rabbi Samuel’s explanation that זיקין “comets” means ככבא דשביט “a star having lank hair” finds its parallel in the Greek/English κομήτης/*comet* “a star having long hair.” Consequently, another definition of שבת—along with its cognate سبط (*sabit/sabaṭ*) “long loose hair”—needs to be restored to the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew and post-biblical Aramaic.

As for the nominal parallelism of “star” and “scepter” Levine (2000: 190, 199–201), like Staerk, Gemser, and Milgrom (cited above), referred to *Berakot* 58^b and recognized that

Some commentators have taken their cue from *kôkăb* “star,” and sought a parallel meaning for *šēbet*, “the name of a star,” referring to a meteor or shooting star that leaves a “tail” in its wake, having the appearance of a staff or scepter (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakôt* 58^b; Levy IV, 496, s.v. *šebîṭ*), extending the usual meaning of the Hebrew *šēbet*.

But as already noted, it is not a matter of an “extended meaning” of שבת “staff” becoming also שבת “comet.” It was a matter of homographs: two completely different stems—one (“long, lank [hair]”) having an Arabic cognate and the other (“scepter”) having no Arabic cognate, but having the Akkadian cognate *šibtu* and the Egyptian cognate *ša-ba-ṭ* (cited by Albright, 1934: 39).

Levine translated the second couplet of Num 24: 17 as, “A ‘star’ marches forth from Jacob; a meteor rises from Israel.” By placing quotation marks around the word “star,” Levine highlighted his conclusion that the celestial imagery of the “star” was an applied metaphor, “a way of referring to a hero, or victorious king.” For him MT כֹּכַב מִיַּעֲקֹב יֵרֶדְךָ could mean, “A ‘star’ exercises sovereignty in Israel.” Likewise, he suggested that שֶׁבֶט “meteor,” had a “figurative connotation of ‘sovereign, head,’ namely, one who bears a scepter,” and that שֶׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל could mean “A sovereign rises to power from Israel” or “A ‘star’ exercises sovereignty in Israel”—as proposed by some interpreters on the basis of the Ugaritic cognate *drkt* “dominion.” However, Levine retained the traditional meaning of יֵרֶדְךָ “to tread, to march forth” but opted to follow Rabbi Samuel’s definition and read שֶׁבֶט as “meteor.” Levine’s conclusion is especially noteworthy. He stated

It is likely, however, that we have multilayered meanings, and that two dimensions of metaphor are expressed in this verse. Underlying the *applied metaphor* is *celestial imagery*. . . . Although the translation given here remains faithful to this *celestial imagery*, the *applied metaphor* should be acknowledged as essential for understanding the full thrust of the verse. (Italics added.)²³

NOTES

1. Levine (2000: 93) rejected Chistensen's emendations as excessive and his interpretation for its being forced "into an interpretative mold." Levine conjectured, "One wonders if Waheb . . . might not, after all, be symbolic or allegorical. . . [which] could be taken to mean 'gift, grant,'" acknowledging at the same time that "as a typonym, Waheb remains unidentified." Levine argued, "Generally, Numbers 21 does not speak of theophany, or the acts of YHWH, but of the Israelite advance," therefore, for Levine, this poetic fragment from the "Chronicles of the Wars of YHWH" should be interpreted simply as a topographic note to fit its prose context. He read the MT **אָתְּ** and **וְאֵת** as prepositions (and added a third **אָתְּ**) and translated

At Waheb in Suphah, and at the wadis;
[At] the Arnon and the cataract of the wadis.
Where it bends to the settlement of Ar,
and leans toward the boundary of Moab.

2. Christensen is correct in identifying the MT **וְאֵת** with **אָתְּהָ** "to come," but he is incorrect in deleting the **הָ** of **הַנְּחָלִים**. The words have been misdivided. The **הָ** goes with the preceding **אָתְּ** as the vowel letter *ô* (see Cross and Freedman 1952: 57). This **אָתְּהָ** is the infinitive absolute having the force of a finite verb (see GKC 75ⁿ and 113^y, McDaniel 1968b: 208–210).

3. Christensen emended MT **וְאֵשֶׁר** to read **אֵשֶׁר** "he marched through." But the emendation is unnecessary. The noun **שׁוּר** "torrent" may also occur in Isa 13:6, **כַּשֶּׁר מִשְׁרֵי יְבוּא**, "(the day of Yahweh) shall come like a raging torrent." Another possibility is the Amorite and South Arabic cognate *asad/asd* "warrior" and the denominative verb, "to fight" (see Huffmon, 1965: 169; P. D. Miller, 1973: 79).

4. Christensen is correct in reading MT אָשַׁר as the verb “to march forth.” But his proposal to delete the word is unnecessary since the verb אָשַׁד need not be emended to אָשַׁר, nor does the text have a redundant use of אָשַׁר “to march forth.” The MT נָמָה is better read as an adverbial accusative, either the participle “quaking” or the noun “(earth) quake,” from the biliteral base נַמ, with probable by-forms נוּמ, נַמַּט, נַמָּה, like stems נָך and נָך (GKC^a 77, Dahood, 1968: 368). Here the *Hiph[‘]il* לְשַׁבֵּת “to destroy” reflects the elision of the ה (GKC 53^q), like the לְשַׁבִּית in Amos 8:4.

5. Christensen follows a traditional reading of this line. The proposal here calls for reading נִשְׁעַן as the energetic *Qal* 1cpl imperfect of שׁוּע, a cognate of Arabic سوغ “to enter easily” (Lane 1872: 1468b, 1469a, especially noticing the quotation سغ في الارض ما وجدت مساغا “Enter the land while thou findest a place of entrance”). For the vocalization of the energetic, see Gordon 1965: 11; Dahood 1965: 21; 1970: 377–378; McDaniel 1968b: 205–206; and Blommerde 1969: 15. The ל is an emphatic ל, and this occurrence should be added to the list cited by Dahood 1965: 22; 1970: 406–407; McDaniel 1968b: 206–208; and Blommerde 1969: 31. שׁוּע is possibly attested in Ezek 23:23, where MT פְּקוֹד וְשׁוּע וְקוּע, traditionally read as place names, “Pekod, and Shoa and Koa,” could better be read: פְּקוֹד יְשׁוּעוּ קוּע “attacking (see Isa 26:14) they will easily enter the plain,” reading an infinitive absolute פְּקוֹד, used with the *yqtl* of שׁוּע, followed by the adverbial accusative קוּע, which is related to Arabic قاع “an even place, a depressed plain” (Lane 1893: 2994).

6. See below, pages 74–77.

7. The versions took the MT פְּאַתָּי “corners” in a metaphorical sense meaning “leaders.” The Septuagint reads καὶ ἀναστῆσεται

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ἄνθρωπος ἐξ Ἰσραηλ καὶ θραύσει τοὺς ἀρχηγοὺς Μωαβ, “a man shall spring out of Israel and shall crush the princes of Moab.” Similarly, the Vulgate has *et consurget virga de Israhel et percuetiet duces Moab* “and the scepter/rod of Israel shall rise up and strike the leaders of Moab.” The Peshitta’s **ܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܝܫܪܐܝܝܠ ܕܡܘܒܐܝܢܐ** (*ganbura³ dēmo³ab*) and the Targum’s **וְבַרְבֵּי מוֹאָב** also interpreted it as “leaders.”

8. Here Seth equals the Aramean Shutu/Suti, the *Swtw* mentioned in the Execration texts. (See Albright, 1944: 207–233.) This cannot be the Seth of Gen 4:25 or Luke 3:38. Note that Targum Onkelos reads **בְּרֵי אֲיִנְשָׁא** “sons of man” for the MT **בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל**. This conflict may be a reference to Saul’s war with Moab (I Sam 14:47) or David’s conquest of Moab (II Sam 8:2).

9. This revisionism by Nehemiah supported the “divorce of the Gentiles” sponsored by Ezra (Ezra 9:10–10:44).

10. As is obvious from Num 25:2, “they [the Moabites] invited the people [of Israel] to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people [of Israel] ate and bowed down to their [Moabite] gods,” the sin of Israel had more to do with *idolatry* than *harlotry*. The Hebrew **זָנָה** may be the verb “to fornicate,” but it is also a homograph for the verb “to commit idolatry,” as evidenced by the Arabic cognate **زُون** (*zûn*) “an idol, and anything taken as a deity and worshiped beside God, . . . a place in which idols are collected and set up” (Lane, 1867: 1273).

11. The emphatic **לָא** is the cognate of Ugaritic *l* (Gordon, 1965: 76, 425 [#1339]) and the Arabic **ل** (*la*) “verily” (Lane 1893:3006). See also note 5, above.

12. Woudstra (1981: 348) identified Balaam as the antecedent of the 3ms suffix of the מִיָּדוֹ “from his hand” in Josh 24:10. Howard (1998: 431) agreed that God had delivered Israel from Balaam, stating, “Strictly speaking, Balaam was only passing on Balak’s request of him, but the context suggests fairly strongly that Balaam’s inclinations were in accord with Balak’s desires.” However, Boling (1982: 536) rightly identified Balak as the antecedent of the suffix on מִיָּדוֹ.

13. See Chapter 7, “Moses was Made to Despair,” in my book, *Clarifying Baffling Biblical Passages*, available on the internet at <http://daniel.eastern.edu/seminary/tmcdaniel/>.

14. Howard (1998: 431, note 65) stated, “When God said that he was not willing to listen to Balaam (v. 10) he was referring to Balaam’s implicit request that God should put a curse on Israel.”

15. Levine (2000: 240) recognized that

One can only speculate on the motivation for the denigration of a seer who was so highly praised by Micah and celebrated in the Torah tradition of the Balaam Pericope. This trend probably had something to do with the changing attitude toward the Midianites in particular, or toward the Transjordanian people, in general; . . . There is also the matter of the changing attitudes toward the Transjordanian Israelites, themselves, in biblical literature.”

16. For the confusion of the נ and the ת, see Delitzsch, 1920: 118 §129^b.

17. Reading הַלְיֹתָיו or הַלְיֹתָם for the MT מִדְּלֵיוֹ, the New JPS translation shifts from a water motif to arboreal imagery, which is followed by Levine’s paraphrase (2000: 189), “Water drips from his boughs; his seed grows near plentiful water.” Levine’s com-

mentary on “The Balaam Pericope” covers 103 pages (plus 34 pages on the Deir °Alla Inscription), but only 11 lines are given to the enigmatic first stitch of this verse, with no mention of any of the variants in the versions.

18. The NIV, NIB, and NLT also gratuitously render the four singular suffixes referring to Jacob/Israel as plurals, e.g., “Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water. Their king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be exalted.”

19. On the confusion of וי and מ, see Delitzsch, 1920: 120 §132^c and 132^e. On the absence of an נ, see GKC § 19^k 68^{h,k} and note the variants ותאזרני and ותזרני in the parallel texts of Ps 18:40 and 2 Sam 22:40. In 11QpaleoLev (Freedman and Matthews 1985: 45–46, 80) וירת appears for ויראת in Lev 25:36, חטתיכם for חטאתיכם in Lev 26:18, and תאבו for תבו in Lev 26:21. See also Delitzsch 1920: 21–22, §14^{a-c}. The masculine plural אֲנִים (rather than אֲנֹת) appears also in Psa 117:1.

20. Compare Levine’s statement (2000: 193), made with reference to identifying שֶׁתָּם “opened” (Num 24:3,16) with the rare שֶׁתָּם of Talmudic Aramaic and Rabbinic Hebrew,

. . . it is sound method to factor in a rare verb, and at that, one known only from late Hebrew, in attempting to fathom the meaning of Early Hebrew poetry. This is because the diction of the Balaam poem is so unusual that one would expect to find in them exceptional vocabulary, including *hapax legomena*.

21. Compare Ashley (1993: 493) who concurred with Gray that the Septuagint is of little help in restoring what is patently a corrupt Hebrew text.

22. See note 19, above. One Jewish tradition states that the Hebrew spoken by Balaam's ass was better than the Hebrew spoken by Balaam himself. For text and bibliography, see Ginzberg, 1968, Vol. 3: 365 and Vol. 6: 128, note 746.

23. My only disagreement with Levine's exegesis is his translating the **אֲדַרְכִּי נַפְשִׁי** of Judg 5:21 as "my body marches powerfully," used in support of his conclusion that the verb **דָּרַךְ** need not be identified with the Ugaritic cognate *drkt* "dominion." When **נַפֶּשׁ** means "body" (as in Lev 21:11, Num 6:6, and Hag 2:13) it generally refers to a "dead body" (i.e., **נַפֶּשׁ מֵת**). For an entirely different interpretation of Judges 5:21, see McDaniel 1983: 230–231 or <http://daniel.eastern.edu/seminary/tmcdaniel/Deborah.pdf> (194).