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THE ORACLES OF BALAAM AND THE BANNERS OF ISRAEL

Robert S. McIvor

A text often becomes clearer when the context is considered and this is especially true for the Oracles of Balaam and the unusual circumstances in which Balaam spoke. The people of Israel under Moses were passing through Moab on their way to the land of promise. The king of Moab felt threatened and it is possible he feared they might take up permanent residence in his country. So he invited Balaam to come to Moab to curse Israel. On three occasions, the king escorted Balaam to different levels of a mountain in Moab called Nebo that provided a panoramic view of the Israelite camp. As Balaam prepared to speak, we are told he was looking out over the Israelite encampment stretched out in the valley below (Numbers 24:2). On all three occasions, he blessed Israel.

THE FOUR BANNERS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

The standards or banners of ancient Israel have been investigated many times by biblical scholars including Lange (1879), Winterbotham (1909) and Binns (1927). Several astronomers have also researched the subject and have come to the same conclusions. Isaac Newton (1733) wrote: "The people of Israel in the wilderness encamped around the tabernacle and on the east side with three tribes under the banner of Judah, on the west were three tribes under the banner of Ephraim, and on the south were three tribes under the banner of Reuben, and on the north were three tribes under the banner of Dan. And the standard of Judah was a Lion, that of Ephraim an Ox, that of Reuben a Man, and that of Dan an Eagle, as the Jews affirm."

The four standards depicted a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. Figure 1 is a diagram illustrating the arrangement of the twelve tribes and the positions of the standards in the camp. A similar diagram appears in the *Mysteries of the Bible* published by Readers Digest (1988).

FOUR CONSTELLATIONS

Astronomer R.H.Allen (1899) has identified the same four figures as Newton for the banners but he adds the significant information that these figures were associated with four constellations. The standard of Judah was a lion associated with the constellation of Leo. Ephraim's was an ox or bull, the constellation of Taurus. Reuben's was a man, the constellation of Aquarius. And Dan's was an eagle, the constellation of Aquila.

Astronomer E.W. Maunder (1908) is firm in his conclusions. "There is strong and harmonious tradition as to the character of the devices borne on the standards carried by the four divisions of the host in the march through the wilderness." He describes each banner figure in more detail and confirms that each figure was also a constellation figure. The banner of Judah was a lion for Leo; Ephraim's was an ox with prominent horns for Taurus; Reuben's was a man with water pots for Aquarius; and Dan's was an eagle with a serpent in its talons for Aquila. Maunder also lists relevant biblical references about these four tribes. In Genesis 49, Jacob compares Judah to "a lion" and Dan to "a serpent" and describes Reuben as "unstable as water". In Deuteronomy 33, Moses says concerning the tribe of Ephraim that "his horns are the horns of the wild ox."

The military standards of long ago were often associated with the heavens in some way. The most dramatic example comes from China where *Chi-you* is named as commander of a vast army around 2500BC and he leads his forces into battle under a distinctive banner with an unmistakable celestial connection. "The Banner of *Chi-you* resembles a comet" (Xi, 1984). A comet with a sweeping tail is a great motif for an advancing army, relentless and unstoppable. And in ancient Rome, legions fought under an *aquila* standard that was associated with the constellation of Aquila. Another Roman banner of the second century AD consisted of a windsock of silken material that filled with air to form the silver head and gaping jaws of a dragon with a huge tail flowing behind. It was called a *draco* banner and presented a terrifying spectacle to opposing forces. It copied the dragon figure of the constellation of Draco in the northern skies. And half a world away from Rome, the Inca marched their armies to

victory throughout Peru under an image of the sun made of pure gold.

ASTRONOMICAL ASSOCIATIONS

There are astronomical associations in much of Balaam's story. He comes from "beyond the Euphrates" and has an interest in stars. The science of astronomy began in Mesopotamia before 2000BC when sky observers imposed order on the stars by inventing constellation figures. Next, Balaam erects seven altars as he prepares for his ceremony which suggests he offered sacrifices to the sun and the moon and the five planets that were known at that time, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Furthermore, he performs this ritual on mount Nebo, a name meaning Mercury and evidently an ideal location for viewing the heavens.

Three times Balaam was taken to different elevations on mount Nebo and all three are associated with sky observations and worship. The first level is called "the high places of Baal" (Numbers 22:41), where the Baalim or "lords" of the sky were observed. The second elevation is called the Field of Zophim (Numbers 23:14), literally the field of the watchers, apparently sky watchers. And the top of mount Nebo is called Peor (Numbers 23:28) where the Moabites observed and worshipped their god Chemosh. The name literally translates as "Fire" and has been variously identified as Venus or Saturn. Later writers would accuse the Moabites of worshipping "the host of heaven" (Amos 5:25-26, Acts 7:42-43). And finally, of course, the most explicit astronomical association in Balaam's story is his reference to the star during his final oracle.

BALAAM'S ORACLES

The figures of the four banners of ancient Israel illuminate the descriptions in Balaam's Oracles. Referring to Israel, Balaam says "he shall pour the water from his buckets" (Numbers 24:7, KJV). This curious expression has baffled many readers including professor William Albright (1944), a world-renowned scholar and archaeologist, who candidly admits he "cannot explain this line" and he refers to the commentators with the remark that "none of them are happy" about its meaning either. However, the reference loses

much of its obscurity when we recall that the banner of Reuben depicted a man pouring water from water-pots representing the constellation of Aquarius. In ancient times in Mesopotamia and Egypt the constellation of Aquarius was depicted as a man pouring water from two pots (Figure 2). The Hebrew for “buckets” in Numbers 24:7 is dual (not single or plural) and Balaam’s actual words were therefore “he shall pour the water from his *two* buckets”. This short phrase succinctly describes the banner of Reuben as well as the constellation of Aquarius. Evidently, Balaam was staring at the banner of Reuben when he uttered these words.

Balaam then compared Israel to an ox with prominent horns (Numbers 24:8 NEB, RSV “a wild ox” but definitely *not* the “unicorn” in KJV) and later to a lion (Numbers 24:9). These are accurate descriptions of the banners of Ephraim and Judah. The pattern of Balaam’s behaviour is clear: he fixed his gaze on three standards in succession during his oracles. First it was the banner of Reuben, then Ephraim, and then Judah. Only one banner remained.

THE STAR ORACLE

Balaam prepared to deliver his final Oracle and set his gaze on Israel for the last time. But he does not describe a banner as he had done earlier. Instead, he becomes conscious that his next Oracle pertains to future events. The expression “the last days” is often a reference to the era of the Messiah. The Spirit of God rests upon him and for a brief period he experiences an inner vision. His eyes remain open. In his trance, he breaks into ecstatic prophecy concerning a star that would accompany a future ruler of Israel (Numbers 24:17):

“I shall see him but not now

I shall behold him but not nigh

There shall come a Star out of Jacob

And a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.”

In this Oracle, Balaam cannot be referring to corporate Israel as he had done in earlier Oracles for he speaks here of an individual he has

not yet seen and whose coming is still future. He is not Israel, he is a son of Israel. He comes “out of” Israel with the right to rule over Israel. A star will appear when he appears.

As Balaam spoke concerning the star, he must have been staring at the banner of Dan. He had already viewed the other three and only the Eagle banner of Dan remained. It is interesting that the commentaries in the Targums also indicate that he was staring at the banner of Dan during his final Oracle. Balaam delivered his Oracle concerning the Star as he gazed at the Eagle banner of Dan that was associated with the constellation of Aquila.

THE STAR OF MESSIAH

In an earlier study in 2002, we assembled a series of quotations from the Early Church Fathers from Justin Martyr around 150 to Jerome around 400 to the effect that the Magi recognized the Star of Messiah through the Oracles of Balaam. And a painting in one of the catacombs in Rome illustrates this by showing four Magi listening to the Oracles of Balaam being read from the Torah (Photo 1). The Magi had easy access to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in Alexandria in the third century BC. They would have identified the four banners without difficulty along with the four constellations associated with them. They would have come to the realization that Balaam’s gaze was fixed on the Eagle banner of Dan as he spoke of the Star that would appear with the Ruler who was yet to come. They may well have inferred that the Star of Messiah should be expected to appear in the constellation of Aquila. This study shows that the text supports this interpretation. There may be additional support for this idea in the earliest painting of the Star of Bethlehem.

THE PRISCILLA CATACOMB PAINTING

The earliest painting of the Star of the Magi is a fresco painting in the Priscilla catacomb in Rome (Photo 2). It is usually dated to around 150. It is really two paintings in one, at right angles to each other. This arrangement is peculiar and is not repeated in any of the other paintings in the Catacombs. No one has ever inquired why two

paintings would overlap in this manner.

One painting shows Jesus as the Good Shepherd caring for his sheep among olive trees. The other painting is the Nativity scene which has faded over time but still preserves a wealth of detail. A man stands in front of a mother who is seated and nursing her newborn. The baby seems startled by the presence of the stranger and we can see he is an astronomer pointing skyward to a brilliant star overhead. In his left hand, we can make out the circular outline of a scroll which is probably the Torah with the Oracles of Balaam. The man in the painting represents Balaam but he also represents one of the Magi guided by Balaam's Oracles to recognize the Star of Messiah when he visited Mary and her newborn son.

In 1980, an American art teacher by the name of Carolyn Murphy Beehler visited the Priscilla catacomb and she offered a new perspective on the Nativity scene. She was fascinated by this strange composition of two paintings at right angles to each other. She came to suspect that the "olives" in the background are not olives at all but stars deliberately disguised to avoid Roman censure and she thought these stars really belonged to the Nativity scene.

With the help of astronomer Dorrit Hoffleit of Yale University, she proposed identifications for the dotted star patterns including the suggestion that the astronomer in the nativity scene is pointing to a brilliant star in the constellation of Aquila (Diagram 1). She thought the brilliant star was a nova, which is an opinion shared by many astronomers. A nova is a star that suddenly erupts in brilliance, sometimes startling brilliance, and appears at a sky location where no star was visible before. Her articles have been published in several astronomy magazines in the United States. Her interpretation of the catacomb painting coincides remarkably well with my interpretation of Balaam's Oracles.

TWO CLUES CONCERNING THE STAR

We now have two clues for the possible sky position of the Star that caught the attention of the Magi in Matthew's story. The first clue from the Oracles of Balaam hints that the Star of Messiah was expected to appear in the constellation of Aquila. And the second

clue from the Priscilla catacomb points to the constellation of Aquila as the sky area where the actual Star appeared about the time of Christ's birth.

This research achieves two significant goals. It severs the Star from the hocus pocus of astrology. There is no need for astrology. The Star of Messiah could have been recognized by the Magi through Messianic prophecy as a nova in Aquila. Just as important, this investigation narrows the search for the Star to one constellation. The constellation of Aquila covers about two percent of the total sky, which means we have eliminated ninety-eight percent of the sky as irrelevant to our quest. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of stars are stable stars like our sun. All of them can be eliminated from our search for we are not looking for a stable star. Quite the contrary, we are looking for an unstable star, one that exploded in a blaze of brilliance two thousand years ago.

These two lines of evidence are inadequate in themselves to make the case for a nova in Aquila as the Star of the Magi. But hopefully in a future article, we can submit contemporary records of China and Korea along with other evidence from across Europe for an unusual star appearance in Aquila around the time of Christ's birth. In the present article, we have made a start. We have removed the need for astrology and we have narrowed the relevant sky area to one constellation. It is a promising beginning ...

FIGURE 1. The 12 tribes encamped around the tabernacle and the four standards were positioned close to the four main tribes.

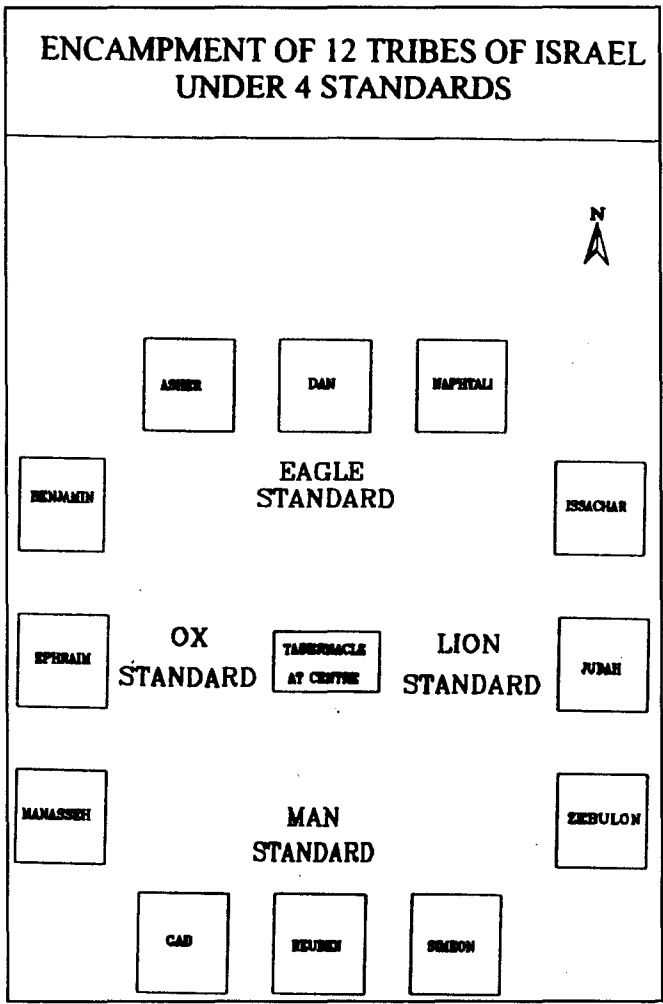


FIGURE 2. The four constellations

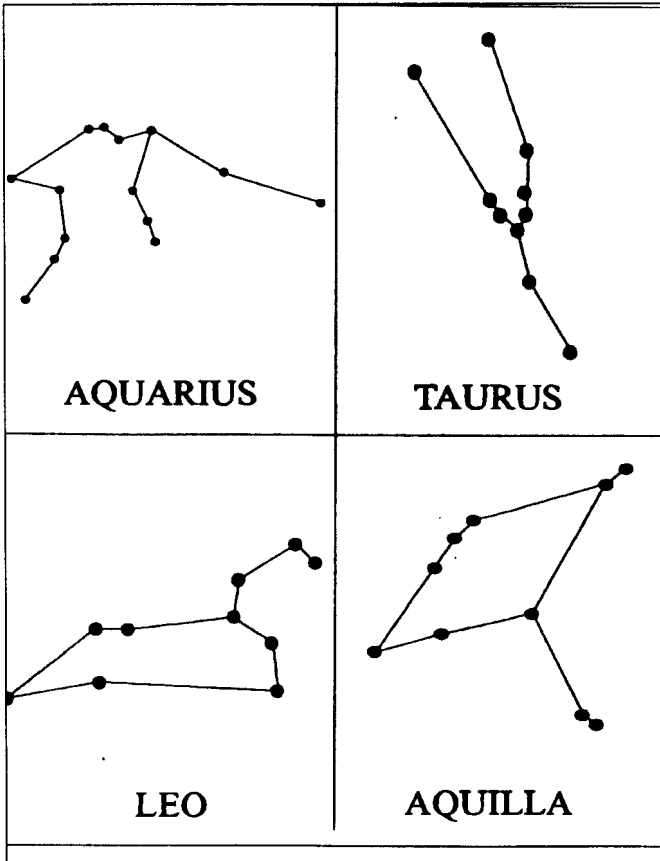


Figure 3. Aquarius was depicted in Mesopotamia and Egypt as a man pouring water from two water-pots.

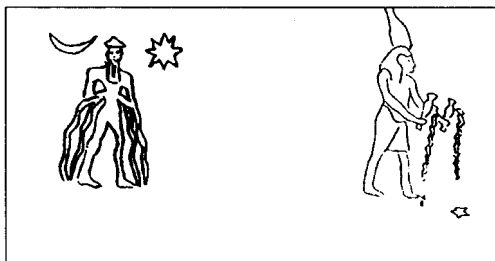


PHOTO 1: This painting in the Catacomb of Marcus & Marcellianus on the Via Ardeatine, Rome, shows four Magi listening to the Torah. The person seated is Moses and he is reading the Oracles of Balaam and pointing to the stars. (McIvor, 1988)



DIAGRAM 1: Beehler's identifications for the dotted star patterns in the Nativity scene painting.



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