

Perhaps Balak, who was king of the Moabites at the time, was himself a Midianite.

We have no previous mention of Balaam. It might seem strange that one who was not of Israel should be referred to as a worshipper of the Lord. However, as Peter mentioned to Cornelius in Acts x.35, God's grace is not restricted to any one nation; wherever a man sincerely endeavours to follow the Lord, God is willing to listen to him. It should be noted that while Balaam sometimes refers to God by the term 'god,' which could be applied to any divine being, he also frequently uses the specific proper name of the covenant God of Israel, which is rendered in the AV as LORD.

There has been much controversy as to whether Balaam was a true prophet or not, but it rests upon a false understanding of the meaning of the word 'prophet.' In the Bible this word does not indicate a permanent occupation or function, which, when it has once been given to a man, always belongs to him. A prophet is simply one through whom God gives a message. God may use one as such a spokesman for a time, and then lay him aside and use another one. The prophets were not inspired in everything they said. Thus, when David told Nathan, the prophet, that he would like to build a house for the name of the Lord, Nathan said at once: 'Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the Lord is with thee.' (2 Sa.vii.1-3). The next day, however, Nathan corrected himself, for God gave him a message for David, declaring that David should not build a temple for the Lord, but should leave this for his son to do (2 Sa.vii.4-16). Nathan was often used of God as a prophet, but when he used his own wisdom, as in telling David that the Lord would bless his plan to build a temple, he was mistaken, and God made him correct his false utterance. Since there can be no doubt that chapters xxiii-xxiv contain messages given by direct revelation of God through Balaam, it is evident that Balaam was God's mouth-piece, and it would be absurd to call him anything but a true prophet. This does not, of course, mean that he was a perfect man. He committed very serious sins (cf. notes on chapter xxiv), but so have other prophets.