

BALAAAM: AN EXPOSITION AND A STUDY.

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

BALAAAM'S *Fourth Oracle* is a series of prophetic utterances rather than the development of a single theme such as we have heard from him heretofore. It deals successively with the fate of Israel, Moab, Edom, Amalek, the Kenites, the Assyrians, and perhaps even with that of the Macedonians. It is divided into sections by the phrase, "And he took up his parable and said;" and is united only by the fact that the career and prospects of the other races of which it treats are viewed purely in their relation to the history and destiny of the chosen people.

Naturally, therefore, and of necessity, by virtue of the motive which prompted it and the intention with which it is fraught, the *predictive* element is far more dominant and conspicuous in this Fourth Oracle¹ than in any of those which we have already considered, although, as we have seen, the predictive is by no means the highest element in prophecy. Here we have clearly defined forecasts, forecasts which project their long shadows through century after century, forecasts which, if not justified by the event, must recoil with discredit on the head of the prophet who utters them. The fate of no less than six well-known Oriental races is involved in them, and of four of these races there was, so far as we can see, not the slightest necessity that Balaam should speak. He needlessly multiplies his difficulties, therefore, if he were not a true prophet, and himself places in our hands means for his detection and disgrace, with a confidence which we cannot but admire, or a reck-

¹ It will not be necessary, therefore, from our point of view, to discuss this Oracle at any length, though there is much in it to engage the attention of the commentator and historian, since, being mainly predictive, it throw comparatively little light on the character of the man.

lessness which proves him to have been beyond the reach of shame.

The whole Oracle, indeed, is volunteered, and seems even to have been thrust on unwilling ears. The Prophet's mission was already discharged. Again and again he had faithfully warned the king of Moab that he had better charge the buffalo, whom even trained and daring hunters of wild beasts avoid when they may, or rouse the lion when he couches over his prey, than assail the people whom the Lord had blessed. The warning had moved Balak to an impotent anger which, since he feared to vent it in violence, lest Balaam might return a curse for a blow—and he knew that whom Balaam cursed *was* cursed—found such poor relief and expression as could be obtained by smiting his hands together, and in breathing out rude sarcasms on the scrupulous piety with which the Prophet served a Lord who held him back from honour and reward.¹ Unmoved alike by the irony and the anger of the King, or moved only to the pity and awe of one who sees a headstrong man rushing on his fate, the Prophet accepts his dismissal, and replies only that, before he departs he will “advertise,” or “advise,” Balak “what this people shall do to thy people in later days”: *i.e.* he will tell Balak advisedly, or with a view to advice, what the ultimate relation of Israel to Moab will be, that so, with full knowledge of the final issue, the King may determine what shall be the present attitude of Moab to Israel.

With this brief exordium, he breaks into an inspired song and delivers his Oracle; of which the first section runs as follows (Chap. xxiv. verses 15–19):

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
 And thus saith the man whose eyes are open;
 Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
 And knoweth the knowledge of the Most High;

¹ Chapter xxiv. verses 10, 11.

He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
 Prostrate, but with opened eyes :
 I see him, though he be not now ;
 I behold him, though he be not nigh :
 There cometh a star out of Jacob,
 And out of Israel there riseth a sceptre,
 And smiteth in pieces both flanks of Moab,
 And shattereth all the sons of tumult :
 And Edom is his possession,
 And Seir, his enemies,¹ is his possession,
 And Israel shall do valiantly ;
 Jacob shall have dominion over them,
 And shall destroy them that escape out of their cities.

In his Third Oracle Balaam had foretold that the king of Israel should be "higher than Agag," *i.e.* "higher than High," higher than the most eminent prince of his time. And now, in the abrupt mysterious tones of one who strains his eyes to behold a bright but distant vision, he declares that this high victorious King, shining with the pure but remote splendour of a star, and wielding a sceptre so potent and imperial that none of "the sons of tumult," none of those who delight in war, will be able to withstand it, is not to be looked for in the immediate future, that his advent is still far off; but that, though his coming be not "nigh," he will come, and come to smite Moab in pieces on both flanks, to reduce to subjection even those inveterate foes to Israel—the Edomites, and to take possession of Mount Seir, their home and stronghold among the rocks.

Now this prediction of the Sceptre and the Star has been read in a Messianic sense both by Jewish and Christian commentators; the Jews of our Lord's time even drew from it a title for their Messiah, and called Him *Bar-Cochab*, or "the Son of the Star." And this Messianic reference is of unquestionable authority if nothing more is meant by it than that all the symbols and predictions of Hebrew royalty find their last and highest fulfilment in the

¹ *His enemies*: *i.e.* both Edom and Seir = the Edomites who dwell in Seir.

Christ; and that it was very natural, therefore, that the piety of after ages should place the star on his brow and the sceptre in his hand. But if it be meant that Balaam saw the figure and day of Jesus Christ afar off, predicted his personal advent, and consciously hailed *Him* as the Star and Sceptre of Israel, we must demur. To import these specific meanings into general terms, to isolate certain images and to interpret them in a sense alien and opposed to the main scope of the prophecy in which they are found, is to treat the most sacred of books with less respect than we accord to almost any other writing; it is to degrade the Bible into a series of arbitrary signs and perplexing conundrums which every man may read in a different sense, rather than to accept it as a revelation of Divine truth to the reason and the conscience of man.

The Star and the Sceptre are natural and common emblems of imperial splendour and power. They are used in this sense in every considerable literature in the world. And we must take them in this sense here. We pass into the region of mere speculation and conjecture if we assume Balaam to have meant anything more than that, in the dim and undetermined future, a Ruler was to arise in Israel—or, still more probably, a line of rulers, a dynasty—under whom the Hebrew race would conquer its most inveterate foes, rise to an uncontested supremacy, and exercise an unchallenged dominion over them. The Oracle itself rebukes us if we attempt to impose a more precise, or a more definitely, Messianic significance upon it. For when did Jesus of Nazareth smite Moab on both flanks, assume Mount Seir as his possession, and destroy those who escaped out of their cities? On the other hand, taken in its natural sense, Balaam's prediction was very sufficiently fulfilled when David carried his victorious arms through Moab and Edom, shattering these and other sons of tumult with what seems to us a ferocious severity, and when,

under Solomon his son, Jacob had full and unbroken dominion over them.¹

But Balaam is not content to foretell the defeat of Edom and Moab. He looks round on the whole circle of Israel's foes, and singles out the first and fiercest of them for his next denunciation. Taking up his parable, he says (Chap. xxiv. verse 20) :

Amalek is the first of the nations,
But his end shall be destruction.

The Amalekites were, we must remember, the great military clan of the Desert, and had recently subdued most of the adjacent clans by force of arms. They stood "first" among them all. But, from Balaam's point of view, their pre-eminence was a bad pre-eminence. For they had also been "first" in their hostility to Israel. They had attacked the Israelites almost as soon as they had broken out from the Egyptian house of bondage, at the very commencement of their long pilgrimage through the wilderness,² and had only been discomfited and repelled after a long and hazardous conflict. They had repeated the attack forty years afterward, and had driven back the Children of Israel when they first attempted to enter the Promised Land.³ For this unprovoked and persistent hostility Moses had solemnly devoted them to destruction; nay Jehovah Himself had said unto Moses, "I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Balaam had probably heard of the doom pronounced upon them, and now repeats and confirms it. How seriously this doom was understood in Israel, what grave importance was attached to its execution, one may infer from the fact that the prophet Samuel, nearly five hundred years after this doom was pronounced, formally commissioned Saul to destroy the Amalekites; and when Saul returned from the slaughter declaring that

¹ 2 Samuel viii. 2; comp. 2 Chronicles xxv. 11, 12.

² Exodus xvii. 8-16.

³ Numbers xiv. 40-45.

he had "utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword," reserving only the king, the Agag of his day, for his personal captive, the Prophet himself,¹ as one engaged in a religious service, "hewed Agag in pieces *before the Lord.*"

But Israel had friends as well as foes, and among these friends there were none who had served them more faithfully and efficiently than the Kenites, who seem to have derived their name either from Kain, their tribe-father, or from Kain, the city in which they dwelt. Led by Jethro, one of their prince-priests and the father-in-law of Moses, they had cast in their lot with the chosen people, guided them through the desert, in which—so the sacred historian gratefully acknowledges—they were as "eyes" to them, and had received from Moses the assurance, "What goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto you." As they had elected to share the lot of Israel, they should share it to the end: *this* is the substance of the next section of Balaam's Oracle, which runs thus: when he looked on the Kenites, he said (Chap. xxiv. verses 21, 22),

Strong is thy dwelling-place,
And thy nest fixed in the crags;
For surely Kain shall not be destroyed
Until Asshur shall carry *thee* away captive.

The prediction is susceptible of more than one interpretation; but the most probable seems to be that which finds in it an allusion to the former home of the Kenites, and makes it declare that as they had left their inaccessible haunt amid the crags of Horeb, to attach themselves to the fortunes of Israel when Israel itself was wandering and homeless and poor, they should be installed in a still more enduring and impregnable home now that they had placed themselves under the shield of Jehovah. In the Hebrew

¹ 1 Samuel xv. 32, 33.

there is a pun on the word *ken*, or "nest," and the word from which the *Kenites* derived their name, which gives a special prominence to the thought that the warm safe nest of this friendly race should remain unrifled and undisturbed until, so to carry out the figure, the Hebrew tree amid whose branches it was placed should itself be cut down and carried away to a strange land. In any case, on any reading, the main drift of the forecast is that the fate of the *Kenites* was bound up with that of the *Israelites*, and that they should continue to share in the good fortune of the men to whom they had committed themselves, until, at last, even these should be conquered and enslaved by the fierce and hasty *Assyrians*. And in this its main drift the forecast was fulfilled. The *Kenites* did continue in the Holy Congregation to the end, and "never wanted a man to stand before the Lord" until the Congregation itself was broken up and dispersed.¹

With the mention of that tremendous name *Asshur*, which in after centuries came to import so much to the whole Eastern world, a still vaster and more dreadful scene breaks in upon the Prophet's soul, musing on things to come; a scene in which enormous empires rise and fall; a scene of which he catches only brief glimpses indeed, and gives us only broken and indefinite outlines, but by which he himself is so profoundly moved and shaken that he opens the final section of his Oracle with a groan. "Alas," he cries (Chap. xxiv. verses 22, 24)—

Alas! who shall live when God doeth this!
But ships shall come from the coast of Chittim,
And shall humble *Asshur* and humble *Eber* :—
And *he* also shall be destroyed.

The Prophet is thus profoundly torn and moved, partly perhaps because he himself came from the mountains and

¹ Jeremiah xxxv. 19.

plains of Aram, in which the great empires of Nineveh and Babylon were to take their rise and find their seat; but, mainly, because, as he looks forward through the years, he sees that the star of Jacob is to set and the sceptre of Israel is to be broken; that the *righteous* nation is to be overwhelmed by the powers of unrighteousness. Nay, as he gazes on the vision which passes before his eyes, he beholds storm after storm of ruin and disaster breaking on the world. Even the proud and mighty Assyrian—and Eber is here but another name for Asshur—is to be humbled and overthrown by forces borne on ships that come from, or come by, Chittim, *i.e.* the isle of Cyprus (Chittim = Citium, the capital of Cyprus), by which island all ships passing from the West to the East must needs pass: a prediction very sufficiently fulfilled when the great empires of the East were overrun by the Macedonian Greeks under Philip and Alexander the Great.

Nor is even this all: but the very Power which humbles Assyria and the East is itself doomed to a similar destruction; for this, as the Hebrew syntax proves, is the force of the final line in the Oracle, “And *he* also shall be destroyed.”

First he sees the Hebrews, with the faithful Kenites, carried away captive into Assyria; then he sees the mighty Assyrian empire itself humbled and brought low by a still mightier Power, of which all that he can discern is that its forces approach in ships from the West; and then even this great Power falls to pieces under a pressure too distant and vague for him to define. Is it any wonder that as he gazed on a spectacle so vast and dark his heart quaked within him, and the groan was forced from his lips, “Woe, woe! who shall live when God doeth this?” For it was not the mere terror of the spectacle which shook him, but the disorder, the lawlessness, the unreasonableness of it. There was no principle in it. He could get no clue to

it. It was alien to his experience, a shock to his most cherished beliefs. For all his beliefs were built up on the conviction that the world was governed by God, and that the Judge of all the earth must not only do right, but get right done. Yet how could it be right that the one people in whom he had descried no iniquity, and whose happy fortune he had just foretold, should be conquered and enthralled by an empire founded on injustice and mere brute force? What hope was there for mankind if the vista of the future were closed by a scene of universal ruin, nation rising after nation only to be beaten down by wave after wave of destruction? Was life worth living, was righteousness worth pursuing, if *this* were to be the end of all?

Thus, at least, *we* might have moralized had we stood in Balaam's place, and gazed into the gloomy horizon which bounded his view. And thus we are disposed to interpret his groan, "Who shall live when God doeth this!" But whether *he* meant all this, and whether this hopeless and despairing outlook in any measure detracted from his faith in the ultimate victory of righteousness and truth, and so contributed to his subsequent disloyalty to God, it is impossible for us to say. All we are told is that when the "vision from the Almighty" had faded from his soul, and his oracular lips had ceased to utter the "words he heard from God," and to convey "knowledge from the Most High," *Balaam rose up, and went away, and turned toward his place; and Balak also went his way.* The phrase, however, does not imply—as many have taken it to imply, especially those who take pleasure in making Scripture seem to contradict itself—that the Prophet returned to his home at Pethor, among the mountains of Aram. It is a common idiom in the Hebrew, and means no more than that both he and Balak went each where he was now free to go, where he was disposed to go. At the same time, from Balaam's words in verse 14, "And now, behold, *I go unto*

my people," it does seem probable that he left the presence of the king of Moab fully intending to bend his face homeward. If that were his intention, all that needs to be said is that, like many other men before his time and since, he changed his intention, and did not change it for the better. For from other sources we learn that, on second thoughts, he joined the Midianites, Balak's allies, with whom from the first he seems to have been more at home than with the Moabites; and that he afterwards suggested to them the vile expedient by which the men of Israel were seduced from their allegiance to Jehovah, and so brought down on them the curse which he had refused to pronounce. Nay, from the course of his subsequent history, it would seem probable that he became the recognized *vates* and counsellor of the Midianite clan, and cast in his lot with them; as it is quite certain—unless we are to reject Scriptures quite as authentic as this Chronicle can be—that he remained with them till, in the war of vengeance against Midian which Moses commanded, this great but mean man, this true yet false prophet, was taken captive and judicially slain.

And so our Chronicle comes to a close. By its aid we have followed Balaam from his distant home in Mesopotamia, through the adventures of his long journey; we have stood with him on the mountains of Moab, as he watched "till knowledge came upon his soul like flame," and have seen his soul illuminated, not by "magic fires at random caught," but by "true prophetic light." We have stood by him as "with transc'd yet open gaze, fixed on the desert haze," like "one who deep in heaven some airy pageant sees," he has told us how, "in outline dim and vast," "the giant forms of empires on their way to ruin" cast their awful shadows on his heart. And now we must close the Chronicle, and turn to the supplementary Scriptures which carry on the tale or indicate the character of his life,

in the hope that they may throw some new light on the facts we have considered.

But already we have seen enough of him to know that though a great man, Balaam was by no means one of the greater prophets. The very visions and trances, in virtue of which we often ascribe greatness to him, are themselves the proof that he does not take the highest rank in the goodly fellowship. We are apt to lay too much stress on these strange and exceptional experiences, these ecstasies in which the spirit that is in man is carried out of and above itself, these visions in which the secrets of the future pass before his eye in visible form, and to attach too great an importance to them; as, indeed, we are apt to think too much of all rare and splendid mental endowments, and too little of the yet nobler moral gifts which are open to every son of man. And, therefore, we need to remember that as in the New Testament St. Paul lays down the canon, that self-consciousness and self-control are never lost by the true prophet, so also the great prophets of the Old Testament never paraded their ecstasies before their fellows, never appealed to visions and trances as authenticating their inspiration or augmenting their authority.¹ By their self-possession, by the sobriety of their bearing, no less than by the truth and power of their words, they are clearly marked off from the whole tribe of heathen soothsayers and diviners, and of the ministrants at Oracular shrines, who were held to be under the influence of the god in proportion as they lost composure and self-control. In this very Book of Numbers,² too, Jehovah Himself is represented as thus discriminating between the higher and inferior orders even of prophets who were genuinely inspired: "If there be a prophet among you" (*i.e.* among the Children of Israel, who then possessed, as we know, no

Cf. *The Prophets of Israel*, By W. Robertson Smith.

² Numbers xii. 6-8.

prophet of any great mark save Moses), "I, the Lord, do make myself known unto him *in a vision*, and do speak unto him *in a dream*. My servant Moses is *not so*, who is faithful in all my house. With *him* I speak mouth to mouth, even visibly, and not in dark speeches, and the similitude of the Lord doth he behold." Faithful service in God's house, then, and fellowship of spirit and aim with Him, are far higher gifts than prophetic dreams and trances, ecstasies and visions; and these are open to us all: they are gifts which all who ask may have, which all who seek may find. For what is there, save our own unwillingness, to hinder any one of us from seeing and serving God in all we do? what is there, save our own worldliness and selfishness, to prevent any one of us from a constant and growing communion with Him, and an ever-augmenting knowledge of his will? For all lowly, but faithful and loving, souls there is immense comfort in St. Paul's words: "Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, . . . but have not charity, I am nothing."

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THE EXEGESIS OF THE SCHOOLMEN.

THEIR VAGUE VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF INSPIRATION.

If we were to fix on any one special characteristic which marks each separate epoch of exegesis in the age of the Schoolmen,¹ we might say that—

(i.) The first period, from Walafrid Strabo († 849) down to Abelard († 1079), is mainly marked by secondhandness and iteration.²

(ii.) The second period, from Abelard to Durandus of St.

¹ I will speak of the Mystics separately.

There were, of course, partial exceptions, such as Rupert of Deutz.