

### 3. The Seven Oracles of Balaam in Numbers 22-24

#### A Logotechnical Analysis

Please read the [General Introduction](#) and the Introduction to the [Embedded Hymns](#).

#### The Oracles in their Literary Context

The purpose of the present article is solely to direct attention to the numerical aspects of the story of Balak and Balaam in Numbers 22-24 in order to demonstrate that it is a close-knit literary unit. Unfortunately, the beautiful story has been treated very roughly by scholars, who, spellbound by old-style literary criticism, dissected it into 'sources' J, E, and P, which are supposed to reflect a 'southern' and a 'northern'/'Ephraimite' picture of Balaam.<sup>1</sup> Far from shedding new light on the story they have, in fact, wreaked havoc with this work of art and failed to appreciate its compositional unity and its literary function in its context.

The story of Balaam should first and foremost be studied as it stands in MT. In its literary context, positioned directly after the conquest of the land of Sihon and Og, at the beginning of the settlement, it is primarily intended to create the image of Israel as a people saved and blessed by YHWH. The Oracles of Balaam fall in the same vein as the Blessing of Jacob in Genesis 47-49 and the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33. That is why this article is published in the rubric "Blessings and Laments". The gist of the story's message is that the prophet Balaam, summoned by Balak to curse Israel, is employed by YHWH to bless it.

In addition to this, the Balaam story has another aim: to define true prophecy. In the story, which draws on traditions about a famous 8<sup>th</sup> century historical intermediary (known as 'Balaam, the son of Beor' from the famous text from Deir `Alla), this figure is backdated to the time of Moses, where he is depicted as a textbook example of a true prophet, that is to say, a prophet *who speaks only what YHWH tells him*. Compare YHWH's command to Balaam:

*You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed (22:12), and Balaam's assertion:*

*How can I curse whom God has not cursed?*

*How can I denounce whom YHWH has not denounced?" (23:8).*

The picture of Balaam in the story reflects the true prophet in contrast to the false prophets. Most significantly, this defining characteristic of the true prophet reverberates most emphatically no less than **14** times (2 x 7, the number of fullness).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the image of Balaam as the foreign prophet who is used by YHWH to make clear that Israel is blessed, is numerically reinforced by the fact that he speaks altogether **234** (9 x 26) words in the dialogues and **289** (17 x 17) in the oracles, as I shall show below. The author/redactor did his utmost to demonstrate numerically that the words spoken by Balaam are of a divine nature. He is God's authorized spokesman when it comes to Israel's blessed position among the nations. Compare Deut. 33:29 "*Happy are you, Israel; who is like you, a nation set free by YHWH? YHWH is the shield that guards you, the sword of your splendour!*"

In my opinion, the negative image of Balaam to be found in some Jewish-Christian texts in the NT, as well as in Josephus, *Antiquitates*, Philo, *De vita Mosis*, and Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, in which he is supposed to have instigated the idolatry at Peor, cannot possibly alter the fact that Balaam is depicted in Numbers 22-24 as God's special prophet whom he calls to bless Israel. Such negative images should never detract from the unconditional positive image of the personage created by the author/redactor of Numbers.

Since I cannot discuss the matter here in any detail, it must suffice to mention the biblical texts in which Balaam is criticized (the negative ones are in *italics*): Num. 31:8,16; Deut. 23:5-6 (4-5); Josh. 13:22; 24:9-10; Neh. 13:2; Mic. 6:5; *II Pet.* 2:15; *Jude* 11; and especially *Rev.* 2:14).

Num. 31:16 is problematic: the meaning of בְּרִבְרֵי בַלְעָם is uncertain: it is either "*on Balaam's advice*", or "*in spite of Balaam*" (that is, in spite of how he spoke about Israel - cf. Deut. 1:32 for this connotation – my preference). The Revised English Bible has "*on Balaam's departure*".

<sup>1</sup> For the research, see the article 'Balaam' by Jo Ann Hackett in *ABD* (1992), Vol. 1, 569-572o, and also H. Donner, "Balaam Pseudopropheta", in *BAT: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli*, Göttingen 1977, 112ff.

<sup>2</sup> Compare 22:8,18f,20,35,38; 23:3,5,8,12,16,20,26; 24:2,13. I consider this, along with other numerical features, evidence for the unity of the story. This also holds true for the use of precisely 7 instances of the designations Jacob/Israel (in this order) in the four oracular blessings. See further below.

## The Numerical Features of Numbers 22-24

The following survey shows how the divine name numbers **17** and **26**, which symbolically signify YHWH's presence, are woven into the fabric of the text. Moreover, it demonstrates particularly the extent to which these numbers have been used to structure the speeches, and how the entire text, including the **7** Oracles, was meticulously designed and composed as a structural unity. The Balaam story is anything but a piece of patchwork!

### The Speeches in the Dialogues and the Oracles

The **7** actants are presented in different colours. Balaam's speeches are differentiated.

Moabites/ Balak	Balaam(dialogue)	Seven Oracles	God/Angel/YHWH	The Donkey
22:4 <span style="color: purple;">11+</span> 22:5f. <span style="color: purple;">40=51(3x17)</span>  22:14 <span style="color: purple;">4</span> 22:16-17 <span style="color: purple;">26</span>    22:37 <span style="color: purple;">14</span>	22:8 <span style="color: red;">1</span> 10 22:10-11 <span style="color: red;">2</span> 25 } <span style="color: black;">34</span> 22:13 <span style="color: red;">3</span> 9 }  22:18-19 <span style="color: red;">4</span> 32 22:29 <span style="color: red;">5</span> 10 } <span style="color: black;">26</span> 22:30 <span style="color: red;">6</span> 1 } 22,25 <span style="color: red;">7</span> 15 } <span style="color: red;">1-7</span> <span style="color: green;">102(6x17)</span> 22:38 <span style="color: red;">8</span> 15		22:9 <span style="color: red;">1</span> 4 22:12 <span style="color: red;">2</span> 10 } <span style="color: black;">26</span> 22:20 <span style="color: red;">3</span> 16 }  22:32f. <span style="color: red;">4</span> 33 =16+17  22:35 <span style="color: red;">5</span> 11	22:28 <span style="color: red;">7+</span> 8=15 22:30 <span style="color: red;">4+</span> 15=19
22,2-41 <span style="color: black;">95</span>	22:1-41 <span style="color: black;">117</span>		22:1-41 <span style="color: black;">74</span>	<span style="color: black;">11+23=34</span>
23:11 <span style="color: purple;">9+</span> 23:13 <span style="color: purple;">18+</span> 23:17 <span style="color: purple;">3+</span> 23:25 <span style="color: purple;">8+</span> 23:27 <span style="color: purple;">13=51(3x17)</span>    24:10f. <span style="color: purple;">21</span>	23:1 <span style="color: red;">1</span> 12 23:3 <span style="color: red;">2</span> 13 23,4 <span style="color: red;">3</span> 8 } <span style="color: black;">17</span> 23:12 <span style="color: red;">4</span> 9 }  23:15 <span style="color: red;">5</span> 7  23:26 <span style="color: red;">6</span> 10 } <span style="color: black;">68</span> 23:29 <span style="color: red;">7</span> 12 }  24:12f. <span style="color: red;">8</span> 46 }	<span style="color: red;">1</span> 23:7ff. 53 <span style="color: red;">2</span> 23:18ff. 75 <span style="color: red;">3</span> 24:3ff. 70 <span style="color: red;">4</span> 24:15ff. 55 <span style="color: red;">5</span> 24:20 6 <span style="color: red;">6</span> 24:21 14 <span style="color: red;">7</span> 24:23f. 46	23:5 <span style="color: red;">6</span> <span style="color: yellow;">5</span>  23:16 <span style="color: red;">7</span> <span style="color: yellow;">5</span>	
23-24 <span style="color: black;">72</span>	<span style="color: black;">117</span>	<span style="color: green;">289(17x17)</span>	<span style="color: black;">10</span>	
22-24 <span style="color: black;">167</span>	<span style="color: green;">234(9x26)</span>		<span style="color: black;">84 (7x12)</span>	

In the **Dialogues** Balaam speaks (8+8 times) 234 (9x26) words: 117 in chapter 22 and 117 in 23-24.

In the **7 Oracles** Balaam speaks 289 (17x17) words. See Column 2 for more particulars.

Moreover, the name of Balaam occurs **51** (3x17) times in the story.

The Moabites and Balak speak altogether **51** (3 x 17) words in 22:4-6.

Balak's messengers speak **26** words in 22:16-17.

Altogether **34** (2x17) words are devoted to the speaking of the donkey (22:28 and 30).

In the narrative **17** words are used to tell that God opens Balaam's eyes (22:31).

The Angel uses **17** of his **33** words in 22:33 to tell Balaam that the donkey has saved his life.

## Additional Divine Name Numbers Woven into the Balaam Story

22:4-5	<b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
22:8-9	<b>26</b> words in total, with <b>17</b> in v. 8
22:7-14	<b>52</b> (2 x <b>26</b> ) words after <i>atnach</i>
22:1-14	<b>221</b> (13 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
22:15-20	<b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) words before <i>atnach</i>
22: 21-30	<b>153</b> (9 x <b>17</b> ) words in total in the scene with the donkey
22:21-23	<b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) words, with <b>34</b> before, and <b>17</b> after <i>atnach</i>
22:26-28	<b>43</b> words, with <b>26</b> before, and <b>17</b> after <i>atnach</i> <sup>3</sup>
22:24-28	<b>8</b> (4 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
22:29-30	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
22:31 and 33	<b>17</b> words in total in each
22:36	<b>17</b> words in total
22:38-39	<b>26</b> words in total
22:1-41	<b>272</b> (16 x <b>17</b> ) in total after <i>atnach</i>
23:7-10	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words after <i>atnach</i>
23:11-27	<b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) words altogether spoken by Balak
23:18-20	<b>17</b> words after <i>atnach</i>
23:18-22	<b>26</b> words after <i>atnach</i>
23:20-22	<b>26</b> words in total
23:18-24	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words before <i>atnach</i>
23:18-24	<b>78</b> (3 x <b>26</b> ) words in total, including the introduction
24:3-5	<b>17</b> words after <i>atnach</i>
24:4-5	<b>17</b> words in total
24:3-9	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words before <i>atnach</i>
24:17-19	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
24:20-22	<b>17</b> words before <i>atnach</i>
24:20-24	<b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
24:17-24	<b>85</b> (5 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
24:15-24	<b>52</b> (2 x <b>26</b> ) words before <i>atnach</i>
24:14-24	<b>104</b> (4 x <b>26</b> ) words spoken by Balaam about 'the things to come'.
24:10-25	<b>104</b> (4 x <b>26</b> ) words after <i>atnach</i>
24:1-25	<b>306</b> (18 x <b>17</b> ) words in total.

It may be that some of these instances are due to chance; nevertheless the great majority of them can be considered hard evidence in support of the compositional unity of the story. This evidence also contains a stern warning against tampering with the text, even when we might think – to use the words of G.B. Gray (ICC, 1903, p. 379) - that 'obscurity and improbability of the text are sufficient to invite emendation'.

The obvious coherence of the seven Oracles is additionally attested by the logotechnical analyses below, which reveal a conspicuous structural uniformity. The First, Second and Third Oracles, as well as the Fourth through the Seventh taken together, have an unmistakable central core, which expresses in each case the gist of Balaam's words.

Moreover, the unity of the 7 Oracles is underlined by a string of **7** instances (**red** in the charts below) of **Jacob/Israel** (in this order!) occurring in 23:7, 10, 21, 23a-b, 23b-c, 24:5, 17).<sup>4</sup> Finally, there are **7** nations prophesied against in the Fourth-Seventh Oracles: Moab, Edom Seir, **Amalek**, the Kenites, Asshur and Eber, with arch-enemy **Amalek** at the centre, where it is especially focused on.

<sup>3</sup> The number **43** represents the numerical value of the name Balaam (2 + 12 + 16 + 13 = **43**)!

<sup>4</sup> Note that in the 8<sup>th</sup> reference (24:18b-19a) the names are conspicuously, and deliberately, mentioned in reverse order, obviously to keep the series of seven intact.

## The First Oracle: Numbers 23:7-10

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the framework; **d**: words in the central core.

			Total		a		b		c		d	
7	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <span style="color: red;">וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר</span><sup>1</sup> </div>		3		3				3			
	מִן־אֲרָם יִנְחֵנִי בְלֶקֶךְ	1	4				4		4			
	מִלֶּדְמוֹצָב מִהַרְרֵי־קָדָם		4				4		4			
	לְכֹה אֶרְהֶ־לִּי יַעֲקֹב	2	4				4		4			
	וּלְכֹה זַעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	1	3				3		3			
	Total, v. 7b-d		15	=	0	+	15	=	15	+	0	
8	Central Core:	מָה אֵיֶקֶב לֹא קִבַּה אֱלֹהִים	3		5						5	
	The people of Israel	וּמָה אֲזַעֲמָה לֹא זַעֲמָה יִהְיֶה׃		5			5				5	
9	cannot be cursed!	כִּי־מִרְאֵשׁ צָרִים אֲרָאֵנִי	4		4						4	
	They are a unique people	וּמִגִּבְעוֹת אֲשׁוּרָנִי		2			2				2	
	standing out among	הַגּוֹיִם לְבָדָד יִשְׁפָּן	5		4			4			4	
	the nations.	וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב׃		3			3				3	
	(53 = 15 + 23 + 15)	Total, v. 8-9		23	=	11	+	12	=	0	+	23
10		מִי מִנְהַ עֵפָר יַעֲקֹב	6		4				4			
*		וּמִי סִפֵּר תִּרְבַּע יִשְׂרָאֵל <sup>2</sup>		4			4		4			
		תָּמַת נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל	7		4			4	4			
		וַתְּהִי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְמוֹהוּ׃		3			3		3			
		v. 10		15	=	8	+	7	=	15	+	0
		Total, v. 9-10		28	=	14	+	14	=	15	+	13
		Total, v. 7-10		53	=	19	+	34	=	30	+	23

\* The MT reading וּמִסִּפֵּר אֶת־רִבַּע in 10b is suspect. See ap. crit. in *BHS*, *HALOT*, Vol. 3, 1181, and Seebass, *Numeri* (BK, IV31, p. 19). The text should be read וּמִי סִפֵּר תִּרְבַּע יִשְׂרָאֵל, 'Yes, who can count the dust-cloud of Israel?', which is a perfect parallel to 'Who can calculate the dust of Israel?' in v. 10a. The word תִּרְבַּע, 'dust-cloud', is a synonym of עֵפָר, 'dust', and is derived from רִבַּע, 'dust'. Compare Akkadian *tarbu'(t)u(m)*, *turbu'ttu*, 'dust, dust-storm'. Note that 'dust' is a metaphor for a troop on the move, raising clouds of dust. Both words for 'dust' allude to the uncountableness of Israel's forces.

### Observations

1. The caesurae in the text are to be found between vs. 7||8 and between vs. 9||10, which divide it into 3 sections, showing the pivotal positioning of the core, flanked by 15 words on each side (53 = 15 + 23 + 15):

v. 7b-d Balaam's reference to his commission from Balak	15 words 4 cola
vs. 8-9 Balaam asserts that Israel cannot be cursed	23 words 6 cola
v. 10 Balaam desires to have the same fate as the Israelites	15 words 4 cola.

If my colometric division is correct, the oracle has 7 verselines and 14 cola, which display a pattern that underscores the tripartite structure of the text: 14 = 4 + 6 + 4 cola.

There is every reason to assume that the choice for 23 words in the central core is due to authorial intent, since it represents the numerical value of *kabod*, 'glory' (11 + 2 + 6 + 4),

which signifies YHWH's presence: in this case, among his people. In fact, it is YHWH's presence that renders Israel a unique people among the nations.

- The middle word of the oracle, מראש, 'from the top', in v. 9a (26 + 1 + 26), which is also the middle word of the central core (11 + 1 + 11), has been positioned in pride of place, because it refers back to where Balaam is standing when he utters his first oracle: on Bamoth-Baal (22:41). From there, he can see the full extent of the Israelite host.

### The Second Oracle: Numbers 23:18-24

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the framework; **d**: words in the central core.

		Total	a	b	c	d
18	וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר <sup>2</sup>	3	3		3	
	קוּם בְּלֶקְ וּשְׁמַע <sup>1</sup>	3		3	3	
	הֲאֵינִי עָרִי בְּנֹ צֶפֶר:	4		4	4	
	v. 18bc	7	= 0	+ 7	= 7	+ 0
19	לֹא אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּכְוֹב <sup>2</sup>	4	4		4	
	וּבְנֵי אֲדָם וַיִּתְנַחֵם <sup>1</sup>	3	3		3	
	הֲהוּא אָמַר וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה <sup>3</sup>	4		4	4	
	וְדַבֵּר וְלֹא יִקְמְנֶה:	3		3	3	
	v. 19	14	= 7	+ 7	= 14	+ 0
	Total, v. 18bc-19	21	= 7	+ 14	= 21	+ 0
20	Central Core: הִנֵּה בְרַךְ לְקַחְתִּי <sup>1</sup>	4	3			3
	Balaam cannot revoke וַיִּבְרַךְ וְלֹא אֲשִׁיבֶנָּה:	3		3		3
	the blessing he uttered on Total, v. 18-20	30	= 13	+ 17	= 24	+ 6
21	YHWH's command. לֹא-הִבִּיט אֹן בְּיַעֲקֹב <sup>3</sup>	5	4			4
	Since YHWH is וְלֹא-רָאָה עֵמֶל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל <sup>1</sup>	4	4			4
	on their side, וַיִּהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵיוֹ עִמּוֹ <sup>2</sup>	6	3		3	3
	(middle word/verseline) וַתִּרְוַעַת מִלֶּדֶ בּוֹ:	3		3		3
22	no enchantment אֵל מוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם <sup>1</sup>	7	3	3		3
	works against Jacob כַּתוּעַפַּת רַאִים לוֹ:	3		3		3
	and Total, v. 18-22	50	= 24	+ 26	= 24	+ 26
23a-b	no divination כִּי לֹא-נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב <sup>1</sup>	8	4	4		4
	against Israel! וְלֹא-קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל <sup>4</sup>	3	3			3
	Total, v. 20-23b	33	= 21	+ 12	= 0	+ 33
23c-d	כִּיעַת יֹאמֶר לְיַעֲקֹב <sup>1</sup>	9	3		3	3
	וְלְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִה-פָּעַל אֵל: <sup>5</sup>	4		4	4	
24	הֲנֶעַם כְּלָבִיא יָקוּם <sup>10</sup>	4	4		4	
	וּכְאֶרִי יִתְנַשֵּׂא <sup>2</sup>	2	2		2	
	לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יֵאכַל טֶרֶף <sup>11</sup>	5		5	5	
	וְדַם-חֲלָלִים יִשְׁתֶּה:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 23c-24	21	= 6	+ 15	= 21	+ 0
	Total 18bc-24	75	= 34	+ 41	= 42	+ 33
	Total, including the introduction, v. 18-24	78	= 37	+ 41	= 45	+ 33

## Observations

1. In terms of content and as suggested by the numerical structure, the strong caesurae in the Second Oracle are to be found between vs. 19||20 and between vs. 23ab||23cd, which give the text a tripartite structure, precisely as in the First Oracle. Excluding the **introductory formula**, we find a central core meticulously positioned in pride of place at the arithmetic centre of the text ( $75 = 21 + 33 + 21$ ):

vs. 18-19	Balaam alerts Balak to YHWH's steadfastness	21 words
vs. 20-23ab	Balaam asserts that he cannot revoke his blessing	33 words
vs. 23cd-24	Balaam announces what is to befall Israel: victory!	21 words.

The number **33**, which represents the numerical value of the root בִּרְךְ, 'to bless' ( $2+20+11=33$ ) serves to underline the fact that the core is about *blessing*. Note that the verb is used twice in v. 20, at the very beginning of the central core.

2. Exactly as in the First Oracle, the middle word of the text as a whole, in this case עִמּוֹ, 'with him', in v. 21c ( $75 = 37 + \boxed{1} + 37$ ), coincides precisely with the centre of the central core ( $33 = 16 + \boxed{1} + 16$ ). Moreover, the middle word falls within the middle verseline, v. 21c-d ( $11 = 5 + \boxed{1} + 5$ ), and within the 2 middle cola ( $22=10+\boxed{2}+10$ ), which fall within the middle of the 7 verses ( $3 + \boxed{1} + 3$ ). The statement in v. 21cd is particularly meaningful, for it is because YHWH is *with* the people of Israel that they are uncursable and blessed:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי עַמּוֹ וַתְּרוֹעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ:

YHWH their God is with them, and the King's acclaim is among them.

The meaningful centre is highlighted by the name YHWH at the beginning, the only occurrence of the name in the Oracle! For the use of the divine name as a literary device to highlight the centre of a given text, see Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, Volume II (OTS 57), 2010, pp. 508-526.

3. The metaphor of the lion in v. 24 in connection with the bright future of Israel clearly preludes on what is said at the end of the Third Oracle (24:9). This is another indication of the interrelationship between the Oracles.
4. Since the Second Oracle is much longer than the first, the author could here weave some divine name numbers into the fabric of the text: **17** words after *atnach* in vs. 18-20, **26** words after *atnach* in vs. 18-22, and **78** ( $3 \times 26$ ) words in the entire text. Note also that the Oracle without the 7-word call to Balak to listen (v. 18bc) has **68** ( $4 \times 17$ ) words.

Moreover, in terms of content, the 33 words of the central core divide into two parts, generating another divine name number:

**26** words in vs. 20-22, Balaam's assertion that he cannot revoke his blessing, and **7** in v. 23a-b, his concluding statement about the invulnerability of the Israelites:

"Yes, there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel."

### The Third Oracle: Numbers 24:3-9

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the framework; **d**: words in the central core.

		Total	a	b	c	d
3	<b>וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר<sup>3</sup></b>	3	3		3	
	<b>נָאִם בְּלָעַם בְּנֵי בְעֹר</b> 1	4		4	4	
	<b>וְנָאִם תִּנְבֵּר שְׁתֵּם הָעֵינַן:</b>	4		4	4	
	v. 3	8	= 0	+ 8	= 8	+ 0
4	<b>נָאִם שְׁמַע אִמְרֵי-אֱלֹהִים</b> 2	4	4		4	
	<b>אֲשֶׁר מִתְּהַה שְׂדֵי יִתְּהָה</b>	4		4	4	
	<b>נִפְל וּגְלוּי עֵינַיִם:</b>	3		3	3	
	v. 4	11	= 4	+ 7	= 11	+ 0
	Total, v. 3-4	22	= 7	+ 15	= 22	+ 0
5	Balaam portrays <b>מִה-טָבוֹ אֶהְיֶה יַעֲקֹב</b> 3	4	4			4
	<b>וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂרָאֵל:</b>	2		2		2
	using a metaphor that is very reminiscent v. 5	6	= 4	+ 2	= 0	+ 6
	of the tree metaphor in Psalm 1. Total, v. 4-5	17	= 8	+ 9	= 11	+ 6
6	<b>בְּנֶחְלִים נִפְיוֹ</b> 4	2	2			2
	<b>כְּגִנַּת עֲלֵי נֶהְרָה</b>	3	3			3
	<b>כְּאֶהְלִים נִטְעַת יִתְּהָה</b> 5	3		3		3
	Middle words of the Oracle: <b>כְּאֶהְלִים עֲלֵי-מַיִם:</b>	3		3		3
	(70 = 34 + 2 + 34) v. 6	11	= 5	+ 6	= 0	+ 11
	Total, v. 5-6	17	= 9	+ 8	= 6	+ 11
7	Middle verseline and cola: <b>וַיִּגַּל מַיִם מִדֶּלְיוֹ</b> 6	3	3			3
	(11 = 5 + 1 + 5) <b>וַיִּזְרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים</b> 8	3	3			3
	(24 = 11 + 2 + 11) <b>וַיִּרְם מֵאֲנַג מִלְכּוֹ</b> 7	3		3		3
	<b>וַתִּנְשָׂא מִלְכָּתוֹ:</b>	2		2		2
	v. 7	11	= 6	+ 5	= 0	+ 11
	Total, v. 5-7	28	= 15	+ 13	= 6	+ 22
8	<b>אֵל מוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם</b> 8	3	3		3	
	<b>כְּתוֹעַפֶּת רֵאִים לְאוֹ</b>	3	3		3	
	Total, v. 7-8b	17	= 12	+ 5	= 6	+ 11
	<b>יֵאֱכָל גּוֹיִם צָרְיוֹ</b> 9	3		3	3	
	<b>וְעֲצֻמֹתֵיהֶם יִגְרֶם</b>	2		2	2	
	<b>וַחֲצִיּוֹ יִמְחָץ:</b>	2		2	2	
9	<b>כָּרַע שֹׁכֵב כְּאֶרֶץ</b> 10	3	3		3	
	<b>וּכְלָבִיא מִן יְקִימֹנִי</b>	3	3		3	
	<b>מִבְּרִכְיָה בְרוּךְ</b> 11	2		2	2	
	<b>וְאֶרְדֵּי אֶרֶץ:</b>	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 8c-9	17	= 6	+ 11	= 17	+ 0
	Total v. 8-9	23	= 12	+ 11	= 23	+ 0
	Total, v. 5-9	51	= 27	+ 24	= 23	+ 28
	Total, v. 3-9	70	= 31	+ 39	= 42	+ 28

## Observations

1. In terms of content and as suggested by the numerical structure, the strong caesurae in the Third Oracle are to be found between vs. 4||5 and between vs. 7||8, which gives the text a *tripartite* structure, as in the two preceding Oracles:

vs. 3-4	Introduction to the Oracle	22 words
vs. 5-7	Portrayal of the Israelites as trees beside the waters	28 words
vs. 8-9	Israel is envisaged as victorious over their enemies	23 words.

In this case, the central core (surrounded by 45 words: 22 + 23) is slightly off-centre in comparison with the arithmetically perfect central cores of Oracle One and Oracle Two. The **23** words in vs. 8-9 are probably consciously designed to match the **23** words in the central core of the First Oracle.

The **28** words in the core are undoubtedly based on the numerical value of נאם, 'oracle', the very first word of the passage (14 + 1 + 13 = **28**), precisely as in [2 Samuel 23!](#)

2. The arithmetic centre of the text as a whole is constituted by the 2 words עַל־מַיִם, 'beside the waters', in v. 6d, which are significantly flanked by **34** (2 x **17**) words on either side (**34** + **2** + **34**). Since the two words allude to the metaphor of the trees beside the waters, they were evidently designed as the meaningful centre of the Oracle, to highlight the metaphor. As noted above, the metaphor of the trees is highly reminiscent of Psalm 1.
3. In terms of structure, the middle verseline is v. 7ab (11 = 5 + **1** + 5) which coincides with the 2 middle cola (24 = 11 + **2** + 11):

וַיִּלְמִים מִדְּלִי וַיִּרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים

Water shall flow from his buckets and his seed shall be in many waters.

This striking metaphorical reference to Israel's fecundity may be regarded as the consciously designed meaningful centre in terms of the poetical building blocks.

4. Apart from the **34** (2 x **17**) words on either side of the arithmetic centre, there are more instances of **17** in the Third Oracle: the **17** words after *atnach* in vs. 3-5, the **17** words in vs. in 5-6, the **17** words in 7-8b, and the **17** words in 8b-9. According to Pieter van der Lugt (private communication) the Oracle itself, vs. 5-9, consists of three 3-line strophes of **17** words each: 5-6; 7-8b; 8c-9. In my view, the three **17**-word strophes (marked in the table) this does not exclude the proposed tripartite structure which overlies them.
5. The use of the number **11** is conspicuous: the **11** verselines (precisely as in the Second Oracle, 23:18-24), the **22** words of the introduction in vs. 3-4 (divided into **11** in v. 3 and **11** in v. 4), the **11** words in vs. 6 and 7 respectively, the **11** words before *atnach* in vs. 3-5, and the **11** words after *atnach* in vs. 8-9. This is not surprising, since **11** is the number of fulfillment, which subtly anticipates the concrete fulfilling of Israel's blessedness through the destruction of their enemies – the theme of the Fourth-Seventh Oracles.

## The Fourth Oracle: Numbers 24:15-19

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the attach.
- Column **c**: words in the heading; **d**: words in the **Preamble** and the **Prophecy**.

			Total		a		b		c		d
15	<b>וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ</b>		3		3				3		
	The Preamble to the	<b>נֶאֱמַר בְּלָעַם בְּנֵוֹ בְעַר</b>	1	4			4				4
	Prophecy as such:	<b>וְנֶאֱמַר הַנִּבְרָר שְׁתֵּם הָעֵינַן:</b>		4			4				4
16	21 words.	<b>נֶאֱמַר שָׁמַע אֲמֵר־אֵל</b>	2	4	4						4
		<b>וַיִּדַע דַּעַת עֲלוֹנָיו</b>		3	3						3
		<b>מִחֲזֵה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֵה</b>	3	3			3				3
		<b>נִפְלַ וּגְלוֹי עֵינָיִם:</b>		3			3				3
	Total, v. 15b-16		21	=	7	+	14	=	0	+	21
17	The Prophecy as such,	<b>אֲרָאנוּ וְלֹא עָתָה</b>	4	3	3						3
	foreseeing	<b>אֲשׁוּרֵנוּ וְלֹא קָרוֹב־</b>		3	3						3
	that Jacob/Israel	<b>דָּרַךְ כּוֹכַב מִיַּעֲקֹב</b>	5	3			3				3
	will crush their enemies	<b>וְקָם שִׁבְט־מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל</b>	7	3			3				3
	and dispossess them:	<b>וּמְחִץ פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב</b>	6	3			3				3
	34 (2 x 17) words.	<b>וְקָרַקַר כָּל־בְּנוֹי־שֵׁת:</b>		4			4				4
18		<b>וְהָיָה אֲדוֹם יִרְשָׁה</b>	7	3	3						3
		<b>וְהָיָה יִרְשָׁה שְׂעִיר אִי־בֵינָיו</b>		4	4						4
	In reverse order!	<b>וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל עָשָׂה חֵיל:</b>		3			3				3
19	<b>וַיִּרְדָּם יַעֲקֹב</b>	<b>וְהֵאֱבִיר שְׂרִיר מְעִיר:</b>	8	2	2						2
				3			3				3
	Total, v. 17-19		34	=	15	+	19	=	0	+	34
	Total, v. 15b-19		55	=	22	+	33	=	0	+	55

\* In v. 19a, the MT reading **וַיִּרְדָּם מִיַּעֲקֹב**, 'And from Jacob shall dominion be exercised', should be corrected to read **וַיִּרְדָּם יַעֲקֹב**, 'Yes, Jacob shall trample them down', with Jacob as subject, as in 18c, where Israel is subject. For a discussion see Horst Seebass (BK IV/31, p. 25).

### Observations

1. In terms of content, the Fourth Oracle differs significantly from the others, for it is clearly a prophecy. It deals with the blessedness of Israel based on the destruction of their enemies. Therefore, the term 'Blessing' is most appropriate. The prophecy deals specifically with Jacob/Israel (vs. 17-19), and foresees the destruction of their nearest enemies, Moab, Edom and Seir. The remaining, more remote nations: Amalek, the Kenites, Asshur and Eber, are dealt with in separate oracles.

In a strict sense and formally, the Prophetic Blessing foreseeing the destruction of the enemies is already precluded on and introduced by Balaam in v. 14, where he tells Balak what is going to happen "in the days to come":

*"And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, I will let you know what this people (Israel) will do to your people (Moab) in the days to come."* (13 words)

Therefore, in terms of content, v. 14 precludes not only on the Fourth Oracle, but also on the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh, and should therefore be included in the word-count. From a logotechnical viewpoint, the 13 words in v. 14 bring the total number of words spoken by Balaam about what is going to happen "in the days to come" to 68 (4 x 17): 13 + 55. This is hard evidence for the interconnection between the the Third and Fourth Oracles.

But there is more: in terms of form, the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Oracles taken together (vs. 15-24) are very similar to the preceding three Oracles, because they have a comparable *tripartite* framework, which is structured by significant numerical features:

vs. 15-16	Introduction to the prophecies	24 (2 x 12) words
vs. 17-19	Prophecy dealing with Jacob/Israel	34 (2 x 17) words
vs. 20-24	Prophecies against the remote foreign nations	51 (3 x 17) words.

In this case, the central core is Balaam's 34-word prophecy foreseeing Israel's victory over their enemies and the downfall and dispossession of Moab, Edom and Seir.

### The Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Oracles: Numbers 24:20-24

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the **introductions**; **d**: words in the **Prophecies**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
20	Prophecy against Amalek	וַיִּרְא אֶת־עַמְלֵק	3	3	3	
		וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר <sup>5</sup>	3	3	3	
		רֵאשִׁית נוֹיִם עַמְלֵק	9	3	3	3
		וְאַחֲרֵיהֶן עַד־י אֶבֶד:	3	3	3	3
	v. 20		12	= 6	+ 6	= 6 + 6
21	Prophecy against the Kenites	וַיִּרְא אֶת־קִנְיֵי	3	3	3	
		וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר <sup>6</sup>	3	3	3	
		אִיתָן מוֹשֶׁבֶךָ	10	2	2	2
		וְשִׁים בְּסֹלַע קִנְיָה:	3	3	3	3
22		כִּי אִם־יִהְיֶה לְבַעַר קִינִי	11	5	5	5
		עַד־מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׁבֶּכֶךָ:	4	4	4	4
	Total, v. 20-22		32	= 17	+ 15	= 12 + 20
23	Prophecy against	וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר <sup>7</sup>	3	3	3	
	Asshur and Eber	אֹיֵי מִי יִהְיֶה מִשְׁמוֹ אֵל:	12	5	5	5
24		וְצִיִּם מִיַּד כְּתִיבִים	3	3	3	3
		וְעַנּוּ אֲשׁוּר וְעַנּוּ־עֵבֶר <sup>8</sup>	13	4	4	4
		וְגַם־הוּא עַד־י אֶבֶד:	4	4	4	4
	Prophecies against the enemies, v. 20-24		51	= 27	+ 24	= 15 + 36
	Four Prophecies about their downfall, v. 17-24		85	= 42	+ 43	= 15 + 70
	Prelude (v. 14) and Four Prophecies, v. 14-24		122	= 56	+ 66	= 18 + 104

All this shows that the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Oracles (vs. 15-24) constitute a close-knit literary unit, and that v. 14 is in terms of content part and parcel of it. This is numerically underscored by the fact that, including v. 14, Balaam speaks altogether **104 (4x26)** words in vs. 14-24 ( $13 + 55 + 36 = 104$ ).

There is abundant evidence showing that the Balaam story as a whole, as it stands in MT, is also a coherent literary entity. For particulars, see my logotechnical analysis of the book of Numbers: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/3.numbers22-24.pdf> , pp. 29-32.

For an extensive bibliography on Numbers 22-24 (presented alphabetically), see the commentary by H. Seebass, *Numeri* (BK, IV/31), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2004, pp. 2-9.

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