

BALAAAM'S ASS.

NUMBERS xxii. 28-30.

IT is rational to believe in miracles, but it is not easy to believe in *all* the miracles recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. Every one who believes in God believes in the supernatural—believes, that is, in a supernatural order underlying the natural order, believes even in a supernatural Being who originated the natural order, who is immanent in it, and transcends it. Every one who believes that God has at any time revealed his will to men believes that the supernatural order has at times shone through the natural order which it underlies and in which it is immanent; that the supernatural Being has, so to speak, come forth from the secret places of the sacred pavilion in which He habitually dwells, to manifest Himself to mankind. Nay, even Science, which has long professed to know nothing of God or of any revelation of his Will, is rapidly approaching the conclusion that the various forces—mechanical, chemical, vital—whose motions and laws and sequences it has traced, spring from a supra-sensible substance and order. By the mouth of its most advanced disciples in Germany, England, America, it is giving in its adhesion to that ancient assertion of Holy Writ, that “the things which are seen are made of things which do not appear.” Force, motion, life, thought, conscience, confessedly take their

origin in heights far above the natural order; if at least we listen to the masters of human wisdom, and not to those who stumble, a little clumsily, in their rear.

It is rational to believe in miracles, then, if we believe in God and in any revelation of his will to men. But to believe in some miracles is not to believe in all miracles; and, obviously, some of the miracles recorded in the Old Testament make a very large and heavy demand on our faith: none of them, perhaps, a larger and heavier demand than this, that "the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet."¹ Sceptics have long made merry over it as a monstrous and self-evident fable—a merriment in which it is not easy to join; for it surely is not laughable, but infinitely pathetic, that for long ages men should have been left to believe a lie, if indeed it were a lie that they believed. On the other hand, while sceptics have made merry over this alleged miracle, certain defenders of the faith have long done their best to explain it, or, rather, to explain it away—not always with candour, and never with more than very partial success. Perhaps the explanation which has found the widest acceptance in our own day runs as follows. Balaam, the seer, the diviner, was trained to interpret the motions and cries of birds and beasts, to draw auguries and portents from them, to infer from them indications of the Divine Will. When, therefore, the beast he rode shewed so strange and unwonted a reluctance to advance; when he, first, "turned aside out of the way," then, "crushed Balaam's foot against a wall," and then fell down, groaning or shrieking, in "a narrow place where there was no room to turn

¹ 2 Pet. ii. 16.

either to the right hand or to the left," the diviner felt that the ass was remonstrating with him; that, conscious of a presence of which he himself was unaware, it was seeking to save him from a doom he was heedlessly provoking. And so, with the dramatic instinct of an Oriental poet, either Balaam himself, or the original writer of the narrative, *translated these subjective impressions into external facts*, and made the ass "speak" the meaning which he read in its motions and cries.

I have not a word to say against that hypothesis except this—that it does not so much as touch the real difficulty of the case. For, obviously, the sacred historian who reproduced the story in the Book of Numbers *believed* that the ass spoke just as sincerely as he believed that an angel appeared and stood in the way. Obviously, too, the men who first heard or read this story would never for a moment doubt but that the Lord in very deed "opened the mouth of the ass." And, finally, St. Peter, fifteen hundred years afterwards, just as obviously and just as sincerely believed that God rebuked the iniquity of the Prophet by the dumb ass "speaking with man's voice." To my mind the question is not whether the ass did, or did not, speak, but whether the sacred and inspired writers *believed* that he spoke. And to that question I submit that there can be but one reply. However *we* may interpret the story, I do not see how we can doubt that, from Moses to Peter, *they* read the story in its plain and literal sense. I do not affirm that we are bound to read it as they did; but I do affirm that the real difficulty lies in the question of how they read it. The difficulty, in short, that we have to meet is not so much, *Was there a real miracle here? as, Did men,*

inspired by God, *believe* that there was a miracle? And to that question there can be, as I have said, but one reply. They *did* believe that, for a moment, the dumb ass was endowed with the gift of human speech. It is to this belief in the miracle, therefore, rather than to the miracle itself, that those must address themselves whose theory of Inspiration is too narrow to admit of any imperfection or defect in the conceptions and beliefs of the holy men of old who wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

To many of us happily—to as many, I am tempted to add, as hold the Biblical theory of Inspiration, *i.e.*, the view of it suggested by the Bible itself—the narrative presents no difficulty. *We* have reached a point of view from which all such difficulties as this cease to have any power over us, and stand on a rock from which we can be swept by no wave, whether of Criticism or of Scepticism. For we believe that God's revelation of his will has been gradual and progressive; and that even to the very end we have, and must have, this heavenly treasure in earthen vessels. We believe that God revealed the truth to men as they were able to receive it,—in and through the words with which they were familiar, in and through the mental forms and imaginative conceptions and beliefs with which they were familiar. We believe that, if He deigned to speak to men at all, or at least in any form which they could understand, He *must* speak to them in the verbal, literary, and imaginative forms which they had invented, which they used at the time He spoke. And hence it does not disturb our faith in his Word to learn either that, when He would teach men that all things were made by Him, He disclosed that

momentous fact in *the scientific terms* of the age to which He taught it; or that, when He would rebuke the madness of a diviner, He should deign to employ *the imaginative forms* in which such a man thought, and humble him by setting his own ass to prove the blindness of one who prided himself on having his "eyes open" to spiritual visions and intimations.¹ It matters but little to us whether the ass spoke or did not speak, whether we have history here or fable. It does not perplex us to see that the sacred writers regarded as history what we, perhaps, hold to be parable. We say, If God was to speak to men, He could only speak to them through the words, the thoughts, the conceptions, and beliefs with which they were familiar at the time, just as a man can only speak to a child effectively by adapting himself to its stage of mental and moral development. And if these verbal and mental forms were imperfect—as doubtless they often were, and *still are*—nevertheless, the lessons He conveyed to them through these imperfect forms were the lessons of a perfect Wisdom. Though the vessels of Revelation be of the earth, the treasure they contain is heavenly and from Heaven. And so the facts which perplex others do not perplex us, since they are in entire harmony with our fundamental conception of Revelation, but are only new illustrations of the condescension and compassion of God.

So much labour and thought have been expended on the miracle, or supposed miracle, of this narrative, that hardly any attention has been given to its intellectual and ethical suggestions: form has usurped the

¹ Num. xxiv. 3, 4, 15, 16.

place of substance. And yet this Scripture, like all Scripture, was given mainly *for instruction*, the instruction which builds man up in righteousness, and is full of such instruction when we bring to it an open and disengaged mind. Here, if anywhere, we may find the lessons of a perfect Wisdom couched in imperfect forms, a heavenly treasure in an earthen vessel. Say that this talking ass is a miracle, if you please; say it is a fable, if you will; from our point of view it matters little to which conclusion you come: but, whether you hold it to be fable or miracle, be sure of this, that God meant us to learn something from it, and something worth learning. Take it at its lowest, admit that it is a fable—I will quarrel with no man for that—but let us at least mark how congruous and instructive a fable it is.

If the dumb ass had had any profoundly spiritual truth put into its mouth, any such truth as the wisest men of that time had failed to grasp, we should all have felt, I suppose, that in his mouth it would have been very much out of place—that there would have been a marked and repulsive disproportion between the truth revealed and the medium through which it was conveyed. But no such truth is given him to speak. What he says is wholly in keeping with his animal nature and conditions. It is simply what myriads of the animals reduced to the service of man might and would have said, could they too have spoken with man's voice: it is simply, alas! what myriads of these poor relations of ours upon the carnal side might say to us at this very day. All he does is to remonstrate against the injustice and cruelty of man, to appeal to the fidelity of his service as a reason why

he should not be suspected of wilful disobedience. And, certainly, there seems a special propriety in putting this protest and remonstrance into the mouth of an ass—of one who belonged to, who may at least be accepted as the spokesman of, perhaps the most wronged and suffering class of creatures under the sun. Virtually, he says: "You have smitten me these three times. You would have slain me, if you could, although my only offence is that I have been trying to save you from a danger you did not see. Why have you treated me so cruelly? Have I not served you faithfully ever since I was thine? Have I ever disobeyed you before, or disobeyed you without sufficient cause? Am I wont to do so unto thee? If not, why did you not conclude that I had good reason for disobeying you now? Why forget my past service and faithful attachment, and seek to slay me because I am seeking to save you?" Now, if an ass *could* speak, could he speak more appropriately than that? Are there not thousands of dogs and horses who, if man's voice were lent them for a moment, would take up his "ancient tale of wrong," and repeat, with only too much cause, his very words to-day? Have we never *seen*, although we could not hear, a dog or a horse say them? I have many a time. And therefore I hope that Balaam's ass *did* speak, and lodge once for all this pathetic remonstrance and appeal on behalf of the whole animal world.

Such a rebuke of "the madness" of man in his treatment of the animals who serve him, especially in his treatment of all beasts of burden, must often have risen to our own lips. It is almost impossible to walk the streets of any of our towns and cities without

seeing some senseless and furious brute of our own race belabouring a poor, patient, but overtasked beast, who is nevertheless straining every muscle and sinew in his service. The fact that the poor beast cannot strike back again, that he is helplessly in the hands of his master, that he has no avenger but God, so far from restraining cruelty, often seems to provoke it. Nay, even the fact that the poor beast is inoffending, that he has done nothing to deserve punishment, that he is doing his best, or that, if he is restive, he is restive simply because of some maladroitness on the part of his driver, or because the recollection of former cruelty makes him apprehensive and suspicious, — all this even is often powerless to restrain the brute who calls himself a man. How often must all our hearts have ached with an almost intolerable pang at seeing the well-nigh impossible tasks to which horses are put, and the utterly irrational and unfeeling cruelty with which they are lashed and tormented until their task becomes altogether impossible, or the poor suffering creatures are spoiled for future use !

Much of this cruelty, however, springs from ignorance and thoughtlessness, if much also springs from a fierce domineering temper and uncontrolled passion. It is not often, I am afraid, that beasts of burden see *angels* in their way, though they are only too familiar with—the antithesis of angels. But the senses and perceptions of many of them are certainly keener than ours. They often see what we cannot see, and are alarmed by dangers, or threatenings of danger, of which we are unaware ; just as Balaam's ass saw the drawn sword which barred his way long before his master saw it. They must have saved myriads of human lives by the

superior fineness and delicacy of their organs of sight and smell and hearing, and even by the superior accuracy or tenacity of their memory. You can hardly talk with a man who rides much, or who drives much, but he will tell you of adventures in which he was saved from imminent peril by the wonderful sagacity of his four-footed minister and friend ; just as Balaam was saved from the impending sword by his ass.

But for these superior instincts and powers they have—and all creatures have the defects of their qualities—to pay a penalty. They render them sensitive, apprehensive, quick to see, or to suspect, peril. And it is these highly-organized, these sensitive and apprehensive creatures, who see and hear and smell so much which escapes us, that we lash and torture with unthinking but unsparing cruelty! It is these patient and faithful creatures, who do so much for us and bear so much from us, that at times we drive frantic, so that they are no longer themselves, and rush anywhere, anywhere, to be out of their misery! We boast of their sagacity, their affection, their fidelity, of the exquisite delicacy of their senses and instincts, with all of which, Heaven knows, *we* have very little to do ; but when they disobey us, we too often forget both the fidelity of their past services and attachment, and the fact that what we take for disobedience may be, and commonly is, a perception of risks or danger which we are too dull to share. We rate them as mutinous and stubborn when their only fault is that they do not understand what we wish them to do, and punish them for a single and momentary act of wilfulness as if they had not bent their will to ours for years. Whether or not Balaam's ass really spake, I do not know ; but again I say, I

hope he did, and could almost wish that every one of the patient and faithful beasts whom we torment so unreasonably could speak with man's voice, if only to rebuke the madness and brutality of man.

Humanity to animals, then, let this be the first lesson we learn from this narrative, since we are in search of the "instruction" it contains. So often as we see them oppressed, or are ourselves tempted to oppress and torment them, let us carry ourselves as though we heard the pathetic remonstrance issuing from their "poor dumb mouths:" *Wherefore smite us? Have we not served you faithfully ever since we were yours? Are we wont to rebel against you?*

And if humanity to animals be our first lesson, let *fidelity to God* be our last. How Balaam took the remonstrance of his ass—who did but *remonstrate* by-the-by, not curse and swear and kick and strike, as many "a Christian" would have done in his place—we are not told, except that it stands recorded that, to the ass's appeal as to whether he was wont to be wilful and disobedient, he was compelled to answer, "Nay." But as he was a wise man, and even a good man, though very imperfectly good, we may hope that it quickened a sincere shame and remorse in him. For how could he, a man accustomed to look for ethical and religious meanings in all the signs of Nature—how could he listen to that appeal without searching for a hidden meaning in it, without applying it to himself? He, too, had a Master—a Master in heaven. Could he look up to heaven and say to his Master, as the ass had just said to him, *Have not I been true to thee ever since I was thine unto this day? Was I ever wont to be unfaithful and disobedient to thee?* Why, at that very

moment he was untrue, unfaithful: he was on a base rebellious errand, and knew it, though he tried hard not to know it. He was engaged in the attempt to speak other words than those which God had spoken to him, to cross the will of the Spirit by whom he was moved—an attempt, strange to say, in which he both succeeded and failed. For though, when the push came, he could not speak any message save that which God had put into his mouth, could not curse the men whom God had blessed, he nevertheless brought a curse upon them, instigating Balak to put a temptation in the way of Israel, to set a trap for them, by falling into which they provoked the anger of the Lord. He, a prophet, from mere love of hire, mere lust for “the wages of unrighteousness,” was betraying the Master whom he professed to serve, a Master who had never wronged him as he had wronged the beast he rode! It would be strange indeed, then, if he did not find an appeal to his own conscience in the words with which his madness was rebuked—some such appeal as this: Have *you* been as true to your Master as I to mine? Have you been as mindful of the heavenly vision vouchsafed to you, as I to the heavenly apparition which appeared to me? Has your service been as faithful, as patient, as disinterested, as mine?

It would be a very happy result of our meditation on this strange and difficult narrative, which seems to lie so remote from our daily experience, if, besides learning from it a more thoughtful and considerate kindness for the dumb beasts who serve us, we should also learn from them a little more fidelity and patience and self-forgetfulness in the service of God: for thus we should acquire at least two of the “reverences”

which Goethe held to be indispensable to the culture of man, "the reverence for that which is beneath us" and "the reverence for that which is above us." Scripture was given, not for polemical nor even for philosophical debate, but *for instruction*, for that kind of instruction which leads to righteousness. And we may be quite sure that we have made the best use of this Scripture if, besides learning from it a lesson of right conduct towards the docile and faithful creatures who serve us, we also learn from it to let them instruct us in our right relation and our right bearing to our Master in heaven. At least once in the old time God Himself had to make this very appeal to the men who were most bound to serve Him. "If I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my reverence?"¹ Probably He might also make that appeal even to us. Assuredly it could not but be well for us if when a dog shews any marked and special affection for us, or a horse any marked sagacity and fidelity in our service, we were to allow the question to arise within us, Do we serve God as faithfully as these poor dumb creatures serve us? Do we love Him with the same reverence and affection with which they love us? To put them to that use would be to put them to a far higher use than that to which we put them when we ride a horse or shoot over a dog. And if it may be feared that such a question and appeal would often contain a severe rebuke for us, it may also be hoped that such a question and appeal would set us on serving God more patiently and loving Him more truly. No one of us, alas! not even the best, can look up to Him and say, "Have I

¹ Mal. i. 6.

not been faithful to thee ever since I was thine? Was I ever wont to disobey thee?" But we can all seek to turn our dumb companions and friends to the best account, by letting them remind us of the reverence we owe to our Master, and of the affection we owe to our Father in heaven.

S. COX.

THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS.

GENESIS xxxii.

THAT part of Christian dogmatics which is concerned with the existence and ministry of angels demands the careful consideration of reverent and thoughtful minds at the present day. For it is in *this* position—a position almost, if not quite, peculiar to itself—that, although founded upon numerous explicit statements of Holy Writ, it has yet fallen to a very great extent out of the real belief of Christian people. If this seem stronger than the fact, I would ask any devout person, holding the common faith, to examine his own religious belief, and to inquire whether the doctrine of angels, as taught by all religious bodies alike, has any *roots* in his own practical faith towards God, in his own conscious relations to the unseen world.

I do not mean to imply for a moment—as will, I hope, appear—that we *disbelieve* either the existence or the ministry of angelic beings: we cannot do so without rejecting and denying point blank the unquestioned and unquestionable dicta of our Lord and of his apostles. There can be no doubt that the doctrine of angels as ordinarily taught throughout all Christendom