

*BALAAAM'S ASS.*

OF all the narratives in the Old Testament there is not one which has been singled out for more contemptuous ridicule than that which tells us how "the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbade the madness of the prophet." But if it has been made the butt of unseemly frivolity, it must be freely admitted that it has also furnished a plea for groundless and untenable defence. The story would not have been assailed with scoffing satire if it had not been buttressed up with impossible exegesis. In arguing with those who have been driven by endless difficulties into an attitude of intellectual distrust, let us never forget that the distrust is largely due to the dogmatic theories of theologians who, with perfect sincerity, but with knowledge necessarily limited by the narrow horizon of their own particular sect or their own partial study, have erected their views of inspiration into a dangerous and anathematizing system. The yearning for some rigid standard of infallibility has, in all ages, been the besetting weakness of sincere religionists; the belief in their own possession of such infallibility has been the *idolon theatri* which, in age after age, has impeded the progress of those who sought for sacred knowledge; the assertion that this supposed infallibility gives them an indefeasible authority over the opinions and consciences of others has led to the worst tyrannies of sacerdotalism and intolerance. In vain have many of the wisest and deepest thinkers warned the Church of their day that to stake the credibility of religion on this or that text,

and to insist that the whole structure of Christianity must stand or fall with the minute and literal exactness of this or that narrative, is to subject it to fatal dangers and to hedge it round with needless and insuperable difficulties. An unintelligent view of the nature of revelation—a hard dogma that every word and letter of Scripture—every date, every trivial discrepancy, every popular allusion, every antique allegory, every ordinary proverb, every *obiter dictum auctoris aliud agentis*, is not only divinely inspired, but inspired in a manner so mechanical that every phrase which is not professedly metaphorical must, under pain of anathema, be accepted as rigidly literal—lies at the root of half the difficulties of thousands of honest minds. It has been a reasonable excuse for the inlet of a scepticism which is at once perilous and to be pitied. So far as Christians allow their prejudices to place this positive and enormous stumbling-block in the path of belief, by the blind and unreasoning repetition of assertions which are not found either in Scripture itself or in any Christian creed, they are deeply responsible for all the deplorable results which such dogmatism produces. It is not too much to say that the Bible can never be fairly understood or truly valued, even by those sceptics whose scepticism is entirely humble and sincere, until its true significance and position are more largely interpreted and more widely understood. That Holy Scripture is given by inspiration of God—that it contains all things necessary for salvation—is what all believers hold; but to make this belief coextensive with all the traditional views

of a hard and harmonizing literalism is most unduly to strain both the meaning of language and the possibility of faith.

Now I believe that, when rightly understood, the magnificent Chapters which record the story of the Prophet Balaam do not necessarily involve our belief in any external miracle, beyond those miracles of Providence which we may witness on any day of our lives. I believe that, if a reasonable view of their interpretation had always been taken, they would never have created a moment's difficulty or given rise to a word of jest; and that we shall be most likely to estimate their moral grandeur aright if we banish as far from our minds as possible the entire array of learned, or pseudo-learned, arguments which the spirit of system has suggested in defence of the literal acceptance of the story of the ass. That any one can attach one moment's importance to the mere physical aspect—the mere verbal acceptance—of a scene which was so obviously and transparently intended to be the vehicle of great moral lessons, and not merely to excite the astonishment caused by what is supernatural,—is more than can be easily understood. If any one still cherish so injurious a slavery to the letter, let him by all means do so undisturbed; only, in the name of toleration and of sound judgment, if not in the yet more solemn names of Christian knowledge and religious truth, let him be content with his own personal conviction and not try to enforce by denunciations, which can only recoil upon those who utter them, the belief in an interpretation which, while in itself supremely unimportant—supremely unim-

portant because it can add nothing whatever to our faith in the majesty and providence of God, or to our acceptance of miracles adequately established—tends only to bewilder and disturb those who find in the real significance of the story one of the most forcible illustrations which even the Scriptures afford of certain great moral and spiritual laws. At any rate, it cannot be too widely known that Christian faith and Christian orthodoxy are in no way concerned in any one's refusal to understand literally a story of which the beauty and instructiveness are due exclusively to its spiritual significance. To shew how that story may be regarded—to place it once more in that light of moral revelation which in all ages has constituted its true value to those who desire to learn—to indicate the relation to the entire narrative of the particular episode which has been so determinately ridiculed and so obstinately defended—is the sole object of the following remarks.

1. Balaam, the son of Beor, is abruptly introduced to us, in the twenty-second chapter of Numbers, as a great Mesopotamian sorcerer, living at Pethor, "which is by the river of the land of the children of his people,"—or, in other words, as living on the banks of Euphrates in his native land. The names applied to his "divinations" and "enchantments" indicate with perfect clearness his addiction to forbidden arts; and the significance of the names Balaam, Beor, and Pethor (from roots which mean "to detest," "to burn," and "to reveal"), though not decisive, and not to be too far pressed, no doubt furnishes an additional argument to those who

regard the whole narrative as purely ideal. As it is not my immediate object to treat it from a critical point of view, but only to shew the bearing of it on great religious truths and principles, this is not the place to furnish the reasons which lead to the distinct conviction that Balaam was an actual and well-known personage; but while this is my own belief, it seems only fair to say that the idealizing of the whole story would no more, necessarily, destroy its value than the maintenance of a similar view with regard to the Book of Job. The main incidents of the episode which relates to Balaam appear to me to be demonstrably historical; but, in the case of every one alike, the value of those incidents must rest *mainly* in the inspired truths which they are so well calculated to enforce, and they may be regarded as a noble vehicle for the inculcation of Divine teaching, even by those who are compelled to doubt as to their historic verity. Does any one attach less value to the Parable of the Prodigal Son because it is an ideal, not an actual, story?—in other words, because it is a parable and not a fact?

2. Towards the close of the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness, Balak, the son of Zippor, was king of Moab, a country which he seems to have won by personal conquest. The insecurity of an alien dynasty intensified the terror with which he watched the irresistible advance of the children of Israel. Sihon had been slain, and Heshbon, his capital, had been taken from the possession of the warrior Amorites. Og, the gigantic king of Bashan, had fallen with all his people in the splendid victory of

Edrei. The whole east of Jordan had thus been subdued by Israel. The Moabites, who had already been defeated by the Amorites, now saw the conquest of their conquerors; and the Midianites, who had seized the government of the weakened country, watched with extreme terror the advance which threatened to lick up all that was round about them as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. There seemed to be no help in war, no strength to resist in the arm of man. And the gods of the terrified nations were impotent to aid. The Baalim and Ashtoroth had met with signal overthrow, and Chemosh had given no sign that he was ready to avert the woe which had been pronounced upon his people.

3. It was under these circumstances of suspense and terror that Balak sent to Balaam. As the king looked down from Pisgah on the countless tents which broke the monotony of the desert, he could think of no aid sufficiently powerful to blight and arrest the progress of Israel except the enchantments of the splendid sorcerer. There has always existed in the East an intense conviction in the potency of articulated words, and Semitic nations have always believed that not only men, but nations might be fettered fast in the "unclanking chains" of spells and curses. And if so, whose word could have mightier influence over the powers that cause the earthquake than the words of the son of Beor? So the messengers of Balak started in solemn embassy with the invitation—"Come now, I pray thee, curse me this people, for they are too mighty for me: for I wot that he whom thou

blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed."

4. The elders traversed their long journey to Aram-Naharaim and delivered their message. But Balaam—sorcerer and Gentile as he was—had yet such knowledge of the true God, and such insight into the moral law, and such a fire of prophecy burning in a soul otherwise darkened, as to be well aware that the curse is powerless against those whom God protects. He knew that Jehovah, who frustrateth the tokens of the liars and maketh diviners mad, would only bring retributive ruin on those who attempted to curse a nation which He had conspicuously blessed. But, unhappily for Balaam, the elders of Moab and Midian appealed to his besetting sin, for they carried "the rewards of divination in their hand." To bid them depart at once would have been Balaam's only safety; but instead of that he paltered with his conscience, and, as though he needed some Divine interposition to tell him how to act, he invites the messengers to lodge there that night. He puts off the firm refusal; he simulates a doubt as to the distinct duty. He must forsooth have a vision of God, which he secretly hopes may permit him to take the rewards and go. But this time his conscience, though it swerves and wavers, does not yield. God comes unto Balaam—so transparently allegorical and anthropomorphic is the narrative—and asks him "who these men are." Balaam tells Him, and is distinctly forbidden to accept their invitation.

5. But if the evil spirit of covetousness had for the moment been exorcised, if the dictate of con-

science had for the time prevailed, the original weakness and insincerity produced their own terrible Nemesis in the swift recurrence of the moral crisis. Balak, at any rate, is desperately in earnest, and sends "princes, more, and more honourable" than the first, with a yet more urgent message and yet more splendid promises. The temptation comes back upon Balaam, "terrible and with tiger's leap." The very boastfulness of his talk about refusing a house full of silver and gold is a bad omen, in which Balaam must have felt, as Balak had done instinctively, that an implied "yes" lay under the ostentatious "no." The very form of his refusal revealed the images amid which the thoughts of Balaam were lingering. Again follows the same pretence of indecision, the same implied necessity for further direction, the same hypocritical desire to be directed, when all was already so unmistakably plain. And now the guilty longing is followed by the penal permission. The erring desire is left to bring about the consequences of its unimpeded fulfilment. It is a terrible omen when the offended conscience sinks into sudden silence. There is a fearful irony in its extorted connivances. "Do it," said the Heathen oracle in answer to him who asks if he may betray a trust—"do it;" and then there follows in a whisper the fearful "*but.*" Sometimes the consequence is supplied—"Walk in the light of thine eyes, but remember that for all these things God shall bring thee into judgment." Sometimes, which is still more terrible, the scorn of prophetic irony speaks with disdainful gaiety, and adds no more—"Go up to Ramoth-Gilead, and prosper, for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand

of the king." The idolater is answered—and is answered unconditionally—according to his idols. The fiat goes forth—"Ephraim is turned unto idols,"—what then? Punish him? Let loose against him the healing miseries of famine, and fire, and sword? No.—"*Let him alone.*"

6. Temptation assailing a besetting weakness; the temptation only half resisted; the temptation bounding back like a half-baffled wild beast, with more resolute rage, against a weakened enemy; the temptation completely and penally victorious;—such, up to this point, have been the stages of Balaam's career. He is permitted, or half permitted, to do what he chooses to think is best; he is suffered to walk in the way which seemeth right to him, though the end thereof are the ways of death. God says, "If the men come to call thee, rise up and go with them." Whether the men came and called him or not we are not told, but, at any rate, Balaam rose up in the morning and saddled his ass and went. He has gained his point; he is on the high road of disobedience: like a baleful and delusive meteor glimmers before him the house full of silver and gold. But, though he has gained his point, he is not happy. Remorse follows remonstrance. He knows too well that he is but the victim of just irony and wrath. God's anger is kindled; the angel of the Lord is standing in the way for an adversary against him.

7. But he will not see the opposing angel. The gleam of the avenging sword, the waving of the white robes, are lost upon him. The ass sees; the dumb ass is sensible of the danger and terror in the path, but not he who gave himself the proud title

of "the man whose eyes are open, who heard the words of God, who saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open." Could there be a symbol more rich with significant warning? Is not history, is not the common experience of life, full of instances of men who advance blindly, boldly, unconsciously, to manifest destruction? All around see it; we might imagine that the very animals, the very dullest of the dumb creatures, see it; but the man sees it not. God sprinkles penal blindness over illicit lusts. The eyes that will not see are sealed; the ears that will not hearken are stopped; the heart is made hard and gross that will not understand; the iron sinew is stiffened in the neck that will not bend.

8. The warning accident, the sinister omen, the doubts and fears which it ought to have inspired, are all ignored or set at naught. Balaam smites the ass which has turned into the field, and so drives her into the way. That way is now evidently drawing near to some city, for it lies through a vineyard, protected on either side by two walls which only leave between them a narrow path. In that narrow path the angel is standing, and though Balaam is blind, the ass sees that the danger is now still more imminent, and so, thrusting herself close to the wall, crushes Balaam's foot against the wall. Again Balaam smites her, and then, as if to allow time for the incident to teach its lessons, as if to give an interspace for thought and penitence and warning to work a change in the Prophet's distorted will, the angel of the Lord goes further. But 'warning not taken is the very presage of destruc

tion," and the angel has only removed to take his stand more irresistibly, more imperiously, at a spot where there is no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. Still blinded, the Prophet advances on his unhallowed mission, and now the terror-stricken ass, which has all along been conscious of the dreadful obstacle to her progress, falls down under Balaam,—and a third time he smites her.

10. So far all this is perfectly simple and easily intelligible, for every one who has studied the strange phenomena of animal life is aware that animals frequently shew signs of liability to mysterious and apparently inexplicable terror. But at this point comes the crisis of the story. "*And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.*

"*Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.*"

11. Now contrast the literal and the ideal interpretation of this passage.

If taken literally we have the unnatural, wholly needless, and I had almost said revoltingly-abnormal portent of a smitten ass asking its master a question, and wishing to know the reason of its punishment.

The presence of the two servants, and of the elders of Moab and Midian, is not noticed. No mention is made that they were even aware of anything remarkable, and during the remainder of the story no allusion, however remote, is made to the speaking ass. Without one particle of astonishment, without the faintest expression of surprise, the master of the ass explains why he had struck her, and is only sorry that accident prevents him from doing her a worse injury. She then pleads her former character and past services, which her master frankly admits; and then the angel intervenes.

12. Now I hardly hesitate to say that the entire circumstances and context of the narrative shew that the Semitic writer neither did attach, nor could have attached, any importance to what may be called the mere outward machinery of his story, and that he is intent, not on describing a marvel, but on teaching a lesson. And if so—if, writing in the ordinary and perfectly familiar Semitic style, which as much as possible throws every image into the concrete and every lesson into allegory or narration; if, accustomed by his Semitic habits of thought to see and recognize but little distinction between the providential and the miraculous; if, being perfectly familiar with the talking trees and animals which have always entered into Oriental parables—he wished to convey the story of an awakening conscience—the incidents which reveal to an erring soul that its ways are not pleasing to the Lord,—the omen which should bring home to it the awful conviction that even the unintelligent creation around it seems more conscious of, more sensitive to, God's presence and to

the majesty of God's offended law than itself:—then I maintain that it would have been impossible for the writer more powerfully—because it would have been impossible for him in a manner more startling from the very simplicity—to shew how it came home to Balaam's heart that there was an awful meaning in what occurred, how conscience reasserted its majesty, how he became aware that an angel of opposing mercy stood right in his path, to warn, to punish, haply even to save him ere it was too late. A spirit is before him. He can distinguish the very waving of his apparel; he can no longer mistake the flash of his sword for the hot sunshine that streams through the leaves of the vines. His eyes are opened with that great glare of unnatural illumination which so often follows the commission of a great act of sin. His soul is frozen and stunned as it realizes the dread of an Avenging Presence.

13. If it be thus regarded the strange incident falls in quite naturally—even with a certain sublimity in its antique form of allegory—into a narrative which is peculiarly rich in solemn considerations. To pursue the story and to point its further lessons would be a very pleasant and perfectly easy task, but is no part of my object: that object is to remove a needless stumbling-block and to take from the hands of scepticism an irreverent and unavailing jest. It is quite possible that hundreds of honest believers, trained in unquestioning and obstinate traditions, may fail to accept the point of view which I have offered. They will think that the truth of religion and the majesty of revelation are robbed of something by such methods of interpretation. They will prefer to believe that the ass really spoke

human words, and pleaded and reproached. Be it so, if so they will. Let them rest in their own convictions and be fully persuaded in their own minds. But, meanwhile, what is it which they suppose is lost by my subjective interpretation? Does the belief in a Divine providence, does the power to accept all duly attested instances of the exertion of supernatural power for fit ends and for beneficent purposes, rest on our literal belief that human vocables were uttered by Balaam's ass? If they think so, if they think that the necessity of such a belief is clenched by the purely incidental and illustrative reference made to the story in the Second Epistle of St. Peter, then I say again, let them by all means rest undisturbed in such a belief. I have no desire to win any one over against his will to a view which seems to me nobler and truer. Only let those who differ from us imitate the same spirit of charitable concession. Do not let them make their own positiveness blind them to the possibility of their own ignorance. From the earliest days of belief there is abundant evidence that many great and holy minds have seen in this portion of the story a vision or a philosopheme. But to say that the ass spoke to Balaam only *in a vision* is, of course, the same thing as saying that it did not *actually* speak at all. It is to give to the story a purely subjective turn. If this be stigmatized as rationalism, or branded by any other name of dislike, the stigma must be borne by so many men of eminent faith and pre-eminent knowledge, that even if all the voices of all the sects be raised in his condemnation no one need blush to share the blame.