

ARTICLE IX.

BALAAM.¹

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To the thoughtful reader no part of the Bible is more suggestive than the story of Balaam, the seer. Like a meteor, he comes from regions comparatively unknown; he passes before our eyes in a career at once strange, brief, and brilliant; and then he is gone. But he leaves upon our minds an impression that remains.

The Israelites had finished their forty years of wandering in the wilderness and had appeared upon the plains of Moab. The comparatively civilized Moabites and the wandering tribes of Midian were equally alarmed, fearing lest this multitude should "lick up all" that was about them "as the ox licks up the grass of the field." Apparently without waiting to learn whether the spirit of the Israelites was friendly, they sent across the whole breadth of the Arabian desert to get the great seer Balaam to come and curse the newcomers before the issue of a battle should be risked.

1. In this we find already a suggestive fact: it is that both Balak and the Midianite sheiks recognized a higher power working among human affairs and had hope of getting its help.

Balaam lived far away, beyond the Euphrates, among the mountains, and yet twice the long journey was taken, by the most honorable ambassadors, with the utmost speed, with the

¹As portrayed in Numbers *xxi.*-*xxiv.*; Micah *vi.* 5-8; 2 Peter 14-15.

most lavish promises,—for what? For money? for arms? for troops? for a leader famous for his skill in war? Not at all. For a man to come and offer prayer! “I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.” It is true that Balak’s belief had in it much of superstition and error; it still was, after its fashion, a belief in the power of prayer.

Such has at least tended to be the universal feeling of mankind. It was evidently a custom of that day for kings and nations, before entering upon war, to devote their enemies to destruction. The Romans had public officers whose business it was to do this work. The battle that sealed the fate of idolatry in Hawaii was preceded by the sacrifice of two human beings to an idol of reputed power. Balak waited for the prayer of Balaam before risking the issues of battle.

It was only one manifestation of that religious belief or sentiment which in modern times finds expression in fast-days and public thanksgivings, and has often bowed a whole nation in united prayer. If God is only on the side of the heavier battalions, it is a discovery recently made and still greatly doubted. If philosophy is to take away our belief in a God who cares for men and is moved by what they say, it will rob us of one of the few possessions common to all ages and to all conditions of mankind.

We do not believe it possible to root out this belief. The religious sentiment, neglected or left uncultivated, does not die; it only runs wild, and bears fruit in superstition, fanaticism, or vice. It will be so with that branch of religion which leads men in their extremity to turn to the Almighty for help. Spiritualism is the natural reaction from naturalism, and the benignant faces of many believers in spiritualism show how much better are even the husks of that superstition, re-

garded simply as food for the soul. We are all puzzled by the wonderful spread of the most fantastic notions as to cures to be wrought by faith, but that craze is the reaction of human nature against religious ideas that rob the world of any real Father in heaven.

Men will keep going to God for help in their distresses. They may go, like the South-Sea islanders, with sacrifices of captives; like the king of Moab, with the offer to slaughter the heir to the throne; or, like the Christian, with the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart; but in some way they will go, believing that God is and that in some way, if they can only find it, he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him. Many a half-skeptical Christian has lived to see the day when an utterly ungodly man has come to him in the spirit in which Balak went out to meet the seer, and,—while, perhaps, like Balak, chiding him for his delay,—has begged him, as being on better terms with God than himself, to pray by the bedside of his dying child. The wickedest men stand in awe before those whom they suppose to have power with God.

Balaam was forbidden to go with the messengers of Balak: so he sent them home, doubtless dismissing all thought of going, although with a sigh of regret over the honor and the profit that he might have had. But Balak's case was urgent; *he must have that prayer*. So a more numerous and more honorable body of messengers made the long journey across the desert, with yet greater speed, and with yet stronger inducements to Balaam to give up his scruples and come.

2. Now here was the first false step. At their first coming the answer of Balaam, though it may have been petulant, was essentially right: "Get you into your land; for the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you;" and now he says: "If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I

cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more." The spirit of these words was just right. But his action at this point began to be just wrong. If God had said *no*, he meant *no*, and Balaam should have meant *no* too. He should have sent back the messengers at once. But his fingers were by this time tingling for the offered money, and his ears were itching for the applause that would come to him as he entered the country of Moab, escorted by gorgeous Moabite nobles and Midianite sheiks; so he tried the Lord again; and the Lord, perhaps willing to make him an example that should help to keep future generations out of sin, let him go.

That seems to be sometimes God's way of dealing with men. He finds them determined to have their own way, in spite of his saying *no*. He seeks to lead them to what is really best for them, but, when they show themselves determined to break over his leadings, he sometimes lets them go. It is not always a good sign for a horse that wants to run away, if he finds that his master has thrown him the reins: in enjoying his liberty, he may break his neck. So it was with the Israelites under Saul: they were determined to have a king, and God let them have a king, who proved a most mischievous tyrant. So it was with Pharaoh: he was determined to have his own way in the matter of the Israelites, and God let him go till he had destroyed almost everything for which he valued life. So it was with Pilate: God's spirit did not always strive with him, and the water with which he washed his hands did not cleanse his soul from the guilt of delivering a just man to death. There was once a mother whose two boys were at the point of death, and all night long she prayed for their lives, not in the spirit of submission, but in rebellion against any other event than that which she demanded from God. "They must live; they shall live," was the spirit if not the let-

ter of her words. They did live, and, before they were twenty-one, they had broken her heart, and had suffered together a criminal's death. It is possible to be rebelliously determined to have our own way, even in the matter of life or death for our children or our friends.

God made an example of Balaam, and we, if we are wise, shall learn from it to keep all our wishing and all our ambitions and all our firm determinations within the bounds of cheerful submission to the will of God. Any man may well beware how he refuses to become a Christian because he means by-and-by to do this or that and is sensible of the incongruity between it and the Christian profession. God's spirit may be quenched. It may be the blight of his life that he is finally let go, to serve his personal ends. Millions before us have proved that the only satisfying way is to ask what is the will of God. He that thus loseth his life shall find it. The only path that surely leads to happiness is the path of loyalty to right, to duty, and to God.

With the arrival of Balaam in Moab begins a remarkable series of events: Balak takes him first to the high places of Baal, then to "the field of the watchers" on the summit of Pisgah, and finally to the very top of Peor. In each place, with great pomp of preparatory sacrifice, Balak, utterly unable, like the unspiritual man in all ages, to understand the principle that holds Balaam back, tries to extort from him at least a few words of cursing upon at least a fraction of the host that covers the plains below. Balaam suffers himself to be led from place to place, evidently wishing, hoping,—shall we say, praying?—that he may find a chance to say something that shall bring him the honor and the wealth that he craves. But, wherever he goes, the confession is wrung from him, ten times he makes it, that he can do nothing and say

nothing against Jehovah's will, and five times he breaks into sublime words of mingled prophecy and blessing. The message, struggling within him, will find utterance, in spite of his covetous desires. He can do nothing against the truth.

Imagination kindles at the thought of the scene: The king, in an agony of fear that makes him offer to sacrifice even his first-born son, and that makes him hurry Balaam from place to place in the hope of his cursing at least a part of the invaders; the princes in their robes, straining their eyes to make out the number and the movements of the enemy; the priests heaping high the fires upon the altars and loading the air with the fumes of incense and the smoke of sacrifice; Balaam the master-spirit of the hour: he is desired only to offer prayer, but, with all his restless longing, he dares not speak other than the words of God; he comes back from his solitude a little apart, having received a message; he speaks that and that only, and he utters it in words whose force and majesty and beauty and reach of prophetic vision thrill us to this day.

3. Now the rank of the actors in those scenes, the half-heathen character of the rites, the antiquity of the time, the fact that Balaam was a spokesman for Jehovah,—all these do not hide from us the central fact that he dallied with temptation in a dangerous and inexcusable way. After the first refusal, he should have been satisfied without repeating his request for permission to go. Once arrived in Moab, he might still have retraced his steps. Each time that he got instructions not to curse but to bless, he should have taken it as a sign to him to fly from temptation. When all was done and Balak gave up in despair, Balaam still should have fled from a region where every secular ambition held out to him bribes to the commission of sin. He should have fled, as Lot fled out of Sodom. Instead, he staid on and on, painfully scrutinizing the

border-line of duty, to see how far he could go, how closely he could inch up to the edge, without bringing upon himself a positive curse.

Now what was the result? Just what might have been expected. We are too familiar with the working of our own hearts under temptation to be dull at guessing what happened to him. He could not curse Israel: the words were strangled in his throat by the awful sense that God said *no*. Yet,—as Peter says,—though he believed in righteousness, he “loved the *wages* of *unrighteousness*,” and, the longer he thought of them, the longer he staid near them, even though he turned his eyes away from them, the more sure he was that he must find some way of making them his very own.

Whether he got them or not, is not positively said: people often sell themselves to the service of Satan and then fail to collect their pay. But probably he got them; at least he earned them: he gave Balak all the help that he could, short of uttering the actual words of a curse. The book of Revelation (ii. 14)¹ lets out the fact told of him nowhere else: he “taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.” He could not curse Israel,—no! that was asking too much,—but he could teach Balak the Satanic trick of making Israel curse themselves. Balak profited by the hint. The Israelites fell into the snare. They rioted in the sins connected with idolatry, and the plague that rebuked them swept off twenty-four thousand men. But there was another result that also might have been expected: Moab was conquered in spite of the trick. And there was yet another result that might equally have been expected: Balaam perished under Israel’s sword.

¹ Evidently a matter of tradition.

4. It is not our main purpose to emphasize here the old lesson that a man cannot afford to play with temptation. That lesson is as true as it is old, but it is written out so vividly on the record that words can hardly add to its force. It is the old story of the life of Lot: first shocked by the sins of Sodom;—then realizing the business-advantages of the neighborhood of Sodom;—then harmlessly “pitching” his tent “toward Sodom”;—then living in the suburbs of Sodom;—then sinking almost to the level of the people of Sodom;—at last, though escaping from the destruction of Sodom, yet ending his life in unutterable shame. It is the lesson that has come tingling home to us, as we have found ourselves sidling along toward folly, and at last in the full commission of a sin for which a little before we had announced our contempt. The first oath, the first lie, the first time of being intoxicated, the first lewd act, the first dishonesty, are very far from being the results of deliberate intention: they come in the way so aptly suggested in the beginning of the Psalms: first we just “walk” along “in the counsel of the ungodly”; then we “stand” irresolute “in the way of sinners”; then we “sit” down “in the seat of the scoffer,”—and in due time feel very much at home. It was Balaam’s constant exposure of himself to the solicitations and the bribes of Balak that wore out one by one the cords that held Balaam back, and so at last let him slip,—slip into a sin of peculiar wickedness, cutting short his days, hurrying him to the Judgment, and sending down his name to posterity not merely to point for us a moral, but to be, as long as the Bible is read, “a byword and a hissing.”

But this terrible catastrophe suggests two things that we may well take deeply to heart.

5. *One is the effect of the spirit of self-indulgence and the habit of playing with temptation in unbalancing one’s notions of right and wrong.*

Balaam was under a peculiarly high sense of personal relation to God. He was a genuine seer and prophet, some of his words being even thought to prophesy Christ. He could tell the cringing Balak that what God required of him was not human sacrifice, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with his God,—a religious code that is good enough for to-day. He had at the outset a perfectly clear sense of his duty. His conscience was alert enough and powerful enough to hold him back from doing what Balak asked. He said that he desired to live a good man's life and to die a good man's death; perhaps his words mean that he wanted to reach the good man's heaven. Here were the materials for a well-balanced judgment, an acute but healthy and controlling conscience, and a life of resolute, triumphant righteousness. But he loved the *wages* of unrighteousness, and so he kept wishing and wishing for them, and therefore studying the whole range of human action for some way of making them his own. Up and down before that wall which stood everlasting between him and them he searched with eagerness for some crevice through which he might thrust his hand.

Now, in the cool judgment of lookers-on like ourselves, the question was simple. If he must have the money and the honors, let him curse Israel boldly, take his pay, and be gone. Flat defiance of God is always, in the long run, the easiest way. We find such a course in the man who simply defies the teachings of the Bible as to him who puts the bottle to his neighbor's lips. Let Balaam stand up straight, fling his defiance at Jehovah, curse Israel to the utmost of Balak's desire, take the wages of his blasphemy and his impiety, get out of them in this life such pleasure as he can, and let the next life take care of itself. That would have been the easiest, the manliest, and the least guilty way.

But in some way special terrors had gathered about that particular act for which he had been brought from his home. So, by-and-by, when his covetousness could no longer be restrained, he earned what he wanted by a sin whose guilt was a hundred times greater than that of pronouncing the forbidden curse. Temptation had so distorted his notions of right and wrong that he could draw back from the sin of empty cursing, that, as long as God did not consent, could do Israel no harm, and could teach Balak a diabolical cunning that made Israel break some of their strictest commandments and that slew many thousands in the visitation of the sin. We say, How enormously self-deceived! He kept the letter of the commandment, and yet broke its spirit with a vast aggravation of guilt.

It would be easy to show how necessary it is that the pressure of temptation upon a man's weakest point should, unless stoutly resisted, disorganize all the just working of his mind. All matters of truth and duty come to be looked at through the colored glass of desire, and so borrow its hue. Acts that will help the attainment of the desire come to seem excusable or perhaps even important, while conscience makes up for its laxity on these points by insisting strenuously upon other duties which will not affect the desire,—or by lashing some neighbor's sin. So the man's notions of right and wrong get more and more awry. Christ said that his countrymen, to carry their point, would think that they did God service by killing his immediate disciples. Saul of Tarsus "verily thought" that he ought to do just that. Herod thought it a small matter to kill John the Baptist, compared with that which was really a duty, the breaking of a drunken, impious oath. Napoleon, with vast indignation, hanged the contractors who cheated in the supplies for his army, but, in further-

ing his own selfish ends, he brought about the death of millions with apparent unconcern.

So says Frederick W. Robertson: "There are men who would not play false, and yet would wrongly win. There are men who would not lie, and yet would bribe a poor man to support a cause which he believes in his soul to be false. There are men who would resent at the sword's point the charge of dishonor, who would yet for selfish gratification entice the weak into sin, and damn body and soul in hell. There are men, respectable and respected, who give liberally, and support religious societies, and go to church, [and are good critics of sermons,] and would not take God's name in vain, who have made wealth out of the wreck of innumerable human lives. Balaam is one of the accursed spirits now, but he did no more than these."

My sin is a mild, respectable, white kind of sin; but yours is very rank, and low, and black. The beam in this eye of mine is nothing; let me take the mote out of yours. So perverted become men's notions of right and wrong, when the passion for something forbidden creeps in.

But let us never forget that, when a man spoils his conscience so that it can give no truthful judgment of right or wrong, God sits upon the circle of the earth and holds him responsible for that which he ought to know. He held Esau responsible for his folly, and there was no place left him for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. He held David responsible for his sin against Uriah, and even the anguish of penitence that prompted the fifty-first Psalm did not save him from the blight of his sin. He held Balaam responsible to the full measure of his guilt, and the avenging sword of Israel was but the beginning of the reckoning with him.

If the captain of a ship, in a moment even of carelessness,

puts the compass out of order, he must correct that compass, or make his port as he can. Let the case of Balaam warn us to hold temptation far enough from that compass which God has given to each one of us, to prevent its turning the compass one hair's-breadth off from the polar star of right. It may make all the difference between our reaching the blessed harbor of the home-land and our striking the sunken rock.

6. And this brings us to the point toward which all these other considerations have been leading our way. It is that no money and *no* other earthly *reward*,—we say “earthly reward,” for *no* heavenly reward is offered,—*can pay a man for doing what he knows to be wrong*. Would it have been better, or would it have been worse, for Balaam, if he had never gone to Moab?—or if, having gone, he had returned to his home, poor and dishonored, resting simply upon the consciousness of his integrity, even joyful in the thought that, in spite of the king's inducements, he had not swerved from his original position that he could do nothing and say nothing that God did not expressly permit? One may say that of course it would have been better for him to stay away, for he happened to get killed: what shall a man take in exchange for his life? Well: strike that out, and suppose that through a life of patriarchal length he enjoyed his guilt-stained pay,—a whole “houseful of silver and gold.” But, it is answered, the longest life has an end, and then what? Every summer there hangs over the world the certainty of a swiftly coming frost, that shall cut down the banners of the corn, the splendors of the rose, and the soaring ambition of the vine: so hangs over us the frost of death, uncertain as to its day or month or year, but sure, the one surest thing of all our lives. “Ye know not the day nor the hour.” Yes, the longest life has an end; we cannot strike out that, though many would gladly do it.

"For in that sleep of death what *dreams* may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause."

"In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;
There is no shuffling, *there* the action lies
In [its] true nature, and we ourselves compelled,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence."

If Balaam's religious knowledge or speculations went at all into the questions of the future life, no matter how long he lived or what his wealth, he must have cringed in terror at every thought of death. Oh, yes, it would have been far better for him if he had staid at home.

But he may not have thought much of that: the Old Testament is almost silent as to there being any life after death; he had not even been taught in the Jewish religion; forget that aspect of the case. What then remains? There remains just this: a continuous pitiless self-contempt; a miserable sense that he had sold himself at a terribly cheap rate; a conscience arousing at any moment to reproach him and only by the most desperate efforts beaten back into torpor; a shrinking from the society of the good,—who somehow, even in adversity, seemed to have elements of happiness that he could not touch;—an occasional meeting with clean men, and a stabbing sense of being despised; a haunting suspicion that self-respect and a good conscience are necessary to put savor into any pleasure that money—even omnipotent money—can buy; a growing sense that his gold could not oppress him more if it were forged into chains and hung about his neck; the loss of his great office as a seer; the shutting off from his soul of all high and ennobling views of God and of truth; a monotonous alternation between shrinking from death—as

Cain fled before the avenging angel that followed him with uplifted sword—and that mad craving for death which has driven many a guilt-burdened wretch into suicide; the heavy, patient, remorseless working out upon him of those terrible words of the Apostle: “Your gold and silver is *cankered*; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire.”

Is not this a dreadful picture? Let us fear it and flee from it with all the powers of our souls. And yet there is one that, to him that looks upon his case with discernment, is ten times worse: Balaam might have gone comfortably home, uplifted with honors and loaded with money; he might have settled down to the enjoyment of his great fee; he might have built himself a palace, have surrounded himself with luxuries, have been buzzed about by flatterers worshiping his wealth, and have *cared nothing* for the sin he had committed or the ruin he had wrought. This would have been more dreadful, for, though the other would have been a daily torture, this would have been a very death-in-life. In the other there would have been some faint hope of repentance, with its power to cleanse even the vilest soul; but here the avenues by which contrition might have stolen into his heart are finally sealed. He has “grieved away the Spirit.” His “heart is hardened.” The light that was in him is darkness. *Conscience is dead, and with it hope.*