

*THE CHRONICLE OF BALAAM.*

§ 3. *The Oracles.* (Numbers xxii. 36—xxiv. 25.)

FRESH from his encounter with the angel of the Lord, and with the echoes of the Divine rebuke of his duplicity still making "a fearful music" in his soul, Balaam arrives at Ir, a city on the extreme north-eastern boundary of Moab; and here he meets a new antagonist. Messengers had no doubt been sent on, after the Eastern fashion, to announce his approach to the King; for we find that Balak had left his capital (Rabbah) and come forth to this border city to receive him. A twofold motive may have prompted the King. He may have intended, and probably did intend, to give the Prophet a signal mark of his favour; and, according to Oriental notions, he could have shewn him no greater honour than by coming so far to meet him. But, though on courtesy bent, he may also have shewn a frugal mind; and probably in coming so far to meet the Prophet his strongest motive was to save time. For the mountains from which he proposed that Balaam should overlook and curse the camp of Israel lay in the immediate vicinity of Ir-Moab; and it is easy to see that Balak was impatient to have the curse pronounced, thought that too much time had been wasted already, and was in no mood to brook another instant of unnecessary delay.

Kings do not easily bow before an authority higher than their own; and even when they are obliged to court the aid of an eloquence, a statesmanship, or a genius for war, which they do not themselves possess, they are apt to suspect and dislike the very instruments they are compelled to use. There is a touch of this royal insolence in the demand with which king Balak greets the Prophet he has sent so far to fetch: "Did I not urgently send unto thee to call thee? Wherefore didst thou not come unto me? Am I not able, forsooth, to promote thee unto honour?" But a man who

has stood face to face with God is not likely to fear the frown of a king; and hence Balaam replies with quiet dignity: "Behold, I *have* come unto thee! (But) have I any power at all (now that I have come) to say anything? The word that Jehovah shall put into my mouth, that (only) will I speak." His dignified reply had its effect; for the next thing we hear of these two men is that they rode peacefully together to a city called *Kirjath-huzzoth*,<sup>1</sup> an ancient *Strass-burg*, or "city of streets," as its name implies, or perhaps the word rather means "a fort with streets" round it. It was probably, therefore, a border-fortress on the way to the ranges of Attarus and Abarim, from divers peaks of which they were to look down on the Hebrew encampment. Here Balak holds a feast in honour of Balaam's arrival, sending the best portions of the oxen and sheep he slew to Balaam's table, as an Arab sheikh would do to this day on receiving a guest whom he delighted to honour.

On the morrow, early in the morning, Balak rode with Balaam to a neighbouring summit consecrated to the service of his god, and thence called Bamoth-Baal, or "high place of Baal," on which therefore there was probably a grove of sacred trees, and from which they could look down and see the host of Israel encamped upon the plain beneath. And no doubt the site was chosen partly because it was a sacred place, very meet therefore for a religious imprecation, just as the anathemas of the Pope are supposed to gain special force because they issue from St. Peter's chair, and partly because it was an article of ancient superstition that the seer must have those whom he was to curse under his eye if his curse were to take effect.

This latter superstition Balaam may have shared, but

<sup>1</sup> Knobel conjectures, with some probability, that *Kirjath* may have been an older form of *Kerioth*. The sole interest of the conjecture lies in the fact that Judas *Iscariot*, i.e. Judas of *Kerioth*, came from a place which bore the same name, though in a different locality; and thus supplies a sort of link between the Prophet who turned traitor to Jehovah and the Apostle who betrayed Jesus.

from the former he hastens to detach himself. He is the servant of Jehovah, not of Baal, and he will not stoop or affect to serve any but the only true God. When, therefore, they reach the "high place" he separates himself decisively from the idolatry of which it was the haunt. He will not use the altars of Baal, nor join in any of the Moab-*itish* rites. In a tone of authority he bids Balak "build *me* seven altars, and prepare *for me* seven bullocks and seven rams." And these altars were dedicated, these sacrifices were presented, as we learn from a subsequent Verse (Chap. xxiii. 4), not to Baal, but to Jehovah.

Among the ancients sacrifices preceded every enterprise of pith and moment, especially of course any ceremony of adjuration; and these sacrifices grew more costly in proportion as the ceremony or enterprise was deemed critical and important. Since bullocks and rams were the chief victims of the Patriarchal and Mosaic altars, and seven was the number of perfection and completion, we may fairly infer from the seven bullocks and seven rams which Balaam proceeded to offer on the seven altars, that both the Prophet and the King attached the gravest importance to the enterprise in which they were now engaged.

An ancient augur, moreover, habitually chose some lofty spot, with a wide and open outlook, in which to watch for omens and indications of the Divine will; and hence we can understand why, after having offered his holocausts in the sacred grove, Balaam went forth from its shade to "a bare place," a scaur, leaving the King to stand by the altars. He wanted to be alone and undisturbed that he might be the more sensitive to any spiritual impact, any touch of spiritual light or force, whether from within or from without. And he also wanted (Chap. xxiv. 1) to secure a wide view of earth and sky in which to detect some portent that his art would enable him to interpret. For in this, or in some similar form, he expected the Lord to "meet" him, to

direct and illuminate his mind, and to give him some inkling of things that were to be. And in this, or in some similar way, God did meet him and put a word into his mouth; that is to say, the conviction was borne in upon him that he knew what the Lord would have him say, what he *must* say therefore, however unwelcome it might be, however fatal to his interests and desires. He returns to the sacred grove, therefore, and faithfully delivers the burden of the Lord.

The oracles of Balaam are full of interest to the historian, the antiquarian, and the literary artist, as well as to the student of theology; and did the occasion require, it would not be difficult for one who has studied these oracles patiently and minutely to throw some light on certain curious psychological and literary problems. But the occasion does not require it. Our main endeavour is to decipher the character of Balaam, to reach such a conception of it as shall bring him within the recognized limits of our common humanity. And hence we need not enter into the difficult literary and philosophical problems which his oracles suggest, but may be content simply to seize such indications of character as they afford.

One of these characteristics pervades the whole series. The honesty, the veracity, of Balaam is conspicuous throughout. Whatever base cupidity or selfish ambition he may have cherished on the journey from Mesopotamia to Moab, no trace of it is to be found in the predictions he utters. And it would have been so easy for him to be dishonest, to utter words of double meaning, words which, while formally a curse on Israel, were really a benediction, and thus to seem to comply with Balak's wish, while nevertheless he ran counter to it. Many of the ancient oracles took this dubious form, offering a word of promise to the ear, while they broke it to the hope. The oracles of Dodona and Delphi, for instance, habitually paltered with

words in a double sense; as when they informed Croesus that, if he attacked the Persians, he would "destroy a mighty empire," but quite omitted to inform him that that empire would be his own.<sup>1</sup> And our own Shakespeare supplies us with a similar illustration of "the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth" in the oracle which deceived Macbeth: "Fear not, till Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane." The temptation to Balaam thus to equivocate with Balak, and to make truth itself a liar, must have been immense. For he loved reward; and, after buoying up the King with false hopes, he might easily—had he have been the villain which some assume him to be—have gone off with the silver and gold before the event betrayed him. But he does not listen to, we cannot even detect a single symptom that he so much as felt, the temptation. From first to last he is true to his vocation, and speaks out simply and gravely the thoughts which God had put into his heart.

And who can doubt that it was the intervention of the Angel and the Ass which made and kept him sincere? His "madness" had been effectually rebuked, so effectually that while he remains with Balak we see no trace of its return. Was not that, then, a most merciful rebuke, however humiliating and severe it may have seemed, which exorcised the evil spirit that he had been cherishing, and made a true man and a true prophet of him, at least for a time? If *this* was the end of the miracle, was it not a worthy and sufficient end?

Balaam's First Oracle, which, like many of the ancient heathen oracles, took a poetic form, runs thus (Chap. xxiii. 7-10):—

From Aram hath Balak brought me,  
The King of Moab from the mountains of the East,

<sup>1</sup> *Herodotus*, Book I., chap. 53. It would be easy to give many similar instances from the pages of Herodotus alone.

(Saying) Come, curse me Jacob,  
 And, come, ban Israel !  
 How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed,  
 Or how shall I ban whom the Lord hath not banned ?  
 For from the summit of the rocks I see them,  
 And I behold them from the hills ;  
 Lo, it is a people that dwelleth apart,  
 And is not reckoned among the nations .  
 Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
 Or number the fourth part of Israel ?<sup>1</sup>  
 Let me die the death of the righteous,  
 And be my last estate like his !

With the exception of the tremulous sigh with which it concludes, the oracle seems little more than a simple statement of the events by which the Prophet had been led to his present position, and an equally simple description of the scene beneath his eyes. But, as we look into it, we discover traces of character in it which help us to understand the man, and to understand him in the loftier and nobler aspects of his nature. There is not only an assertion of his unalterable fidelity to the God whom he serves, of the utter impossibility of his cursing any whom God has not cursed ; but, obviously, he is even more profoundly impressed by the *holiness* of the people on whom he looks down from the summit of the rocks than by their vast numbers or their power. He cannot but see that they are like the dust of the earth for multitude ; but what strikes him most is that which any but a genuine lover of righteousness might altogether have failed to perceive. It is that they are a people called to “ dwell apart,” and not to be reckoned among the nations around them. The isolation of the camp as he looked down upon it from the heights, its sharply defined limits as it lay in the great plain of the Jordan, its orderliness, and a something peculiar and unique in its aspect, may have suggested this thought to him ; but, whatever suggested it, there can be no doubt

<sup>1</sup> An allusion to the four camps into which the Hebrew host was divided.

that it arrested and impressed him. For by this separateness he does not mean simply that, under the protection of Jehovah, they are to dwell in safety, unvexed by the strifes and tumults of other races; but, mainly, that they are a people of other and better laws, pursuing a different and nobler ideal than other races. Separation is here, as throughout the Old Testament, the symbol of sanctity, the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the grace which impels men to the pursuit of a pure and unworldly life, and makes righteousness, rather than culture or power or wealth, their chief end and highest good.

Summoned to curse this peculiar people, he can conceive no higher wish than that he may share their aim and fate. And there is a special force and pathos in the form into which he casts this wish. He projects himself into the future, and asks himself how he shall crave to have lived when he comes to die. Under the shadow of death, when the garish lights, by which during their brief day on earth men are too often misled and betrayed, are withdrawn, they discriminate the true aims of life more clearly and are most profoundly sensible of their worth. Hence Balaam draws the solemnity of death into his thoughts, and, in that revealing darkness, finds that his supreme desire is that he may be able to look back on a well spent, a pure and kindly life, a life ennobled and insured by the protection and love of God. His ideal of righteousness was, as we learn from Micah, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God; and he feels that, unless his ideal be attained, he cannot die at peace.

This is the noblest posture of the soul in which we have yet seen this strange Prophet; but in the Second Oracle he touches a still higher point, and takes a more penetrating tone.

Angered and disheartened by the result of his first ex-

periment, Balak nevertheless determined to risk another. With what seems to us a childish simplicity, but long seemed to our fathers the dictate of practical sagacity and piety, he was content to seek for omen after omen till he got one to his mind, and then, forgetting all the portents which foreboded disaster, to commit himself to that which flattered his hopes. Hence he shifts his ground, and conducts Balaam to a still more sacred and conspicuous spot, the Field of the Watchers or of the Seers as it was called, on the top of Pisgah, a peak of the mountain chain of Abarim, a little north of the Attarus range which they had just left. From this point, though it was nearer to the camp of the Israelites, an intervening spur may have shut out from view the greater part of the camp; for—and here we have another illustration of the simplicity of antique superstitions—Balak seems to have thought that the Prophet may have been daunted by the vast numbers of the host on which he looked down from the summit of Bamoth-Baal, and would find it easier to curse them if he did “not see them all” (Chap. xxiii. 13).

On Pisgah, then, and in a field set apart for divination, as on Bamoth-Baal, altars were built, sacrifices offered; and once more the Prophet left the King, to seek for auguries. As he gazed down on the plain beneath him, his eye would pass, beyond the Hebrew host, to the river Jordan, on the broad margin of which they were encamped. And here, possibly, while he heard the sound of the trumpet which called them to worship, and the shout with which they greeted it floated up to his ear, he may have seen buffaloes and lions going up from the swellings of Jordan, and have found in *these* the omens of which he was in quest, as he certainly found the dominant figures of his Second Oracle; which runs thus (Chap. xxiii. 18-24):

Arise, Balak, and hear;  
Hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor!



God is not a man that He should lie,  
 Nor a son of man that He should repent.  
 Hath He said, and shall He not do it,  
 Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?  
 Behold, I have been charged to bless ;  
 And if He blesseth, I cannot reverse it.  
 No iniquity is to be descried in Jacob,  
 No distress to be seen in Israel :  
 The Lord their God is with them,  
 And the trumpet-shout of their King among them.  
 God brought them forth from Egypt ;  
 They have the bison's strength.  
 For there is no augury in Jacob,  
 Nor any divination in Israel ;  
 But in due time it is told to Jacob,  
 And to Israel, what God doeth.  
 Behold, they are a people that rise up like a lioness,  
 And lift themselves up as a lion ;  
 They lie not down till they eat their prey  
 And drink the blood of the slain.

No wonder that Balak was angry as he listened to this lofty strain, and in his anger cried out on the Prophet, "Thou shalt never curse them again, nor bless them again ;" for here was the knell of all his hopes. He is summoned at the outset to rise and brace himself for tidings that will go near to unman him ; and, as Balaam's song goes on, his worst prognostics are verified and surpassed. He learns that he is bent on "a hopeless contest against overwhelming numbers," a contest with a race strong as the bison, fierce and unrelenting as the lion when he seeks for prey, and which all the power of Egypt had not been able to withstand. He learns that the God who brought them forth from Egypt is still with them and for them, their Guide, Ruler, and Saviour, and that He is neither to be tricked nor cajoled into enmity against them.

But it is with Balaam that we are concerned, not with Balak ; and this Second Oracle shews him to us at his best, in his most piercing insight, in his noblest poise. He repeats in firmer accents (Verse 19) his belief in the unchange-

able fidelity of God. He depicts in a more memorable and impressive phrase the righteousness and consequent blessedness of Israel. Nothing, indeed, could well be happier or more significant than the sentence, *No iniquity is to be descried in Jacob*, and therefore *no distress is to be seen in Israel*, with its fine implication that the sins of men are the sole cause of their miseries, and that their miseries are intended to correct their sins.

But fine as is the spirit of such sentences as these, the noble frankness and veracity of the man when he was at his best come out still more strikingly in the two passages which bear, directly or indirectly, on his vocation as a soothsayer and a prophet. For the Soothsayer affected to shape and change the Divine will as well as to predict it, to vary the currents in which it ran, and even to direct it against this man or that at his pleasure. But even in the presence of the King and the princes who deemed so highly of his power, and valued him above all for this very gift, Balaam plainly disavows the power they ascribed to him. He frankly confesses, "Behold, I have been charged to bless, and if He blesseth, *I cannot reverse it.*" Nay, more, even in respect of that skill of his craft, or gift of his vocation, which he still claims to possess, the power to divine the future, he humbly acknowledges that this is but a poor gift at the best, very far from being so precious as it was accounted, and not to be compared with the grace vouchsafed to every child of Israel, however lowly his position, however limited his range. The Hebrews are so strong, he says, God loves them and dwells with them, *because there is no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel; but in due time it is told them what God doeth.*<sup>1</sup> That must have been a wonderful glimpse into the ways of God with men which led a diviner to deny his own art, and to confess that to wait with childlike confidence on God till in due time He reveals

<sup>1</sup> Comp. Deuteronomy xviii. 9-22.

his will is a far greater and more precious gift than to force or surprise the secrets of the future and to pass in spirit through the times to be. God "met" Balaam to purpose when He taught him a truth which men, and even Christian men, have not yet learned,—that a little trust is better than much foresight, and that to walk with God in patient and loving dependence is better than to know the things to come.

And this insight into the real value of his special gift was part of that training, that discipline, by which, as we have seen, God was seeking to save his servant from his besetting sin. For Balaam was proud of the gift which set him apart from and above his fellows, of the eagle eye and unyielding spirit which made the supernatural as easy and familiar to him as the natural, while *they* were trembling before every breath of change and finding omens of disaster in the simplest occurrences of daily experience. He was apt to boast that he was the man of an open eye, hearing the voice of God and seeing visions from the Almighty, falling into trances in which the shadows of coming events were cast upon his mind, and that he could read all secrets and understand all mysteries. Unlike the great Hebrew prophets, who humbly confessed that the secret of the Lord is with all who fear Him, and so made themselves one with their fellows, he was perverting his high gifts to purposes of self-exaltation and self-aggrandisement. Was it not, then, most salutary that he should be checked and rebuked in this selfish and perilous course? And how could he be more effectually rebuked than by being shewn a whole race possessed of even higher gifts than his own, possessed above all of the gift of waiting for God to reveal his will to them in due time, and so raised out of all dependence on divinations and enchantments? At this spectacle even his own high and sacred endowment seemed but a vulgar toy, and the aspiration was kindled in his breast for that greater good, that greatest of all gifts, the power to walk in ways

of righteousness and to leave the future, with simple trust, in the hands of God.

It is a lesson which we still need to learn. For which of us would not rejoice had he prophetic raptures and trances of which to boast, if men looked up to him as possessed of a solitary and mysterious power, and resorted to him that he might forecast their fate and interpret to them the mysteries by which they are perplexed? Which of us does not at times long to pierce the veil and learn how it fares with those whom we have loved and lost a while, or even what will be the conditions of our own life in years to come or when death shall carry us away, instead of waiting until in due time God shall reveal even this unto us? Let us, then, learn from Balaam, if we have not yet learned it from David or St. Paul, that to rest in the Lord and to wait patiently for Him is a higher achievement than to apprehend all mysteries; and that to do his will in humble trust is a nobler function and power than to foresee what that Will will do.

SAMUEL COX.

### ISAIAH, AN IDEAL BIOGRAPHY.

#### IV. UNDER HEZEKIAH, B.C., 726-698.

WE wonder, as we compare the characters of Ahaz and Hezekiah, how so evil a father could have been the parent of so good a son, how the child could have grown up to manhood uncontaminated by the corrupt atmosphere of the father's court. The answer to that question is in part found in the fact that he was born before the evil tendencies of Ahaz had had time to develop themselves, and that his early years were passed under the influences of a mother who was better than her husband. He was already nine years old when Ahaz succeeded to the throne; and at the time of his birth, the young father, then not more than sixteen, must still have been under the tutelage of the