

THE EXPOSITOR.

BALAAH: AN EXPOSITION AND A STUDY.

A man of two minds, he is unstable in all his ways.

INTRODUCTION.

EVEN in the noble portrait-gallery of the Old Testament there are few figures more striking, more impressive, or more perplexing than that of Balaam. A heathen, not a Hebrew, and yet elected for special distinction in the service of God; a diviner, seeking omens and auguries and interpreting them after the approved methods of the ancient East, and yet a prophet who heard the words of God and saw visions from the Almighty with opened eyes; a sooth-sayer, affecting to foretell and even to control human destinies, and yet a seer familiar with the ecstasies of the prophetic trance, and to whom the inspiration of the Almighty gave understanding of things to be; a man of God who, in the face of all threatening and allurements, professed that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord his God, "to do a small thing or a great," and who, in the teeth of his own most clamorous interests and desires, did consistently "speak the word that the Lord put into his mouth," and yet a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord, and who by his vile counsel to the daughters of Midian cursed Israel far more effectually than by any spell he could have cast upon them; a sage before whose mind there floated the loftiest moral ideal which has ever blessed the eyes of man, and to whom both the life

and the death of the righteous were infinitely desirable, and yet a "fool" who "loved the wages of unrighteousness" even more than righteousness itself: here, surely, was a man whose character it is by no means easy to decipher and harmonize, a man of qualities and impulses so contradictory and opposed that, to most of us, he remains an enigma to this day.

Many have attempted to solve, and one or two have gone far toward solving, this enigma. Bishop Butler, Dr. Arnold, Cardinal Newman, F. D. Maurice, Robertson (of Brighton), Dean Stanley, with many more,¹ have been attracted by it; but while they have all contributed something to our knowledge of the man, and two of them, Butler and Maurice, have contributed all, or nearly all, of which their respective methods of inquiry would admit, it is still open, even to far inferior men, by employing new methods, or even by using old methods more rigorously, to arrive at a truer solution of the problem, a more adequate conception of this great but most unhappy Prophet.

And there are two methods of inquiry, I think, which may still be used with some hope. Up to this time no English scholar has, so far as I know, collected together *all* the Scriptures which relate to Balaam—Scriptures much more numerous than is commonly supposed—and studied

¹ In preparing for this Essay,—on which I would not have ventured could I have persuaded any of the more learned and able of the contributors to *The Expositor* to have undertaken it—I have naturally read all that has been said on Balaam by the great critics and thinkers of the present and of past generations, so far as I could lay my hands upon it. And I have been as gratified as astonished to find that F. D. Maurice and Bishop Butler are even now far more helpful, and go far more deeply into the real difficulties of this difficult theme, than any of their contemporaries or successors. Dean Stanley, *more suo*, deals mainly with the picturesque incidents of the story. Cardinal Newman is, for him, unusually thin and slight in his handling of it. After Butler and Maurice, Robertson is perhaps the most thorough and suggestive; and to these three I am indebted for many valuable hints and suggestions. The monographs of Hengstenberg and Kalisch are of much value from the critical point of view, especially that of the latter; but their handling of the moral and psychological problems involved in the narrative is by no means adequate or satisfactory—as we shall soon see.

them in the light of the new modern learning; though, obviously, this is the only method by which all the facts of the case can be recovered and ranked in their due order and importance, and the problem we have to solve can be fairly stated or re-stated. And, again, I have never yet seen what may be called the *comparative* method deliberately applied to the history and character of Balaam; that is to say, I have never seen him fairly placed alongside of other faulty or even guilty prophets, men such as Jacob, Saul, Solomon, Jonah, Caiaphas, etc., who, though they too were at times moved by the Holy Ghost, nevertheless fell under the dominion of divers lusts as degrading, if not as fatal, as those by which he was carried away captive; while yet, it will be admitted, that if we can only *classify* Balaam, and read the problem of his character in the light of that of men of his own type, this of itself will carry us far toward the solution of which we are in search, or will, at lowest, relieve the problem of many of its difficulties.

These two methods, therefore, I propose to apply. By a careful study of all that Holy Scripture records of him, I hope we may get the facts of the case, the quantities of the problem, more clearly stated; while by running a comparison between him and other inspired men of a similar type, I trust we may find that the problem is a much more common one than we have been wont to suppose; that his case, which has been assumed to be without a parallel, is not so unique, and therefore not so difficult and perplexing, as it seems.

Pope called Lord Bacon—

“The wisest, brightest, *meanest* of mankind.”

Few epigrams are more brilliant, or more unjust. But though Bacon was wronged by it, there have been men who have, in some measure, deserved it; men far wiser than their fellows, raised high above them by a splendid dowry

of the gifts which the world most admires, but who have nevertheless abused their gifts to their own shame, and to the lasting injury of all who loved and trusted them. And among these rare and gifted men, who once shone with a lustre so brilliant and attractive, but have long since sunk into the darkness of reprobation and pity and contempt, "lost to name and fame and use," we shall, I suspect, be led to rank this great, bright, but mean Prophet of Pethor.

Now of course, in urging this inquiry, our first question must be: What are the historical documents, the authorities, at our command; and what are they worth?

The first, and by far the fullest, historical document at our disposal is that which, for the sake of brevity and distinction, we may call *The Chronicle of Balaam* inserted in the Book of Numbers. Every reader of that Book must have observed that in Chapters xxii. 2—xxiv. 25 we have an episode complete in itself; and all the modern critics who have studied this Scripture concur, I believe, in the conclusion that, in this place, the Author or Compiler of the Book has inserted one of those ancient, detached or detachable, documents of which we find so many in the Pentateuch.

Where and how he got it, is a question not easy to answer, if indeed answer be possible. But, from the comparatively favourable light in which the Chronicle presents the facts of Balaam's story, most of our best scholars conclude that in some way he derived it from Balaam himself. Hengstenberg, who has devoted much labour to the illustration of the Chronicle, goes so far, indeed, as to assume that, on his dismissal by the King of Moab, Balaam betook himself to the camp of Israel, and told the chosen people how he had been constrained to bless them again and again, in the hope that they would welcome and reward him; and that, on meeting with but a cold reception, he went over

to the Midianite camp, and so fell with the chiefs of Midian when they made war upon Israel. But this is pure assumption, without a single recorded fact to support it. And, therefore, I venture to offer a speculation of my own which has at least some recorded facts to go upon.

We are told (Numbers xxxi. 8) that, together with five Midianite chiefs, Balaam was taken prisoner by the Israelites, and put to "a judicial death" after the battle had been fought and won.¹ A judicial death implies some sort of trial. And what more natural than that Balaam should plead in his defence the inspirations he had received from Jehovah, and the long series of blessings he had pronounced on Israel when all his interests, and perhaps also all his inclinations, prompted him to curse them? Such defences, in the East, were commonly autobiographical. Even St. Paul, when called upon to plead before kings and governors, invariably told the story of his life as his best vindication. And if Balaam, called upon to plead before Moses and the elders, told the story we now read in his Chronicle—what a scene was there? What a revelation his words would convey to the leaders of Israel of the kindness of God their Saviour, of the scale on which his providence works, and of the mystery in which it is wrapped to mortal eyes! So, then, God had been working for them in the mountains of Moab, and in the heart of this great diviner from the East, and they knew it not! Knew it not? nay, perhaps were full of fear and distrust, doubting whether even He Himself were able to deliver them from the perils by which they were encompassed! As Balaam unfolded his tale, how their hearts must have burned within them—burned with shame as well as with thankfulness—as they heard of interposition after interposition on their behalf of which up till

¹ So the best critics read the Verse, understanding by "Balaam they slew with the sword," the sword of justice, since the battle was over when he was slain.

now they had been ignorant, and for which at the time perchance they had not ventured to hope!

Balaam may well have thought that such a story as this would plead for him more effectually than any other defence he could make. And, no doubt, it did plead for him; for we all know that it is when our hearts have been touched by some unexpected mercy that they are most easily moved to pity and forgiveness: it might even have won him absolution but for that damning sin of which nothing is said here—the infamous counsel he gave to the daughters of Midian which had deprived Israel of four and twenty thousand of its most serviceable and precious lives.¹ Even with that crime full in their memories, it must have cost Moses and the elders much, one thinks, to condemn to death the man who had told them such a story as this.

On no other hypothesis can we so reasonably explain, I think, how Israel became possessed of the story recorded in the Chronicle of Balaam. But, however they got it, there can be no doubt that it shews us Balaam on his best side, in the noblest posture of his soul; and that, had we nothing but this Chronicle to go upon, we should have formed a far higher conception and have pronounced a far more favourable verdict on him than we are able to do.

For while even the Chronicle contains some hints of human imperfection and weakness, the other Old Testament Scriptures which refer to him clearly reveal those baser elements in his character which, blending with his noble qualities and gifts, have made him a standing puzzle to mankind. There is, indeed, one passage outside the Chronicle which, so far from lowering, raises him in our thoughts, viz. Micah vi. 5-8; for here a moral ideal is attributed to him than which even the Christian ideal itself is hardly more lofty and sublime. But most of these Old Testament Scriptures paint him in dark and sinister lines;

¹ Numbers xxxi. 16; xxv. 9

while the New Testament speaks of him with an absolute and passionate reprobation which fairly astonishes us, so unlike is it to its usual gentleness, until we remember that the higher and more splendid a man's gifts the lower he falls and the baser he becomes if he should pervert his gifts to selfish and sinister ends. It is from these outside Scriptures we learn that Balaam *wanted* to curse the people he was compelled to bless (Deut. xxiii. 5; Josh. xxiv. 10; Neh. xiii. 2); that it was by his counsel that the daughters of Midian were sent to tempt the men of Israel into the licentious orgies by which Baal and Astarte were worshipped, and so betrayed them to the anger of God (Num. xxxi. 16); and that, much as he loved righteousness, he loved the wages of unrighteousness still more (2 Pet. ii. 15, 16; Jude 11). And thus these Scriptures throw back a lurid light on the Chronicle itself, and compel us to read it with other and severer eyes.

Against this compulsion, however, we must be on our guard, lest it should carry us too far. Dark as is the shadow cast on the character of Balaam by these passages in Numbers, in Deuteronomy, in Joshua, in Nehemiah, in Peter and in Jude, we have no right to put the worst construction on every act recorded in the Chronicle, or to fit all Balaam's innocent or laudable actions with evil motives. It is not by making him out all bad, or all good, that we shall solve our problem, though this is how too many have tried to reach a solution. It is the mixture of good and bad in the man which constitutes the problem, which makes him so interesting to us, and so perplexing. And again and again, in reading the commentaries on this Chronicle, one has to remind one's-self that to cut a knot is not to untie it, and that to strike out all the difficult terms of a problem is not to solve it.

Thus, for instance, some of the most orthodox commentators simplify their task, cut their knot, by reading

the basest inuendoes into the sacred narrative, and wresting every incident of the story to Balaam's disadvantage. He can do nothing, and say nothing, which they do not turn against him, so thickly do motes of prejudice and suspicion float through the eyes with which they view him. Starting with the conviction that he was an unredeemed villain and impostor, they find confirmation strong as Holy Writ of that absurd assumption in trifles light as air. When, for example, they read that Balaam begged Balak's messengers to lodge with him a night, in order that he might consult God before he gave them their reply, they find in this natural and religious action only "a show of sanctity," assumed to "enhance his own importance." In God's question to him, "Who are these men that are with thee?" they hear a stern rebuke of his disloyalty in not having at once sent them back to their master with a peremptory refusal of his request. When Balaam refuses to go with them and to curse Israel, they cry out upon him for not giving them *the whole* of God's command to him: God had said, "Thou shalt not curse them, *for they are blessed;*" but Balaam says nothing of this "for they are blessed," wilfully suppressing words he did not want them to hear. Nay, more: so persuaded are these commentators of the unqualified villany of the man as to maintain that he only refused Balak's first advance "in order to make better terms for himself" and to secure a larger reward. The four misconstructions just cited are forced on only three verses of the Chronicle; and similar misconstructions, quite as malicious and perverse, are forced on it on pretty much the same scale throughout. And it is curious to observe that the critics who pursue Balaam with this microscopic and unrelenting malignity are the very men who are most resolved to find Messianic predictions in the oracles he uttered, and are most sure that to him it was given to see the day of Christ afar off!

No study of Scripture pursued in this carping and censorious spirit, and working by a method so irrational and unjust, can possibly conduct us to sound and honest conclusions. Nor will any orthodoxy of creed, or devoutness of intention, exonerate these who handle the Word of God so ungenerously and deceitfully. A lie is not less, but a thousandfold more, a lie when men "lie for God," when they think to please the Lord and Lover of truth by wresting the truth in his behalf. And we should never forget, though we are all too apt to forget, that we are no less strictly bound by the laws of justice and charity in forming and uttering our verdicts of those who are long since dead than in speaking of the living; nay, that to libel the dead is a meaner and a more cowardly sin than to libel the living, since the dead are no longer with us to speak on their own behalf. As there are few things more foolish, so also there are few more wicked, than an attempt to vindicate the ways of God by hard and undeserved censures on the characters of men, whether they be still with us or have gone before.

But if we need to be on our guard against the tendency and fault of certain (so called) orthodox commentators, we must also be on our guard against the tendency and fault of certain rationalistic commentators; for these, too, cut the knot instead of untying it, and that in the most irrational and unblushing way. As I have given a specimen of the injustice of the one school, it is but fair that I should also give a specimen of the unreasonableness of the other. Dr. Kalisch, then, who is justly severe on a fault to which he himself is not prone, has written a considerable volume on the story of Balaam, of the scholarship and erudition of which it would be difficult to speak in terms too high. And this is how he deals with it. The Scriptures outside the Chronicle of Balaam paint him, for the most part, in far darker colours than the Chronicle itself. We must there-

fore assume that these Scriptures follow a different and wholly untrustworthy tradition, and drop them quietly out of the account. Nay, when we examine the Chronicle itself, we discover in it one long episode—that which describes how the anger of the Lord was kindled against Balaam for taking the very journey He had bidden him take, and how “the dumb ass, speaking with man’s voice, forbad the madness of the prophet”—which is evidently inconsistent with the general tenour of the narrative; this, too, therefore, we must cut out as a later and misleading “interpolation,” “an unwarranted addition” to the Chronicle. But even yet there is a single word in the Chronicle—in the Verse (Num. xxiv. 1) which affirms that Balaam was wont to search for “enchantments” or “auguries”—which clashes with the general tone of the narrative; and this, though there is no diplomatic ground for suspecting it, but simply because it is “a single and isolated expression strikingly at variance with the tenour and spirit of the entire composition,” we must replace by another word, and assume that what he went to seek was “inspirations,” not “auguries.” Having thus cut and carved the Narrative to our mind, we shall have no hesitation in concluding that Balaam was a prophet of the purest and noblest type, without a stain on his character or a questionable incident in his career. “Firm and inexorable like eternal Fate, he regards himself solely as an instrument of that Omnipotence which guides the destinies of nations by its unerring wisdom. Free from all human passion, and almost from all human emotion, he is like a mysterious spirit from a higher and nobler world, which looks upon the fortunes of the children of men with an immovable and sublime repose.”¹

Thus Rationalism, with an unconscious but egregious irrationality which is its almost constant Nemesis, affects

¹ Bible Studies. Part I. The Prophecies of Balaam. By Dr. Kalisch, p. 11.

to solve the problem by calmly wiping it off the slate, and presents us with a faultless monster in place of a man of like passions with ourselves.

Not thus, but by accepting all that the Bible, both in and outside the Chronicle, has to tell us concerning him, and by patiently studying these Scriptures till light arises in the darkness, shall we come to know Balaam as he was, and learn the true lessons of his life.

I. THE CHRONICLE OF BALAAM.

§ 1. *The Invitation* (Numbers xxii. 2-21.)

When the Children of Israel, purged from the worst taints of slavery by their long sojourn in the pure air of the Desert, and in some measure trained to habits of order, freedom, and courage by the hardship and adventures of the way, drew near to the borders of the Promised Land, they were encountered by the Amorites, the great fighting clan of the Desert, under the renowned warrior-chiefs Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan. It was a critical and a perilous moment; for, with this fighting clan once conquered and swept out of the way, there was none left who could successfully oppose their entrance into the goodly land; while, had they suffered defeat, the whole Arab race would probably have flung themselves upon them and hunted them down in the Wilderness. Happily for them, and for us, their victory was immediate and decisive; and, the Amorites being utterly broken and subdued, their road lay open before them, with none to make them afraid.

But though, and because, there was none to bar the way by force of arms, the fear of them fell on neighbouring clans, and two of these, taking counsel of their fears, consulted together how, since force was of no avail, they might betray and undo them by fraud. These two were the Midianites, a peaceful nomadic clan, whose caravans travelled and traded throughout the East; and the Moabites, a

settled and organized clan, whose pastures were alive with cattle, and whose cities were rich in the arts and luxuries of the ancient civilization. To the King and princes of Moab the sheikhs of Midian suggested an expedient which, however strange it may seem to us, instantly commended itself to these statesmen of the antique world, and would commend itself to many of their descendants to this day. They agreed to hire "a wise man" to *curse* the Children of Israel, never doubting that he could lay a spell upon them under which their strength and valour would wither away.

Now the Midianites in their long journeys, journeys which often extended to the Euphrates and even beyond it, had heard of a man so wise, and whose words were so potent, that none could withstand him. A prophet, and the son of a prophet, he was called Balaam, the son of Beor; that is—for men are always most attracted and impressed by the darker side of the prophetic character—he was known as *the Destroyer*, the son of *the Burner*. At the present moment he was head of the Prophetic College of Pethor, on the Euphrates, where men from many lands gathered to study under him the arts of divination and enchantment. But, doubtless, if so great and opulent a prince as Balak were to send a suitable embassy to him, with "the rewards of divination" in their hands, he would come and curse the enemies whom both Moab and Midian had so much cause to dread.

This, as we gather from the Chronicle, was how *they* regarded Balaam; and it was on this report of him that Balak resolved to send for him. But how are *we* to regard him? That he was a Soothsayer we must admit, for by this name he is expressly described to us (Josh. xiii. 22); and therefore we must admit that he was largely dependent for his knowledge on omens and the auguries he drew from them; we must admit that he was versed in the arts of astrology and divination, and bears a suspicious resemblance

to the augurs of Rome, to the "prophets" of the Homeric poems and the Athenian tragedies, and even to the astrologers, sorcerers, diviners, the wise men or magi of Egypt, Chaldea, and Persia. In the words of F. D. Maurice, "He is evidently supposed to have that knowledge of things past, present, and future which is ascribed to Calchas," for example, "and which gave him his high repute with the Grecian fleet. He is appealed to just as that seer was appealed to when a pestilence was raging in the camp or when the ships were weather-bound; just as Tiresias was sent for to explain the calamity which had befallen Thebes, and to clear up the mystery which overhung the house of Œdipus." He falls into trances, he forecasts the future, he gives advice, he utters oracles, he takes rewards, just as they did, and wraps himself in the very cloud of mysterious and lofty pretension which they were apt to wear. The Bible is not even at the pains to delineate him as an exceptionally favourable specimen of his class, but, on the contrary, represents him as eager to win Balak's favour by fulfilling his wishes, and even as ultimately fulfilling them far more effectually than by a formal curse.

Hence it is, I suppose, that the more orthodox critics—Keil, to wit—beg us to observe that, in the Hebrew, Balaam is never called a prophet (*nabi*), or a seer (*chozeh*), but only a soothsayer or diviner (*ha-cozim*), a title never applied to any true prophet; forgetting, apparently, that a still higher authority, the New Testament, expressly calls Balaam a prophet, although in the same breath it rebukes "the madness of the prophet." Hence, too, it is that, in the vulgar mind at least, Balaam has been set down, generation after generation, as a vulgar impostor whose inspiration came from beneath, not from above; or, at best, as an ambitious and crafty schemer who, to enhance his own importance and give weight to his counsels, threw the conclusions at which he arrived by reflection, experience, and

political sagacity into an oracular form, and heightened his figure as a statesman, or a sage, by mounting the tripod of the prophet.

But the Bible lends no countenance to this singular theory. It does not ascribe his inspiration to an evil spirit, or treat him as one pretending to powers which he did not possess. It acknowledges his insight and his foresight to be real and true. It grants him his prophetic trances, confesses that he saw visions and dreamed dreams, affirms that God spake to him face to face as a man speaketh with his friend; it even asserts that at times "the Spirit of God came upon him" (Num. xxiv. 2) with such overmastering force that, raised out of "the ignorant present," he beheld things which were to come to pass centuries after he should have left this earthly scene: nay, it even depicts him as lifting himself to the loftiest of prophetic functions, and holding forth an ideal of righteousness than which none is more simple, noble, and complete.

No, the Bible denies him no honour; it lavishes on him all the signs and credentials of the true prophet, down even to contumely and rejection, while yet it brands him as false to his prophetic vocation. For great as it seems to us, the Bible holds it a very small thing to be a mere prophet, to be able to foresee and to foretell things to come, or even to conceive and admire an ideal of righteousness which does not mould and inform the life. *This* was the real blot in Balaam's character; it was here that he fell from his high vocation; and it is here that we must find the difference between the false prophet and the true. We must, in short, judge him, as we judge every man, not by his gifts, but by the use he made of them. He was royally endowed. He could detect the germs of the future in the present and the past. He could discern and admire the true ideal of human life. His predictions were fulfilled. The experience of subsequent ages has confirmed his moral insight. But

to what end did he foresee the Star that was to come out of Jacob and the Sceptre that was to rise in Israel, if he would not walk in the light of that Star or submit to the rule of that Sceptre? To what end did he admire and covet Righteousness if, not content with bowing his own lofty spirit under the yoke of unrighteousness, he could stoop to betray men in whom God "saw no iniquity" into a crime so foul that it could only be washed out in their blood?

With this conception of Balaam in our minds, this hypothetical solution of our problem—thinking of him as at once a great prophet and a false prophet; great in gifts but false in the use he made of them—we can at least read his history in a just and generous spirit. We need deny him no gift, nor grudge him any good act or word. It is his very greatness which makes him so little, his very goodness which makes him so bad. Moab and Midian saw in him nothing more than a diviner, a wizard, who could shape as well as forecast the future, who could control the events he foresaw; but we may see in him a man on whom Jehovah conferred many choice inspirations and gifts, whom He loved and tried to save,—just as Jesus loved the Young Man in the Gospels, and tried to save him, though he too loved riches and fell into a snare.

Conceiving of him simply as a great wizard, the king of Moab sent twice across the whole breadth of the Assyrian desert to secure the services of this master of potent spells; for Balaam's home was beyond the Euphrates, among the mountains where the vast streams of Mesopotamia take their rise, and whence Abraham had long before come out, not knowing whither he went. His first messengers arrive, we are told, "with the rewards of divination in their hands,"—a phrase from which many bitter waters of aspersion have been drawn. Simply because they brought these rewards with them, it has been inferred that Balaam

hankered after them, although those who drew that inference must surely have known both that, in the East, to enter the presence of any distinguished person without a *nuzzur*, or present, is simply to insult him, and that Oriental custom and courtesy ordained that no one should consult a seer without carrying him an appropriate offering. Assuredly it is not the fault of the Bible if they did not know this; for in that charming idyllic story of Saul seeking for his father's asses and finding a kingdom we read (1 Sam. ix. 7, 8) that, when Saul's servant advised him to consult the Seer who might peradventure shew them the way they ought to take, Saul replied: "But if we go, what shall we bring the man? what have we?" and could not be persuaded to listen to the advice until his servant produced "the fourth part of a shekel" from his pouch. And yet who ever heard *Samuel* condemned as a mercenary impostor because Saul and his servant came to him "with the reward of divination in their hand"?

So, again, it can only be the effect of a prejudice, determined to see nothing good in him, that has led good and learned men to find "a mere show of sanctity" in Balaam's resolve to consult God before giving a reply to the messengers of Balak. For what should the servant of Jehovah do before engaging in any great enterprise? Would not the very critics who now condemn him for "hypocrisy," simply because he consulted God, have been the first to charge him with "presumption" if he had *not* consulted God?

"But," say they, "even if it were right that he should ask God what he was to do when Balak's first messengers came to him, how can you defend him when a second embassy, consisting of more and more honourable princes than the first, reached him, and he begs *them* to tarry with him while he consults God again? Did he not already know what the will of the Lord was? Can anything be

more plain than that he wanted, if possible, to change rather than to learn the Divine will, in order that he might secure the hire and the honour which Balak had pledged himself to bestow?"

To all which we can only reply:—Very possibly all your conclusions are sound enough, but they are not warranted by the facts from which you infer them. Many of the best men are represented as taking the same question to God again and again, and you have called on us to admire them for their piety, for their steadfast and persevering faith? Why, then, are we to blame in Balaam what we are to admire in them? Why are we to condemn him because, after an interval of many weeks, during which all the conditions of the case might have changed, he took his question to God a second time in order that he might learn "what the Lord had to say unto him *more*?" Even if we grant that he wanted to change the will of God and bend it to his purpose, must we necessarily condemn him for that? Did not Paul "thrice" beseech the Lord to take the thorn out of his flesh? Did not Abraham six times plead with God for the Cities of the Plain, and even venture to beat down the terms of the Almighty from the fifty righteous persons whose presence within those cities was to save them from their doom to forty and five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten? And if we are to admire his boldness as "heroism," why are we to condemn that of Balaam as "an impudent irreverence"? Nay, even if Balaam was attracted by "the very great honour" to which Balak promised to advance him, we still run some risk of doing him a grave injustice if we assume that his only motive was a mercenary or selfish one. May not "a prophet" have felt that a noble career was open to him should he become the trusted counsellor of a Prince who had given him the pledge, "I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me"? May he not have dreamed, as many

a recluse scholar has done, of the good he might effect by leaving his studious seclusion to mingle with men, to mould their policy, purge and elevate their aims, and place before them that fair ideal of Righteousness which he had conceived? If, as we learn from Micah, he shewed Balak that God required [no sacrifice or offering, but only a just, kindly, and humble heart, may we not well believe that part, and great part, of the charm of Balak's invitation lay in the hope that he might be able to work in Moab a moral and religious reformation not inferior to that through which Israel had recently passed?

While so many innocent and laudable motives are possible, we have no right to conclude that Balaam was actuated by none but base and evil motives; the lofty stature of the man of itself renders such a construction of him improbable, unreasonable, inadequate. We are bound to judge him as we ourselves would be judged, and to give him credit for all the good we honestly can.

On the other hand, we are also bound not to ignore, or condone, what was plainly evil in the man, because we find much to admire and approve. We know from the Scriptures outside the Chronicle that Balaam did want to curse the people whom he blessed, wanted, that is, to gratify his powerful client and to secure the honours and rewards, the great and influential position, which had been dangled before him; we know also that he "loved the wages of unrighteousness" in their basest form, and cared overmuch for wealth and for the luxuries it would bring him. And if we read the first twenty verses of this Chronicle in the lurid light of these outside Scriptures, we may honestly find in them, I think, two slight hints of the presence and activity of the evil spirit that was at work in his heart, and was fighting against the Spirit of all truth and goodness.

In Verse 13, for example, we may hear a sigh of bitter disappointment in his words to the first messengers of

Balak: "Get you into your own land, for the Lord *refuseth* to give me leave to go with you." "The Lord *would not hearken* unto Balaam," we read elsewhere,¹ "but turned his curse into a blessing." And here we have a similar phrase, a phrase which leaves a similar impression on our mind. The impression is that Balaam would have liked to turn his spells against Israel, and would, if he could, have won the Divine consent to his wish. For if these simple words, "The Lord *refuseth* to give me leave to go with you," have in them a touch of the schoolboy denied a holiday on which he had set his heart, they are also tinged with the bitterness of a grave ambitious man who sees himself debarred from entering on a great and much desired career.

In Verse 18, as even the critics who most delight to honour Balaam are compelled to admit, there is a touch of that vile greed, that lust of riches, which seems to have been the most obvious, as it is also the most sordid, defect in his character; though even here, if we would be just, we must remember that Balaam is by no means the only distinguished personage in the religious world whom this sordid craving has marred: perhaps, indeed, there is no sin more common in the Church than this foolish "trust in riches," and no truth more commonly evaded than that which pronounces riches "a hurtful snare." When we hear him say to the second group of messengers, "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 a small thing or a great," we cannot but feel that the silver and gold in Balak's house had a certain attraction for him, that the possession of wealth enters too prominently into his ideal of a perfect human life. Even Dr. Kalisch himself is constrained to confess that the words imply that Balaam was "agitated by an inward struggle" which is suggested "with the subtlest psychological art," and, for a moment at least,

¹ Deuteronomy xxiii. 5.

suffered his desire for large and affluent conditions to darken his clear and unstained soul,

In this Verse, moreover, we find the first of several utterances which, for all so noble as they sound, breed a certain suspicion in us. He who here says, "I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do a small thing or a great," afterwards says to Balak, "The word that God shall put into my mouth, that (only) will I speak"; and again, "The word that He shall shew me I will tell thee"; and, again, "Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord putteth into my mouth?" and, again, "Did I not tell thee, saying, All that the Lord speaketh, that must I do?" and, again, "Did I not speak unto thy messengers, saying If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go against the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind, but what the Lord saith, that shall I speak?" As we listen to these reiterated and vehement asseverations the exclamation rises to our lips, "Methinks the prophet doth protest too much!" while, as we observe the emphasis he lays on the implicit obedience he owes to Jehovah and intends at all costs to pay, we suspect that the temptation to disobedience was already rising within his heart, and fear that he may break down at the very point of which he brags the loudest.

As indeed he did—most sorrowfully for him, most instructively for us; teaching us the danger of an overweening self-confidence, and that we are never in such peril from ourselves as when we are most sure of ourselves: teaching us also that neither the most splendid gifts, nor the most earnest intentions of obedience, are a sufficient guarantee of obedience. For it is not by denying that Balaam was a true and even a great prophet, nor by denying that he meant and tried to use his high prophetic gifts for noble ends, that we reach the true lesson of his life. Any man may be, and is, a prophet who, not content with living in

the outward show of things, is for ever seeking to acquaint himself with the principles, the realities, which lie behind the great spectacle of human life, ordain the lines along which it must move and mould the forms through which it shifts. Such an one is able to see how the present has grown out of the past, and to project the present into the future and forecast the moulds into which it must inevitably run. He can trace events backward to their causes and forward to their results, and can thus, in some measure, read the whole story of time, which for most of us has no connected story to tell. He can explain us to ourselves, tell us how we became what we are, and what we must be in the years to come; he can anticipate the course which we shall take, rouse that which has fallen asleep in us, quicken in us that which is dead.¹ And he may honestly mean to use this strange power—a power which is only strange to us because we are so inobservant, so unreflecting, so pre-occupied—only for good and noble ends. But unless he does continue to use them for such ends, let him once pervert them to a selfish use, to the gratification of his own ambition, greed, fame, and forthwith his clear and mounting spirit grows dark and dull, his insight fails him, his prevision fails him, his noble intention fails him; he sinks into the deeper sin because it is from such a height he falls. Great gifts are a great responsibility, and may only too easily become a great shame. While, therefore, we earnestly covet the best and greatest gifts, if we learn wisdom from Balaam's fall, we shall most earnestly seek that "more excellent way," on which St. Paul insists, the way of Charity: for a pure and unselfish love is not only the greatest and most excellent of all gifts; it is also the only gift which will keep all our other gifts sweet and pure.

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¹ Cf. F. D. Maurice, *The Patriarchs of Israel. Sermon on Balaam.*