

BALAAAM: AN EXPOSITION AND A STUDY.

II. THE SUPPLEMENTARY SCRIPTURES.

WE have now studied the Chronicle from end to end; and if it has not thrown so much new light on the character of Balaam as we had hoped to gain from it, it must at least have served to sharpen and define our conceptions of the man, and so to set the problem of his character more fairly before us. And as we now turn to the Scriptures concerning him which lie outside this Chronicle, I do not see how we can better prepare ourselves for studying them than by summing up, in a few brief sentences, the impression which the Chronicle itself has left upon us.

Upon the whole, then, I think it has left a very favourable impression. In its earlier sections, indeed, we found some faint hints that Balaam wanted, that at least he was quite willing, to curse the people whom he was compelled to bless; and that if he loved righteousness, he also loved the wages of unrighteousness: while his loud and frequent vaunts of loyalty to the Divine Will suggested that an obedience which protested so much might not be altogether beyond suspicion. In his conferences with the ambassadors of Balak, he seemed to be letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would"; while in his journey to Moab, and above all in his adventure with the Angel and the Ass, we saw only too much reason to fear that "I would" was beginning to get the better of "I dare not," and that he was plotting how to gratify Balak without openly rebelling against Jehovah. But from this point onwards, from the moment in which the dumb ass rebuked the madness of the Prophet, we

found nothing to allege against him, but much to approve and admire. In all his intercourse with Balak he shewed "an incorrigible and losing honesty," a veracity, a fidelity to the words which the Lord had put into his mouth that never wavered, although it would have been easy for him to palter with words in a double sense, and to utter oracles as musical in the ear of his listeners, and as false to the hopes which they inspired, as were many of those which proceeded from the shrines of Delphi and Dodona.

His last oracle has little value for us save as it proves him to have been a veritable seer, able to penetrate the future and foretell things to come. Here he utters definite forecasts, which project into a far-distant future, and so gives us an opportunity to determine whether or not he was endowed with the power he claimed and was believed to possess. Israel, he says, is to conquer all its enemies, to rise into an uncontested supremacy and exercise an unchallenged dominion over them. Edom is to be smitten on both flanks, Amalek to be destroyed. The faithful Kenites, who had attached themselves to the fortunes of Israel, when Israel was destitute and helpless, are to dwell in a home still more secure than the nest in the rocks which they had left to cast in their lot with that of the chosen people. The Assyrians, who, in the remote future are to subjugate and enthrall both the Hebrews and the Kenites, will themselves be humbled by some great Western Power; and even this Power—the Macedonian—is in its turn to be destroyed under a pressure too vague and distant for him to define. These predictions are so definite and precise that any one who cares may bring him to book upon them; and they are so far beyond the reach of that prophetic strain to which age and a wide experience of the ways of God with men sometimes attain that, if they were fulfilled—and we have seen that they *were* fulfilled—it is impossible to deny that Balaam was a true prophet even in the vulgar sense of that

word, and must have received his knowledge from the Most High.

But it is in his earlier oracles that both the true character of the man and the real greatness of the prophet come out; for that which makes men good is the very quality which makes prophets great. It lies not in foresight, but in insight; not in forecasting the exact form and pressure of the time to be, but in the power to grasp the moral order of the universe with a loyal heart. It is in the mastery of ethical principles, and not in mere intellectual capacity or illumination, that a prophet's highest glory consists. And, judged by this admitted canon, it must be confessed that, in his oracles, Balaam takes a high place in the goodly fellowship, though not by any means the highest. From the first of these remarkable utterances we gathered that it was *the holiness* of Israel by which he was attracted and impressed, even more than by their numbers or their power. We gathered that he had learned, what many Christian men and statesmen have not learned even yet, that Righteousness is the true strength of a nation, not wealth, nor dominion, nor culture even. It is because he sees that righteousness is the end and aim of Israel that he longs to share their ideal, to live their life, to die their death, and feels that nothing short of a life conformed to the Divine law can bring him peace at the last.

This conviction culminates in his Second Oracle, in which, therefore, we find our most solid and valuable contributions to an adequate conception of the man. For it is here that we meet with three striking sentences which should largely influence our final estimate of him, although hitherto, so far as I am aware, no emphasis has been laid upon them. First of all he tells us that *no iniquity is to be descried in Jacob*, and that hence *no distress is to be seen in Israel*.¹ And how could he more impressively announce his per-

¹ Numbers xxiii. 21.

suasion that while Sin is the source of weakness and misery, Righteousness is the one source of strength, happiness, and peace, whether to a man or to a nation? Still more striking and suggestive is the sentence in which he disavows a power commonly ascribed to him, and confesses that when Jehovah has blessed he cannot *reverse* the blessing.¹ For this was precisely what a soothsayer was expected to do, what it was universally believed that he could do. What was he good for if he could not curse men who, because they were strong in wealth or power, were held to be in favour with Heaven? A soothsayer who could not control events as well as foresee them, who could not shape as well as forecast the future, who could not evade or overrule the benign intention of a god by magic arts or by calling in some higher celestial influence, was not a soothsayer at all to the vulgar, or even to the princely² mind of that age. And, therefore, to find a soothsayer confessing that he cannot reverse as well as predict the currents of human destiny, is to find a man so frank and honourable, so true to himself, to God, and to men, as to abjure a most potent art, an almost unrivalled power over the conduct and fortunes of his fellows, rather than trade in their superstitions and fears. Balaam never shews a more righteous and disinterested spirit than in this costly sacrifice on the altar of truth. But most striking of all is the sentence in which he ascribes the righteousness and consequent blessedness of the elect people to the fact, that there was *no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel*; that instead of trying, as he had done, to surprise or force the secrets of the future, they waited until *in due time it was told to Israel what God doeth*.³ For this was to contemn the very gift of which he had been most proud. It was to confess that the main study and aim of his life had been one which rather diverted him from a righteous and patient obedience to the will of

¹ Numbers xxiii. 20.² *Ibid.* xxii. 6.³ *Ibid.* xxiii. 23.

God than conducted him to it. No more remarkable confession ever fell from a diviner's lips than this censure on the art of divination ; and in making it Balaam rose into a far higher and nobler mood than when, with tranced but open eye, he saw visions from the Almighty, and there fell upon his inward ear words from God.

In his Third Oracle, although in delivering it he seems to have been more utterly possessed by the Divine afflatus than before, and though the Spirit of God *came* upon him with overmastering force, Balaam simply repeats, and repeats in the same figures and phrases he had previously employed, his old affirmation that Righteousness, and Righteousness alone, is the secret of strength and peace. He does not now so much as go out to look for auguries. God has shewn him his will, and that is enough ; no omen could persuade him of any change in that high and constant Will. He is content to reaffirm the truth he has already affirmed ; only now he is more sure of it than ever, puts his whole soul into the affirmation of it, and is more profoundly conscious that he has "the mind of the Spirit" in declaring that righteousness is the one power which redeems and uplifts men, unrighteousness the secret and cause of all their miseries.

These are the more notable and significant results of our study of the Chronicle of Balaam, and on the whole the Scriptures which lie outside it do but expand the hints and develop the germs of character which we have found in the Chronicle itself ; though it must be acknowledged that, while one of them lends new lustre to the loftier aspects of the man, most of them add to its baser aspects shades so dark and repulsive as to explain why his character has been regarded as a well-nigh insoluble enigma.

I. Let us take the *adverse* Scriptures first, the Scriptures which darken and degrade our conception of him.

(1) We have gathered from the Chronicle that Balaam *wanted*, or at best was quite willing, *to curse Israel*. The faint hints and suggestions of this evil bent and disposition of his mind which the Chronicle contains would not, however, have counted for much. We might have doubted our construction of them had they not been confirmed in the most explicit way, in the most damning sense, by at least three passages of Holy Writ. Thus in Deuteronomy xxiii. 4, 5, we read that no Moabite was to be admitted into the congregation of Israel, "because they met you not with bread and with water in the way when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they *hired* Balaam, the son of Beor. . . . to curse thee. Nevertheless the Lord thy God *would not hearken unto Balaam*, but the Lord thy God *turned the curse into a blessing* because he loved thee." Of the implication of these words there can be little doubt. Read sincerely, without any prejudice for or against the man, they surely charge Balaam with having endeavoured to extort the consent of Jehovah to a curse he was eager to pronounce; while they ascribe it purely to the love of Jehovah for Israel that He would not hearken to the prayers of Balaam, but turned the curse he would have willingly uttered into a blessing he was reluctant to pronounce. It seems impossible to infer less from them than this: that had Balaam been left to follow his own impulse, to take his own course, it was anything but a benediction which he would have pronounced over the camp of Israel, and that the spirit of the hireling contended in his breast with the spirit of the prophet.

This implication is still further confirmed by two subsequent passages. In his last pathetic appeal to the tribes of Israel, Joshua sought to rekindle their fidelity to Jehovah by recounting the mercies of the Lord and the wonders He had shewed them; and in recounting these wonders of mercy he reminds them of an interposition which some

of them could hardly have forgotten. He says (Joshua xxiv. 9, 10): "Then Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and warred against Israel, and sent and called Balaam, the son of Beor, to curse you: but *I would not hearken to Balaam; therefore* he blessed you still: so I delivered you out of his hand." And in Nehemiah xiii. 1, 2, we are told that on a certain day there was read to the Jews who had returned from the Captivity that passage from Deuteronomy cited in the last paragraph; "wherein was found that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever, because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, *but hired Balaam against them that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.*" When they had heard this sentence from "the Book of Moses," adds Nehemiah, they instantly separated themselves from the mixed multitude which had crept into the Congregation.

We may fairly say, therefore, that not only is Balaam branded as a hireling by these Supplementary Scriptures, and charged with having wished, and even tried, to curse the seed of Abraham; but that this conviction both of his cupidity and of his hostility to Israel was the standing and dominant conviction of the Jews concerning him for more than a thousand years.

(2) We found in the Chronicle some reason to fear that Balaam had respect to reward, that he hankered after a house full of silver and gold; that, if he loved righteousness, he also loved the wages of unrighteousness. And this fear has been confirmed by the passages just cited in which he is stigmatized as a hireling. But, unhappily, there are other Scriptures which, if we accept them as inspired, or even as bearing honest witness to historic facts, put this point, this gross and heavy fault, beyond the reach of doubt. In the so-called Second Epistle of St. Peter (Chap. ii.

15, 16), for example, certain "children of a curse" are spoken of as having forsaken the path of righteousness to go astray, "following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, *who loved the hire of wrongdoing*, but was rebuked for his transgression: a dumb ass spoke with man's voice, and stayed the madness of the prophet." I am not unmindful of the questionable authority of this Epistle. For three centuries after it was written it was excluded from the Sacred Canon; and probably enough it may be cast out from the Canon ere long, at least by those who walk by the faith which demands evidence for things not seen rather than by that which is the substance of things hoped for. But no scholar will deny that it is a very ancient document, or that it follows an accepted Jewish tradition in the charge it alleges against the son of Beor. On the other hand, we must cheerfully admit that St. Peter, or the *falsarius* who writes in his name, accords the sacred title of "prophet" to Balaam even while he charges him with that love of money which is a root of all evil; and even goes so far as to call his wrong-doing a "madness," a craze discordant with his general character, of which he could hardly have been guilty had not his true nature been jangled and out of tune. Doubtful as may be the authority of this Scripture, therefore, we may say that it sums up, with some fairness, nearly all that we know of the man, neither concealing the good that was in him nor extenuating that which was evil.

Even the severest criticism, however, can find little of any weight to allege against the authenticity of the Epistle of St. Jude; and in this Epistle (verse 11) it is said of those who revile whatsoever things they know not, "Woe unto them! for they went in the way of Cain, *and ran riotously in the error of Balaam for hire.*" St. Jude, therefore, not only brings the old charge against Balaam and ascribes to him a mercenary spirit, a willingness to let out his art of divination on hire; he also anticipates our next point, and

implies in him a certain sensuality of spirit. For in this verse, "Lust stands hard by hate." Cain is here the emblem of fierce and cruel hate, say the critics; Balaam that of carnal indulgence: those who ran riotously in his error being men—and even in the Christian Church there have always been men, the Antinomians to wit, who have turned the grace of God into licentiousness—who made their piety a cloak for sensual depravity, and blackened the very name of Religion by the immoralities which they held it to justify or condone. The reference may be only to that vile expedient which Balaam counselled, and by which, as we are about to see, the men of Israel were lured into the flagrant orgies of Baalpeor; yet surely that was an expedient which it could never have occurred to any man of pure heart or pure life to advise.

(3) For the next allegation which Scripture brings against him is perhaps the worst of all. The very Chapter (xxv.) which follows the Chronicle in the Book of Numbers tells the sad and shameful story of how the fair women of Midian came down to the camp of Israel, and tempted the men of Israel to join in the licentious rites by which Baalpeor was worshipped; and how, for this sin, the anger of the Lord was kindled so that He sent a plague upon them, and "those that died of the plague were twenty and four thousand;" but it in no way connects the name of Balaam either with the sin or its punishment. Probably it was not known at the time that it was he who had dug this pit for their feet. But in a subsequent Chapter (Numbers xxxi. 16) the dismal secret is disclosed, and the whole guilt of this foul device is fastened upon him: for, in the war of vengeance against Midian, Moses commanded that even the women should be slain, "because they caused the children of Israel, *through the counsel of Balaam*, to commit impurity against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord." To those

who bow to the authority of Scripture a charge so plainly made needs no confirmation; yet it is confirmed in the most explicit terms, and on an authority no less than that of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself; for in the epistle which he sent to the Church at Pergamos by his servant John (Revelation ii. 14), He sharply rebukes as many as "held the teaching of *Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication.*"¹

So that, despite his splendid fidelity to the words which God put into his mouth, and his utter refusal to curse the people whom God had blessed, he did curse them most effectually after all, by a deed which spoke louder than any words. "The expedient he pitched upon," says Bishop Butler, "was that concerning which Solomon afterwards observed that it had *cast down many wounded, yea, many strong men had been slain by it*, and of which he himself was a sad example when *his wives turned away his heart after other gods.*" And so moved is the good bishop, whose mind was as a rule singularly thoughtful and composed, by so foul and sordid a sin in a man otherwise so noble and great, that, after relating it, he breaks out into the exclamation, "Great God, what inconsistency, what perplexity is here!" And, indeed, the sin was so vile, and the tragedy which avenged it so terrible, that we find more than one echo of it even in the later prophets. Hosea, for instance (Chap. ix. 10), "dwells with special interest on the first love of Jehovah to his people when He found Israel like grapes in the wilderness, when He knew them in the thirsty desert, *before the innocence of the nation's childhood was stained with the guilt of Baalpeor,*" and "they separated themselves unto Shame" (a prophetic synonym for Peor), and became as "abominable" as the god they served: while Isaiah (Chap. ix. 4) caught and reproduced the thunders of the

¹ Comp. 1 Corinthians x. 8.

“day of Midian,” on which God took vengeance on the sensual race by which that early innocence was debauched.¹

It is when we bring together such passages as these that we begin to comprehend the bitter and unsparing indignation with which the Bible, and especially the New Testament, glows against the Prophet of Pethor, speaking of him with a severity utterly unlike to the benign generosity of most of its verdicts on human character, even when the character of which it speaks is of no singular or remarkable excellence. His sins were as sordid, as base, as foul, as his virtues were eminent and his endowments rare; and they suffer by force of contrast. That a good man should be so bad, and a great man so mean, this is the wonder, this the shame. For great gifts entail grave responsibilities, and rare virtues should raise a man above vulgar temptations. The Bible is always, and justly, severe on those who pervert high gifts to base uses, and prostitute the very credit of Virtue in the service of vice. Balaam's great sin was that, knowing and loving the right, he nevertheless did wrong. He sinned, not simply against an external law and an external authority, but against the God within him: for while he had, and boasted that he had, the Spirit of God, and that in a measure in which few men of his time possessed it, he forgot that it was a Spirit of holiness and charity as well as a Spirit of wisdom and knowledge. He sinned against the Holy Ghost: and this sin against the Holy Ghost is the one unpardonable sin—unpardonable at least in this world, since it is incorrigible by any discipline which this world affords.

I do not deny that there may have been palliations of his guilt of which the Divine Mercy took note, or that that Mercy may long since have recovered him to a more steadfast and victorious pursuit of righteousness; “for to this

¹ Unless, indeed, with some commentators, we find in this “day of Midian” a reference to the story told in Judges vii.

end was the gospel (of that Mercy) preached even unto the dead,—that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”¹ And even we, who are apt to be as unmerciful in our judgment of our fellows as though we stood in no need of mercy for ourselves, know by observation, if not also by experience, that violent spiritual excitements react dangerously upon the soul, inducing a torpor of its higher faculties, and leaving it perilously open to temptations from the flesh: and therefore we can admit that, after the strain of overpowering inspiration, the trances and ecstasies in which Balaam saw his visions from the Almighty and delivered the oracles of the Most High, he may have yielded to temptations which he would have resisted in moods less morbid, less agitated and depressed; for it is one of the profoundest yet most patent mysteries of our nature that, when the Spirit of God departs from us, an evil spirit is only too likely to usurp his seat, and, alas! to find it ready swept and garnished for him. We confess, too, that the moment in which the main ambition of a life breaks down is a moment at which a man is prone to sink into despair; and that, in his despair, he may be so transported from himself as to be wholly unlike himself: and hence we can understand that if, as seems probable, Balaam had fondly cherished an ambition to abandon his recluse life, to mingle with men, and to become the honoured counsellor of a king or a clan, the sudden failure of this ambition may, for a time at least, have led him to hate the very virtues to which his failure was due, and to lift the yoke from passions which he had hitherto held in check. And we can also understand that his faith in the moral government of the world may have been perilously shaken when he foresaw, as in his last vision he did foresee, that even the people whom Jehovah had blessed, even the one race in which

¹ 1 Peter iv. 6.

he could descry no sin, the unique nation which lived for righteousness, was ultimately to be carried away captive, and to share the fate of empires founded on rapine and maintained by blood.

All this we can understand and allow for ; all this we are bound to make allowance for ; but, allow for it as we will, the unsophisticated conscience of every candid man must surely condemn Balaam as a sinner beyond others, and pronounce his guilt to be as rare and strange as his virtues and his gifts. Our one hope for him lies in the fact that he suffered for his sin in the flesh, that he received the punishment of it here and now, and was not permitted to add to his guilt by flaunting it in the face of the sun. Of all fates that can befall a transgressor the worst is the impunity which makes him bold in transgression. And from this fate Balaam was mercifully spared. For, in the war of vengeance against Midian, he was taken captive by the warriors of Israel, together with the kings or sheikhs of that clan, tried, and condemned to a judicial death (Numbers xxxi. 8, in the Hebrew, and Joshua xiii. 22). "Justice did not suffer him to live." He was taken in the trap he had set for others, and fell into the pit which he himself had digged,—making by his death, let us hope, such poor atonement as was still possible for his crime against God and man.

Sins so sordid, base, and foul as those which we have now seen brought home to him compose a terrible indictment against the Prophet in whom we have found so much to admire,—inspirations so lofty, gifts so rare, and a loyalty to the words which God put into his mouth so disinterested and steadfast. As we ponder the indictment and dwell upon its counts, we may be tempted to forget his redeeming virtues, the qualities which we have admired in him and approved. But the Bible will not suffer us to do him this

injustice ; for among these supplementary Scriptures there is one which not only confirms all the good impressions of him which we have derived from the Chronicle, but raises him even higher in our thoughts. It is the passage which we are now to consider. In Micah vi. 5-8, we read : “ *O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam, the son of Beor, answered him, from Shittim to Gilgal,¹ that ye may discern the righteous acts of the Lord.* ”

[Balak loquitur.] *Wherewith shall I come to meet the Lord, and bow myself before the God of the high place? Shall I come to meet him with burnt-offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord take pleasure in thousands of rams, in myriads of rivers of oil? Shall I give up my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

[Balaam loquitur.] *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good : and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God ? ”*

There seems no reason to doubt that in these verses we have a colloquy which actually took place between the king of Moab and the prophet of Pethor, although the Chronicle contains no report of it. But as it has been questioned by at least one English scholar of distinction (Cheyne *in loco*), who however, does not allege any argument in favour of his conclusion, it is necessary that we should glance at the reasons on which we rely in assuming that we are indebted to Micah for a scrap of ancient history which, but for him, we should have lost. In brief, these reasons are as follows :

(1) The weight of authority is on our side. The literary instincts and spiritual insight of such men as Bishop Butler, F. D. Maurice, Cardinal Newman, Robertson of Brighton, and Dean Stanley, especially when backed by the verdict

¹ Ewald conjectures with much probability that “ from Shittim to Gilgal ” is a marginal note which has crept into the text.

of critics so learned and accomplished as Ewald and Kalisch, are not to be lightly over-ridden; and all these take this passage as reporting a conversation between Balak and Balaam.

(2) It is admitted all round that the verse which introduces this passage (Verse 5) is patient of the construction we put upon it, and lends itself more easily and naturally to it than to any other. When we are told of what Balak *consulted*, and how Balaam *answered* him, we naturally expect to find in the verses that follow some account of the question and its reply: and in these following verses there is a personal tone (Note the "O man" of Verse 8), a conversational tone, which answers to that expectation.

(3) Such supplementary Scriptures as this are common in the Bible; we have already considered a good many of them by which our conception of Balaam's character has been deepened and enlarged. And there are many similar passages. For example, it is no more wonderful that Micah should make this addition to the Chronicle than that Hosea (Chap. xii. 3, 4) should tell us that Jacob "prevailed" over the angel with whom he strove at Peniel, because "he wept and made supplication unto him," although no mention is made of his tears and supplications in the Book of Genesis; or than that the author of the first Book of Chronicles (Chap. vii. 21, 22) should relate how certain men of Gath, while making a raid upon their cattle, came down upon the children of Ephraim in the land of Goshen, and slew them with the sword, nearly exterminating the whole tribe; and how Ephraim their father mourned for them many days, and his brethren came to comfort him, although no mention of this catastrophe is made in the Book of Exodus. It is no more wonderful than that St. Paul should report how the Lord Jesus used to say (Acts xx. 35): "It is more blessed to give than to receive," although that generous maxim is not recorded in any one of

our Gospels; or than that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Chaps. v., vii.) should add so largely to our knowledge of Melchisedek, Prince of Salem, and, in Chapter xi., give many new and picturesque touches to some of the best known patriarchs and heroes of Israel.

(4) There are local touches and undesigned coincidences in this passage which fall in with our assumption and confirm it. What, for example, could be more natural than that Balak, who led the Prophet from one sacred grove on the hill-tops to another, and drenched the altars of so many high places with the blood of his sacrifices, should conceive of Jehovah as "the God of the high place," and anxiously inquire how He might be placated? In the Chronicle, again, Balaam speaks familiarly of leaving the sacred groves to meet Jehovah, and of Jehovah's coming to meet him (Chap. xxiii. 3, 4). So familiar is the phrase with him that he abbreviates it into a technical term, and once, at least (Chap. xxiii. 15) he speaks to Balak simply of going to meet, leaving him to infer that it was *the Lord* whom he expected to meet, and quite sure that he would know how to take the phrase. Micah preserves this singular expression, though in the Hebrew he uses a different verb, and makes Balak ask, "Wherewith shall I come to meet the Lord? Shall I come to meet him with burnt-offerings?" Nor must we omit to note that, in this passage, Balak, king of Moab, offers even to give up his *first-born* for his transgression, the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul. For the custom of making these dreadful human sacrifices in dreadful emergencies seems to have been a Moabitish custom, and to have held its ground many centuries after Balak had left the scene. In 2 Kings iii. 26, 27, we read of a king of Moab, whose name the recently discovered "Moabitish Stone" has made familiar to many of us,—we read how *Mesha*, king of Moab, sorely bestead by the armies of Judah and Israel, not only proposed to sacrifice his first-born to

the offended gods, but actually "took his eldest son, that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall."

And (5) the speeches here ascribed to Balak and Balaam are in character with the men. There is an imperious and yet a reckless and prodigal tone in the demand that Micah puts into the mouth of the King which is quite in harmony with all we know of him. He who sent messengers to Balaam saying, "Let nothing, I beseech thee, hinder thee from coming unto me, for . . . I will do whatsoever thou shalt say"; he who pursued Heaven with fierce and pertinacious importunity from altar to altar and hill to hill; he who, even after he had smitten his hands together in impotent anger, and had cried out on the Prophet, "Thou shalt never curse them again nor bless them again!" could yet command and beseech him to make one more attempt to wring a curse from the reluctant Power on high—may well have huddled one desperate offer and demand on the top of another as Micah makes him do. While Balaam, who loved and admired righteousness, who was true to the words he received from God at all risks and all costs, who was simply fascinated by the holiness of Israel and longed to share their lot, live their life, die their death, and who knew that it was to their comparative sinlessness they owed their strength and their peace, was surely not unlikely to have conceived such an ideal of righteousness as Micah here attributes to him.

For all these reasons, then,¹ reasons which, when combined, form an argument, I think, of irresistible cogency, we may take this passage as supplementing the story contained in the Chronicle, as preserving a colloquy between Balak

¹ For the opposite conclusion Mr. Cheyne alleges nothing but the assumption that those who see in this passage Balak's question and Balaam's reply, have "probably not realised the amount of personification which exists in the prophetic writings."

and Balaam which, but for Micah, would have remained unknown to us.

The exact point in the Chronicle in which we are to insert this colloquy is not easy to determine. Dean Stanley thought that Balak *saluted* Balaam with this question when he first met him on the border of Moab. And it may have been so. It may be that in his eagerness to receive supernatural help against his dreaded foe, the King, who had pledged himself to do whatever the Prophet should demand, may have offered to go all lengths in order to secure the interposition he craved. But there is a tone of desperation in his question which, to my mind, accords better with the assumption that it was at the *close* of his interview with the Prophet, rather than at its commencement, that the baffled monarch grew so excited and so profuse. In Micah's sketch of him he has the look and bearing of one who snatches at a last and fatal expedient, of one wellnigh driven to despair. Thrice already, and on three several heights, he had offered oxen and rams in the hope that he might propitiate the strange God whom Balaam served, and of whom he seemed to have conceived as Himself but a celestial Balaam, who might be lured to change his mind by bribes, if only the bribe were large enough and cunningly adapted to his special bent. And thrice his bribes, his sacrifices, had been rejected, and a blessing had been uttered instead of the hoped for curse. Was there nothing more that he could do? no other expedient that he could try? Would more and more abundant burnt-offerings avail? If not, would flocks of rams by the thousand and rivers of oil by the ten thousand? If not, would even the last and dearest and most dreadful sacrifice of all avail—shall I give *my firstborn* for my transgression, the fruit of my body, the hope of my dynasty, the flower of my stem, for the sin of my soul? The man was maddened with disappointment, with a vague and nameless fear, with cruel

anxiety and still more cruel suspense. The dread lest his power should be broken, his name blotted out, his fair cities ravaged, his tribe destroyed, drove him out of and beyond himself; and in his momentary exaltation no sacrifice seemed too costly by which the dark and awful doom which brooded over him might be averted.

And surely we may say that as the Lord had opened the mouth of a dumb ass to rebuke the madness of the Prophet, so now He opened the mouth of the Prophet to rebuke the madness of the King. It was not inevitable that Moab and Israel should come into conflict. Let the King be just and fear not. It was not bribes nor offerings that God required of him; but only that he should walk quietly and sincerely by conscience, by the inward light, and faithfully discharge the plain moral duties which all men recognize and approve.

Nothing can be finer than the Prophet's reply, whether in spirit or in form:—"*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*" Nothing could more perfectly express that profound belief in Righteousness which, as we have seen again and again, was a characteristic of Balaam, or shew more impressively how pure, simple, and large his ideal of Righteousness was.

And yet, though this ideal is one which may be reached by any man who trusts and obeys the finer instincts of the soul and discerns the moral significance of the relations in which he stands, how wonderful it was that a heathen diviner of that distant time should have risen to an ideal so pure and lofty! A thousand years before the philosophers of Athens had begun to inquire after "the first fair" and "the first good," this unknown Prophet of an obscure race flashes into sight for a moment, and, lo, he has not asked the question only, but gained an answer to it which the accumulated experience and discoveries of

subsequent centuries has but confirmed! Such wisdom was not then to be found, no, not even in Israel itself, nor for centuries afterward. Now and then, indeed, in after years, a few of the noblest and most penetrating minds in Israel caught glimpses of the truth proclaimed by Balaam. Samuel, for instance, saw and said that "to obey was better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." David affirmed that the sacrifices of God are not bullocks and goats, but a broken spirit and a contrite heart. And most of the later prophets maintained that to keep the commandments of God was better than to lavish hecatombs on his altar. But *the people* of Israel never accepted this Divine message; as, indeed, how should they when the very prophets who exalted obedience above offerings, and mercy above sacrifice, were nevertheless very zealous for the service of the altar and the temple? It was not till Christ came that ritualism was superseded by morality, and men really learned that pure and undefiled worship before God our Father is to minister to the afflicted and to keep themselves unspotted by the world. But since He came and dwelt among us the lesson has been learned, though it has been often forgotten; and the wisest of our own day, even though they permit themselves to speak of the Scriptures of life as "Hebrew old clothes," or "faded Jewish stars," still tell us, by life as well as by pen, that to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, is the whole duty and chief good of man.

In placing obedience above ordinances, then, character before worship, right-doing before ritualism, Balaam anticipated the teaching of Christ Himself; and even a Carlyle, though taught by Christ, was no wiser than he; and so prophet touches hand with prophet across an interval of four thousand years. The truth he taught is indeed one "which all the ages tell;" it is commended to us by philosopher as well as saint, by the most modern as well

as by the most ancient wisdom ; and yet it needs no commendation, since it at once commends itself to our best and purest instincts.

Obedience is better than worship, nay, *is* the true worship ; all ordinances of outward service were intended to cherish and express this inward obedience, and are valuable only as they help to confirm us in our obedience to the will of God ; God requires of us nothing more than the justice, the compassion, the humility which our own reason and conscience require of us, so that God's requisition on us is, after all, only our own requisition on ourselves,—in all these ways, and many more, we may state the truth anticipated by Balaam so many centuries ago.

No doubt it is a truth which cuts up all mere ritualism, sacramentarianism, sacerdotalism, by the root. Priests, sacraments, rites, are of use and fulfil their end only in so far as they teach and subserve a pure and noble morality. When once they are loved and venerated for their own sake ; when once they are held to be the vital substance or the main part of Religion ; and, much more, when they are made a substitute for Morality or are exalted above it, they become hateful to God and injurious to men. For what the Lord our God requires of us is not that we should reverence and obey a priest, take sacraments, observe rites ; but that we should act with justice, shew mercy, and walk humbly with Him. What He requires of us is not even that we should attend the services of the Church, or read our Bibles, or assent to creeds ; all these are simply of no use to us save as they help to cherish in us a lowly spirit and a merciful heart, and to make our life righteous and kindly and pure.

On the other hand, we must be on our guard against the error of those who, when once they grasp the truth that real Religion is of the inward life, and does not consist in the observance of outward rites and forms, feel as if they were

relieved from all the burden and strain of Religion, and address themselves to what they take to be an easier course with a light heart. To them, the words of Balaam come with all the force of an enfranchisement. Their feeling is, "We may fling off all these tedious and binding forms, then. We need observe no rite, attend no service, take no sacrament, join in no worship. We have nothing to do but to live a just, kindly, and reverent life!" Ah, but what a *But* is there! Have they at all considered what it is to which they so lightly address themselves?

That we should do justly is a reasonable as well as a Divine demand; for it is a demand which our own reason and conscience make upon us. But how much is involved in it? how hard, how all but impossible, is it for even the best of men to meet it? To do justly is to render to every man his due. It covers all our domestic, social, and political relations, and demands that in every one of these we should do the thing that is right. And we do not need a large experience to discover how difficult it is, in the complex and often conflicting claims to which we lie open, so much as to know what justice requires of us; and how much more difficult it is to *do* it in the teeth of our natural indolence, cupidity, and selfishness.

To love and shew mercy, again, is as reasonable as to do justice; for we ourselves constantly stand in need of the sympathy and compassion of our fellows, and are bound to shew to them the mercy that we need from them. But let any man set himself to keep this reasonable precept, and it will not be long before he discovers how hard it is to shew men a pity which shall not alienate or offend them; how hard it is to do an effective kindness even to our neighbour, and how doubly hard so to do it as not to injure either him or *his* neighbour. Nothing takes more wisdom than to exercise a charity which shall neither hurt nor degrade the man who receives it; and even if we do him no

harm, we may only too easily be doing harm to others by seeming to slight them, or by breeding in them a craving or a pauperized spirit. And all this while I am assuming that we are *willing* to deal gently and kindly with our fellows, to pity, forgive, and assist them. Yet there are but few of us who are willing to shew mercy and forgive when once our self-love has been wounded, or our angry and revengeful passions have been aroused. In fine, it is difficult to say which is the harder, to shew mercy and to forgive from the heart, or to forgive and help so wisely and graciously as to do good rather than harm.

Nothing, again, can be more reasonable than that we should walk humbly with God. Our life is itself a mystery, open to all the accidents of pain, misfortune, sorrow, disappointment, loss, bereavement; and it runs down into the still darker mystery of death. We pass swiftly from eternity to eternity, our immortal spirits hampered and confined in mortal frames, not knowing what may befall us from hour to hour of our brief pilgrimage, exposed to forces over which we have no control, our companions falling around us at every step, reminded at every turn of our ignorance, our weakness, our perishableness. Who should thankfully accept a Divine guidance if not we? Who should humbly acknowledge their need of a Divine support and consolation if not we, and their absolute dependence upon it? And yet how proud we are, how self-confident, how forgetful of our Divine Guide, Redeemer, Comforter! How apt to follow our own guidance or that of some leader as blind as ourselves, and to depend on our own strength or to lean on some reed as weak as ourselves, which breaks and pierces our hand so soon as we fairly commit ourselves to it!

Let no man, then, think lightly of this requisition, or lightly address himself to so great and perilous an enterprise. To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with

God, is the hardest, as it is also the noblest, of achievements. How can it be other than most hard when it summons us to nothing less than to achieve the very ideal of human life, the loftiest moral ideal which the wit of man has been able to frame or the wisdom of God to reveal? He who would attain the true end and chief good of life *must* be prepared to endure hardness, and should be thankful for any and every help within his reach. He needs the Church; he needs the Bible; he needs the sacraments and the exercises of worship; he needs the teaching of those who have had a longer experience of time and change, of the world and men, than he himself, and of those who by special gifts or special studies are more fully acquainted with the Word and Will of God. If he is wise, so far from dispensing with any of these aids to a just, kindly, and humble spirit, he will thankfully accept and use them all.

But if the task to which we are called be hard—and who can doubt that to bend the stubborn and depraved will of man to the claims of Justice, Mercy, and Reverence, is far harder than to observe any ritual or present any sacrifice?—it is as blessed as it is hard. For, after all, nothing but justice lives and thrives in the long run, and nothing so wins upon our fellows as a kindly and sympathetic spirit; and how, amid all the shocks of change and blows of circumstance, can any man be at peace unless he humbly commit himself to the guidance of Omniscience and cast himself on the support of the Almighty? There is no rest but only here. It is as true to-day as it was four thousand years ago, that our real wealth is within us. All else changes and passes away. Fortunes built on injustice crumble into dust. Fame won by a selfish use of power turns to disrepute. Fortress and palace and tower are even less substantial than the baseless fabric of a vision, for *that* may leave some traces of itself on an immortal mind. The whole vast pageant of human life melts away moment by

moment. But the justice, the kindness, the reverence which we have cherished and made our own are beyond the reach of change, and will abide with us for ever; and he to whom it has been given to do justly, to show mercy, to walk humbly with God, has all that even God Himself can enrich him with. For what is there really worth having that we can ask of God save that which He requires of us? Though he have nothing else, yet he hath all who, living a just, gentle, and reverent life by the grace of God, has God Himself for his guide along the dark and perplexing ways of life, God for his support, God for his eternal home and reward.

These general considerations will serve, I hope, to bring out the meaning and force of Balaam's reply to the demand of Balak, to show how wide is its scope, how lofty and pure the ideal which it placed before the perturbed and desperate King. And if our study of it has deepened our admiration of his high prophetic gifts, his ethical penetration and grasp, we cannot but wonder the more that the man who could conceive a moral ideal so pure and lofty should himself so miserably fall short of it. For Balaam did not do justly in so far as he loved the wages of unrighteousness; nor did *he* shew a gentle and generous spirit who, for the sake of hire, strove to curse the people he was bound to bless; nor did he walk humbly with God who, despite the Divine inspiration and command, counselled the foul expedient by which the men of Israel were drawn to transgress the law they had received by Moses. And so the whole problem, in all its mystery, comes back upon us once more; a problem which, since it is now fully stated, and we have all its terms before us, we must forthwith do our best to solve.

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