

BALAAAM: AN EXPOSITION AND A STUDY.

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

DISHEARTENED and exasperated by the strain of Balaam's Second Oracle, the king of Moab, for a time at least, abandoned all hope of inducing him to curse Israel, and sought only to withhold him from blessing them. But the purpose which originally moved him to send for the Prophet lay too near his heart to be easily relinquished. Hence he soon rallies and nerves himself for a final effort. He cannot altogether shake off his dejection, however; we can still detect some trace of it in the words in which he invites Balaam to a third and last trial of his skill. He no longer maintains the confident and sanguine tone of his former request, "Come with me to another place, and curse me them from thence"; but, conscious of the risk he runs, he speaks with a certain hesitation and distrust: "Come, I will bring thee to another place; *peradventure it may please God* that from thence thou shouldst curse me them."

Still he will leave no chance untried. He travels northward from Pisgah to another peak of the Abarim range, and conducts Balaam to another sacred place, the very name of which (Peor) shews that it was dedicated to Baal-peor, the most shamelessly sensual but best-beloved of the gods of Moab. Perchance the conditions may here prove more favourable, or the god more potent. At least one of the conditions is wholly reversed. For whereas heretofore Balak had carefully led the Prophet to points of view from which he could see only a small part of the

Hebrew camp, lest he should be cowed by their number, he now conducts him to a point from which he obtains an uninterrupted view of the whole vast host, "encamped according to their tribes" (Chap. xxiv. 2), in the valley or plain below,—hoping, I suppose, that he may take them all in in one comprehensive and withering glance.

Here, then, in this thrice-sacred mountain grove, new altars are built, new sacrifices offered. But the new scene is so far from yielding new omens that Balaam does not so much as go out to some bare spot to look for them. He had learned the lesson that "God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should repent." And hence he no longer "as at other times" goes out "to seek for auguries," but remains beside the king, gazing steadfastly down on the wonderful and suggestive scene beneath him, and allowing that wonderful spectacle to make its own impression on his mind, being inwardly assured that it is the will of God that he should bless the people whose goodly tents in fair array attract his eye, and inwardly resolute that he will not curse them come what may. How, indeed, should he trust in auguries to whom, as we learn from his Second Oracle, it had been revealed that one great secret of the strength and righteousness of the Hebrew host lay in the fact that "there was no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel, but in due time it is told them what God doeth;" who had learned, therefore, to distrust his own art, and to admit that to wait on God with simple child-like confidence until it is his good pleasure to disclose his will is a far nobler and higher achievement than to anticipate what to-morrow may bring forth? God *had* disclosed that will to him, his will to bless the sons of Abraham and not to curse them; and on this disclosure Balaam is resolved to act, let him lose what he may by his fidelity to the Divine command.

And verily he had his reward. For now we are told,

not simply that "God met him and put a word into his mouth," but that "the Spirit of God *came upon* him" with overmastering force, flinging him to the earth indeed, but lifting him into an ecstasy in which he looked with open and illuminated eyes through the years to be, and saw what they would bring forth.

Under this mighty inspiration, he "takes up his parable," *i.e.* his thoughts rise into poetic form, and his voice breaks into song as he delivers his Third Oracle (Chap. xxiv. 3-9).

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
 And thus sayeth the man whose eyes are open;
 Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
 He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
 Prostrate, but with opened eyes :
 How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob,
 Thy tabernacles, O Israel !
 As valleys that are spread out,
 As gardens by the river's side,
 As aloes which the Lord hath planted,
 As cedars beside the waters !
 Water shall stream from his buckets,
 And his seed be by many waters ;
 And his king shall be higher than Agag,
 And his kingdom shall be exalted.
 God brought him forth out of Egypt :
 He hath the bison's strength :
 He shall eat up the nations that are round about him,
 And shall suck their bones,
 And break their loins in pieces.
 He croucheth, he lieth down like a lion,
 And like a lioness, who shall rouse him up ?
 Blessed are they that bless thee,
 And cursed are they that curse thee.

There are some repetitions here which have a double worth. For when we find in this Third Oracle, uttered in a prophetic rapture and under the pressure of a kind of Divine "possession," thoughts, words, figures which we have already met with in the Second Oracle, for which no such absolute inspiration is claimed, we cannot but feel

that, even under the extremest pressure, "the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet;" that even when, to use the phrase of Novalis, he is "a God-intoxicated man," yet in the full torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of the prophetic frenzy, he remains *himself* and in full possession of himself; his powers exalted, not obliterated; enlarged in volume and scope, yet radically unchanged. And when we mark what these repetitions are,—how he still asserts that it was God who brought Israel up out of Egypt, still likens their strength to that of the bison or buffalo, still compares them to the lion and lioness crouching over their prey, whom none dares to challenge or provoke, still insists, therefore, that Balak would simply court his own destruction were he to attack them, we cannot fail to be impressed with the fearless honesty with which Balaam delivers the burden of the Lord, let the King cajole or threaten as he will. No message can be more unwelcome to himself, or more fatal to Balak's hopes, than that with which he is charged; but, nevertheless, he is true to God, and true to man, and speaks only the word which was given him to speak.

This prophetic trance, or rapture, may have been either a new, or more probably a rare, experience for Balaam; and hence he describes it with much emphasis in Chapter xxiv. verses 3 and 4, repeating his description, with some slight variations, in Verses 15 and 16. From this description we learn that he had sought to acquire knowledge, and above all knowledge of the will of God and of the principles on which that high Will rules the affairs and destinies of men, not by arts of divination alone, not only by studying omens and auguries and interpreting them according to the approved rules of his art, but also by patient brooding meditation on the ways of God with men. We learn that by chastening himself from vulgar aims and rude animal desires, which were very strong in him, he

had sought to attain the pure heart without which no man can see the Lord, to make his inward ear sensitive to "words of God" which others could not hear, to open his inward eye to the spiritual significance of events, so that he might see "visions" from the Almighty" which others could not see; and that, at times, when he had thus prepared himself to receive the heavenly Guest, the Spirit of God fell upon him with a force which, if it flung him to the earth, so strangely energized and elevated his spiritual faculties and powers that, lying prostrate but with opened eyes, all the horizons of thought grew luminous with a more than mortal light, and shot out far and wide beyond their usual scope, so that he could look quite through the shows of things to the sacred realities behind them, and even penetrate the future and discern the things that must shortly come to pass. It was this noble bent and gift of his spirit which made the man no vulgar soothsayer merely, but a genuine prophet, and which gave him his mastery over the spirits of his fellows.

It is in this high mood, too, that he now looks down on the Hebrew host, and, as if carried away by the imposing aspect of their vast yet orderly camp, addresses himself directly to them, and exclaims, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!" He instantly recovers himself, however; for it is not the children of Israel, but the king and princes of Moab to whom he has to speak; and, for their instruction and warning, he proceeds to depict the blessedness and the irresistible might of the race they would have him curse.

The dominant figure in which his conception of their happy estate is conveyed is one which would commend itself to every Oriental mind; for to the Oriental no emblem carries such a sense of wealth and felicity as an abundance of water. And it is curious to note how Balaam harps on this emblem with an iteration which would have been

unnatural in a Western poet, and which, in any case, an English poet would have sought to avoid. He compares them to "gardens *by the river's side*;" to "cedars *beside the waters*;" to a man bearing two buckets so full and overfull that the "*water streams*" from them as he moves. And, as if all this were not enough, he declares that the seed, *i.e.* the posterity, of Israel shall grow up "*beside many waters*." By this insistence on a symbol so grateful and suggestive to an Eastern mind, he doubtless sought to convey, and succeeded in conveying to his hearers, a full conception of the Divine favour for Israel, and made them feel that under the blessing of God his people were to enjoy the richest benedictions, the most lavish wealth and prosperity, which heart of man could conceive. No doubt, too, he took this image, as Dr. Kalisch suggests, from the scene on which he looked down. For the land beyond the Jordan, which Israel was to possess, was a goodly and delightful land mainly because it was "a land of brooks, a land of fountains and lakes that sprang out of valleys and hills," a land that constantly "drank water from the rain of heaven." But this image, derived from the physical features of Palestine, the land to which Israel was going up, is complicated apparently by reminiscences of Babylonia, the land from which Balaam had come. "Valleys that widened out" were before his eye as he stood on Peor; but when he proceeds to compare Israel to "gardens by the river's side," his thoughts probably revert to the famous artificial gardens on the banks of the Euphrates which were reckoned among the wonders of the ancient world. So, again, when he declares, "His seed shall be by many waters," he may refer to the innumerable brooks and streamlets of the goodly land; but when he compares the ideal Israel to a man bearing streaming buckets, he obviously alludes to a mode of irrigation which obtained in his Mesopotamian home, where he must often have seen the

wearry peasants staggering up from the river with the yoke of buckets which they were about to pour on the thirsty fields.

Under these rural and pacific figures, then, the Prophet depicts the coming wealth and felicity of the people whom the Lord had blessed. But he is careful to point out¹ that the wealth and happiness of Israel are not to be "purchased by an inglorious obscurity." They are to be "coupled with the highest political power and splendour." They are to be "the fruit of famous wars and brilliant victories." The nation which has the strength of the buffalo is to use it like a buffalo—to "eat up the nations that are round about it, to suck their bones and break their loins in pieces." Fierce and valiant as the lion, they are to hunt down their prey, and to drink the blood of the slain, till none shall dare to rouse them up. By their valour and their wealth they are to build up a kingdom exalted above the other kingdoms of the earth, and—adds the Prophet in a singular phrase which demands a word of explanation—to secure a king "higher than Agag."

As we read the Oracle, this name, "Agag," checks one curiously. It seems wholly out of place, and meaningless, and only breaks up the flow and rush of the prophetic strain. Nevertheless we find it quite in place, and full of meaning, so soon as we remember that Agag was the dynastic name of the kings of Amalek, just as Pharaoh was the name of an Egyptian dynasty, and corresponds to such English dynastic names as Plantagenet, Tudor, Stuart, Guelph. For Amalek was the fighting and victorious clan of the Desert. It had recently conquered most of the adjacent clans and kingdoms. It was the first to meet and make war against the Israelites as they approached the end of their long pilgrimage. When Moses defeated Amalek, all the clans of Syria—Edomites, Moabites, Midianites,

¹ Dr. Kalisch *in loco*.

Canaanites—were amazed, and read their own doom in that of this warlike race. So that when Balaam predicts for Israel a king “higher than Agag,” what he would be understood to mean was that this happy and wealthy race is to take a higher position than even that which Amalek had held, and to exercise a wider sovereignty. None will be able to stand before them. One by one they will all be subdued, and compelled to submit to the king of Israel as their suzerain or overlord.

There may be, and probably is, another allusion in this dynastic name. For the word *Agag*, like the English name Hugh, means “high.” And it would be quite in accordance with the manner and spirit of Hebrew poetry to introduce even into its loftiest strains a pun upon this name, and to play with the meaning of the word in a double sense. In all probability, therefore, besides alluding to the historic position of Amalek, Balaam intended an allusion to the literal significance of the word “Agag,” and meant to convey that the king of Israel would be higher even than the king whose hereditary name was *High*—“higher than High;” for it is one of the characteristic traits of Hebrew poetry to relieve its most solemn utterances with a playful touch of this kind, and to bring in a pun which, however vulgar and poor it may sound to us, seemed vastly witty and suggestive to the simplicity of the ancient Eastern world.

In closing his Oracle the Prophet once more addresses himself directly to the Hebrew host: “Blessed are they that bless thee, and cursed they that curse thee.” But though he speaks as to Israel, his words were doubtless meant for Balak and his princes,—meant to warn them against seeking some more treacherous and accommodating diviner than himself, who, for a sufficient reward, would utter the curse against Israel which *he* refused to utter. Such a curse would only “come home to roost.” If Balak

were wise, he would relinquish his vain attempt against the people whom the Lord had blessed, and, by allying himself with them, win some share in their prosperity and peace.

The whole of the Third Oracle is now before us ; and if we look back and consider it as a whole, there is one question which can hardly fail to occur to us. Balaam was, as we have seen, a genuine prophet, and faithfully delivered the message which God put into his mouth. And yet, after all, were his predictions fulfilled, did his words come true? *When* did the Hebrew nation enjoy that lavish prosperity and abundance, or achieve the vast military success which he foretold for them? Not certainly for some four or five hundred years after Balaam had gone to his own place. Under the Judges Israel was divided, plundered, enslaved, and though in the closing years of David's reign and the opening years of the reign of Solomon it touched the top of happy prosperous hours, and achieved a military predominance over all the adjacent kingdoms, yet this period of marvellous wealth and power formed but a brief episode in its history, an episode quite out of tune with the general strain of its annals, and was succeeded by ages of discord, strife, poverty, captivity, and subjection. Take their history as a whole, and it is impossible to affirm that Balaam's suggestive emblems portray and forecast it, impossible to assert that their buckets habitually streamed with the fair sweet waters of abundance, or that they shewed either a strength like that of the buffalo, eating up the nations round about them, or the fierce victorious courage of the lion and the lioness when they hunt or when they crouch over and defend their prey. Yet Balaam was inspired to use these emblems ; it was the Spirit of God that came upon him and moved him to utter predictions which no candid reader of the Hebrew story can confidently

affirm to have been fulfilled in the exact literal sense in which they were uttered and understood.

What shall we say to these things, then? Shall we shuffle and equivocate, and say that Balaam's words had a sufficient fulfilment in the brief period of national glory under David and Solomon, when it is plain that the Prophet intended them to apply to and characterize the whole career of Israel, or that, if he had any special period in his eye, it must have been the immediate future? Or must we sorrowfully admit that God was not as good as his word, and only kept his promise to the ear, to break it to the hope?

Before we impale ourselves on either horn of that dismal dilemma, let us at least ask whether it is not our theory of Inspiration, our notion of what really made a man a prophet, which is at fault. In my judgment it is gravely at fault if it has taught us to insist on infallibility as an invariable adjunct of inspiration, or to find the chief function of the prophet in his ability to predict the future, to trace and interpret the shadows which coming events cast before them. That which really constitutes a man a prophet is not so much *foresight* as *insight*—insight into the ways of God with men. Dr. Robertson Smith goes so far as to say¹ that “the possession of a single true thought about Jehovah, not derived from current religious teaching, but springing up in the soul as a word from Jehovah Himself, is enough to constitute a prophet, and lay on him the duty of speaking to Israel what he has learned from Israel's God.” And all who have studied the subject admit, I believe, so much as this,—that the chief function of the prophet is to grasp the great moral principles on which God governs the world, and so to master them as to be able to apply them to the special conditions of men and of races of men. No doubt a profound insight into these principles involves some degree of foresight, and enables a man to predict what the issue of a

¹ “The Prophets of Israel,” p. 182.

certain course of action must be,—just as some of us, simply because we believe in the moral government of the world, foretold, even when the third Napoleon seemed to be the greatest political force in Europe, that his empire must speedily crumble into dust; just as we now predict that the vast and despotic military and bureaucratic systems which are pressing the very life out of many of the nations of the Continent must soon be broken up, or that Ireland will never be well governed until Irishmen have learned to govern themselves. But this foresight springs from insight, and rests upon it. And many a prophet has laid a firm grasp on the moral principles of the Divine Government, and has been able to say without doubt or hesitation that, if men pursue a certain course, they must infallibly reach a certain end, who yet has not been able to read with perfect accuracy what the moral conditions of men were, or to foresee the moral changes through which they would pass. Fallible and mistaken in these inferior points a man may be, and yet remain a most true prophet if only he has mastered the moral principles by which the world is ruled, and can see that obedience to them must lead to prosperity and peace, while disobedience inevitably entails adversity and strife.

There is an illustration of this point in the Bible which seems to have been “written large” in order that we might not fail to mark the limits of the prophetic power. Jonah’s famous prediction, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown:” was *that* fulfilled or was it *not* fulfilled? The message undoubtedly came from God; and God took some pains, it has been commonly thought, to ensure its faithful delivery. Jonah disliked both his mission, and the upshot of his mission; but he was compelled to go upon it. Did God, then, keep the word He spoke by the reluctant lips of Jonah, or did He not keep it? Those who think, as Jonah seems to have thought, that prediction is

the chief work of a prophet, and that his crowning honour is to have his prediction verified in every jot and tittle, must of course admit that, on this occasion at least, God did shew Himself to be like a man who lies or a son of man who repents. But for us, who believe that the main function of the prophet is to declare the moral principles which determine the fate of men and nations, Jonah's insight into these principles was far more gloriously vindicated, and the word of God was far more profoundly fulfilled, in the salvation of Nineveh than it would have been in its destruction. What Jonah saw was that it is righteousness—not wealth, not culture even, nor military organization—which redeems and exalts a nation, while wickedness dooms and destroys it. And when he had taught that great moral principle to a vast and populous city, so taught it that all the inhabitants of that city “turned every one from his evil way,” repenting of and renouncing the wickedness which was destroying him, was not his principle verified, his mission vindicated, to the uttermost? was not God the more abundantly glorified? did not the Prophet, if only he could have seen it, win a veritable and transcendent victory?

In like manner Balaam had grasped the principle that a righteous life infallibly conducts men to the true prosperity and peace. It is this principle, this conviction, which underlies the glowing imagery of his Oracles and gives them force. Was it not a true principle, a principle on which we see God acting along the whole course of human history? In grasping and fearlessly announcing this principle, which the superficial current of events so often seems to contradict, so often conceals therefore from the carnal and inobservant eye, he proved himself to be a genuine prophet, a man really taught and inspired of God. In applying this principle, however, he may, since inspiration does not necessarily carry infallibility with it,

have fallen into errors of detail. It may have been—I think it was—the ideal, not the actual, Israel which he saw in his visions from the Almighty, for it was on this ideal Israel that most of the prophets fixed their eyes. And hence he describes them as a people dwelling apart from other nations in an unapproachable, an unassailable, sanctity, obeying purer laws, pursuing higher aims, and even affirms that there is no distress in Israel because *no iniquity* is to be descried in Jacob. In so far as the actual Israel rose toward this fair and blameless ideal, they did enjoy the very blessings of abundance, victory, peace, which Balaam so lavishly promised them, as every page of their subsequent history testifies; while in so far as they fell away from this ideal, blended with the nations from whom they ought to have dwelt apart, fell back on the idolatries of their Syrian fathers or gave place to the current iniquities of their age and of neighbouring races, they lost the blessings promised to righteousness, and reaped the distress and impotence of which wickedness is the natural root.

If, then, it be the main function of the prophet to grasp and apply great moral principles, we may say with perfect honesty and candour that Balaam's oracles were more truly and profoundly verified than if every letter of his forecasts had come true. The chronicles of Israel are but an expanded commentary on the ethical principles which he laid down,—as, indeed, are the chronicles of every nation if only we had wit and grace to read them aright, or even the history of every individual man. For we must not fail to observe that in this canon of interpretation, which is a key to all the prophecies of Holy Writ, we have also the key to the mysteries of our individual experience and fate. Whether in the story of a man or of a race, Righteousness is the true redeeming and uplifting power; Unrighteousness the secret of all miseries, adversities, and distresses. And

it is only as we grasp and obey the righteous laws on which the universe is ruled, and by which therefore our individual lot is shaped, that we can become either true prophets or true men, and rejoice in the abundance of peace.

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THEOLOGICAL TERMS.—NATURE, GOD.

APART from any question of the value of theological study, it must, I think, be conceded to the Theologian that certain words should be used in a definite sense. In discussion no other sense or meaning is fairly attributable to these words. The terms of theology—to put the matter otherwise—cannot any longer be considered arbitrary or accidental. They have grown to be what they are, to have a more or less fixed and permanent signification, and it can only end in confusion of thought and irrelevance of argument to take them in any vaguer or looser sense—whether in lower meanings out of which the words have legitimately grown with the advance of human thought—or as counters without any fixed meaning at all. No subject has suffered so much from confusion of nomenclature as theology, and it seems as if our age of fertile yet crude thoughtfulness in so many directions, were destined to add to this confusion instead of clearing it up. The most radical of our conceptions, that of “God,” not to speak of “Religion” and “Nature,” is threatened with an obscuration which can only darken both the philosophical and theological atmosphere, and leave us in hopeless perplexity. We had better give up discussion altogether than to continue fighting in the dark.

This confusion has been long going on, and has sprung from obvious causes. The idea of the Supernatural which