

# THE EXPOSITOR.

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## BALAAH : AN EXPOSITION AND STUDY.

### III. *The Conclusion.*

WE have now studied all the Scriptures which relate to Balaam, and if our study has added but few new features to his character, it has served, I hope, to bring out his features more clearly, to cast higher lights and deeper shadows upon them, and to define and enlarge our conceptions both of the good and of the evil qualities of the man. The problem of his character—how a good man could be so bad and a great man so base—has not yet been solved; we are as far perhaps from its solution as ever: but something—much—has been gained if only we have the terms of that problem more distinctly and fully before our minds. To reach the solution of it, in so far as we can reach it, we must fall back on the second method of inquiry which, at the outset, I proposed to employ. We must apply *the comparative method* to the history and character of Balaam; we must place him beside other prophets as faulty and sinful as himself, and in whom the elements were as strangely mixed as they were in him: we must endeavour to *classify* him, and to read the problem of his life in the light of that of men of his own order and type.

Yet that is by no means easy to do without putting him to a grave disadvantage. For the only prophets with whom we can compare him are the Hebrew prophets; and Balaam

was not a Hebrew; he was not bound, and therefore he must not be judged, by their law; he had no part in the special election and grace vouchsafed to them. And, again, it is not easy for us to judge even *them* fairly. They were men of another race and an inferior dispensation to ours; they are separated from us by the lapse of long centuries; the conditions of their life were different from those with which we are familiar: and all this adds immensely to our difficulty in framing any just estimate of them. We should be guilty of a monstrous injustice were we to apply the standards of to-day even to the English statesmen and men of letters of a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago; to Fox, Chatham, Walpole, not to mention such creatures as the Duke of Newcastle and Lord Bute; to Dr. Johnson, Steele, Goldsmith, Addison, Pope, Swift, and still more to the poor wits and scholars of Grub Street and the Dunciad. But how much more monstrous would be the injustice of applying the only standards with which we are thoroughly familiar to the Oriental statesmen and prophets of from two to four thousand years ago? Throughout our endeavour to form an estimate of Balaam's character, then, we must, if we would be just to him, make large allowance for the inevitable and immense differences of race, condition, custom, and age, which divide him from us; while even in our comparison of him with Hebrew prophets we must make still further allowance for the fact that he was not of the seed of Abraham, and possessed none of those advantages of the Jew over the Gentile by which St. Paul affirms<sup>1</sup> that the former was benefited "much every way."

It has been the fashion to speak of Balaam as combining in himself, to a rare and unexampled, if not to an impossible, degree, functions, qualities, and impulses the most contradictory and opposed. Nevertheless, while admitting that few men have combined in a single nature so many

<sup>1</sup> Romans iii. 1, 2.

different and opposed characteristics, I am prepared, not to affirm only, but to demonstrate, that we find in him no contradictory qualities save such as may be found in other prophets of the Old Testament, and, I might almost say, none but such as are common to man.

1. One of the first combinations by which the student of Balaam's career is startled and perplexed is, that one and the same man should be "a diviner, seeking omens and auguries, and interpreting them after the approved methods of the ancient East, and yet a prophet who heard the words of God and saw visions from the Almighty; a soothsayer, affecting to forecast, if not to control, human destinies, and yet a seer familiar with the ecstasies of the prophetic trance, to whom the inspiration of the Almighty gave understanding of things to be."<sup>1</sup> Yet a thousand years after his time Micah affirms<sup>2</sup> not only that the recognized prophets of Israel exercised the arts of soothsaying and divination, but even that these prophets "divined *for money*,"—the very sin charged upon Balaam,—while yet "they leaned upon Jehovah, and said, Is not Jehovah with us? No evil can fall upon us." Nor, strange as it may seem, is it hard to see how these two functions came to be conjoined; how what we should call religion and superstition came to be blended in a single mind.

The soothsayer, the diviner, was not *then* the impostor he has now become. In those early ages he was sincerely convinced that the will of God was disclosed in omens and auguries; in the flight of birds, for example, as they rose to the right hand or the left, in the movements and conjunctions of the planets, in the falling of the lot, in the state of the sacred entrails of beasts offered in sacrifice, in the intuitions of the thoughtful and forecasting mind, in portents, in dreams, and in the unwonted ecstasies of sensitive and holy souls. Conscious of the unity of the universe, observing how

<sup>1</sup> See Vol. V. page 1.

<sup>2</sup> Micah iii. 7, 11.

all things play into each other and form parts of a connected whole—like the alchemists and wizards of the Middle Ages, he believed that the fates of men and of nations might be read in these and similar omens by those who had acquired the art of interpreting them. The sagacity of birds and beasts, for instance, their quick sense of approaching changes in the physical world, naturally led him to infer that from their cries and motions dumb yet speaking hints might be collected of every kind of change that was at hand, and to attribute to them a certain prescience even in human affairs. And if by the study of these ominous phenomena the diviner could foresee things to come, why might he not also advise courses of action by which the blows of adverse change might be evaded, and those who consulted him might put themselves in a posture to benefit by vicissitudes which, to the uninstructed, would bring only sorrow and fear and loss? Why might he not thus in some measure control events as well as foresee them, shape as well as forecast the future; and by persuading men to adapt themselves to the will of God, secure for them the blessing of his favour, a heart unvexed by fear of change, a heart made bold and confident by the sense of being at one with Him, admitted to the secrets of his counsel, familiar with the determinations of his providence?

If, in addition to this devout belief in omens as indicative of the Divine Will, we remember that the man who was prophet as well as diviner made it “the chief business and market of his time” and studies to discover the moral principles by which the world is governed, and cherished a steadfast and growing belief in the ultimate victory of those principles, let appearances contradict it as they would, we shall no longer wonder that to a diviner such as Balaam, to a man thus devoutly seeking to acquaint himself with the will of God, God should at times reveal his will in dreams, in visions, in thoughts and words clothed with an

authority which convinced him that they were the immediate gift of Heaven. To whom *should* the God of all wisdom speak if not to these earnest seekers after the highest wisdom? To whom should he reveal his righteous will if not to these ardent lovers of righteousness?

To us, indeed, who no longer look, and no longer need to look, for intimations of his will to dream or oracle or seer, it may be easy to denounce this faith in omens and auguries as rank folly and superstition; but before we brand Balaam as superstitious, before, at least, we condemn him for his superstition, let us remember that even to-day it is hard to find any man of Eastern race who does not blend this faith in omens, in auspicious and sinister signs and influences, with his religion, however pure and simple his religion may be. Let us remember that there are few even of the Western races, however long they may have held the Christian Faith, who do not cherish the same superstition, often in grosser forms than he, as we have only to travel in Italy or Spain to discover. Let us remember that even here in England, the very focus of civilization and Christianity as we esteem it, whole classes are imbued with it, that hardly any class is wholly free from it; that our sailors still have their lucky and unlucky days; that our peasants and maidservants still consult the wise woman or the fortune-teller; and that even among those who hold themselves too wise to need the aid of Religion there are at least some who are the dupes of the mesmerist and the spiritualist, or who pet and dandle some private superstition of their own. Or, if we would learn once for all that the most sincere and earnest piety is not incompatible with the superstition of divination, let us remember that John Wesley, one of the most sensible and practical as well as one of the most devout of men, "the first to reject what was extravagant, the last to adopt what was new," used to guide his conduct, whether in the ordinary events or in the

great crises of his life, by drawing lots, or by watching the particular texts at which his Bible fell open.<sup>1</sup>

With these facts well in mind, we shall be in no haste to conclude that Balaam was an impostor, or even that he was without true religion and piety, because he sought to ascertain the will of God by the study of omens and portents; nor shall we pronounce him unworthy to be a prophet, and to receive words and visions from the Almighty, simply because he was versed in the arts of divination, arts too, be it remembered, the inferiority of which he was forward to acknowledge the very moment he recognized it.<sup>2</sup>

Nor is it in the least difficult to adduce a case parallel to his even from the goodly fellowship of the Hebrew prophets. The character of Saul, the first king of Israel, presents us with a problem as profound and perplexing as that of Balaam himself—a problem of which our great poet Browning has given us so admirable a study that I have often wondered why he has not made the Prophet of Pethor the hero of one of his poems. For Saul was not chosen to be King simply because of the beauty of his person, or because of his superior stature. There were rare capacities, royal gifts, “in the choice young man and goodly” whom Samuel anointed to be “ruler over the Lord’s inheritance;” capacities for the highest spiritual, as well as for the highest political and military functions. And once at least we know that he too saw visions from the Almighty, and heard words from the Most High. While the royal chrism was still fresh upon him, when he turned his back to go from Samuel, as he went down the hill to Gibeah, “behold, a company of prophets met him, *and the Spirit of God came upon him,*” as it came upon Balaam,<sup>3</sup> “*and he prophesied among them.*” For a time he

<sup>1</sup> Green’s *Short History of the English People*, chap. x.

<sup>2</sup> See comment on Numbers xxiii. 23.      <sup>3</sup> Num. xxiv. 2.

rose into his truest and highest self. God gave him another heart, and he became a new man.<sup>1</sup> Yet what was his after life but a long rebellion against the God who had thus exalted him, until the Spirit of the Lord departed from him, and an evil spirit troubled him?<sup>2</sup> How low must *he* have fallen, how far from all righteousness, who, after having known Samuel, the grave and reverend founder of the schools of the prophets, and after having himself received inspirations from on high which quickened him to ecstasy, stooped to the meanest, the most venal and imposture-ridden, form of divination—a form so base and mercenary that he himself had forbidden it on pain of death—and consulted the witch of Endor, a poor wretch who fooled and plundered rustics by her spells and incantations, her mock apparitions, her ventriloquial illusions! Yet, who that reads David's "Song of the Bow," his elegy over the fallen king, can doubt the original greatness of the man, or pronounce him a wholly unworthy organ of the Divine Spirit? But if Saul were a prophet, why not Balaam?

2. A second anomaly in the character of Balaam by which we are staggered and perplexed is, that he should be at once a good man and a bad; "a man of God who, in the face of all threatening and allurements, professed that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord his God, to do a small thing or a great, and who, in the teeth of his own most clamorous interests and desires did consistently speak the words that God put into his mouth, and yet a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord," who sought to evade the duty with which he was charged, and, while faithful to the letter of the Divine command, was unfaithful to its intention and spirit.<sup>3</sup> And yet the very words in which I have stated this anomaly reminds us of the unnamed Hebrew prophet<sup>4</sup> who, in the days of Jeroboam,

<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam. ix. 1-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xvi. 14.

<sup>3</sup> See Vol. I. page 1.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings xiii. Any one who reads this Chapter attentively will find many

cried out against the altar at Bethel : for he too delivered the message which God had put into his mouth with the most splendid fidelity, risking his very life, and yet could not be true to the charge, Eat "no bread (in Bethel), nor drink water," and lost his life, not by his fidelity to the Divine command, but by his infidelity to it. It is he, and not Balaam, who was originally described as "*a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord.*"

And if Balaam is to be condemned as a sinner above all men because, though he saw visions and heard words from God, he nevertheless wanted to curse the people he was bound to bless, and studied how he might evade the spirit of the injunction he had received from the Most High, what are we to say to Jonah who first tried to flee from the presence of the Lord rather than deliver the warning to Nineveh with which he was charged, and then was "very angry" with God because he did not destroy "that great city in which were more than six score thousand little children and also much cattle," and who seems to have thought less of the destruction of that vast multitude of living men than of that of the quick-springing gourd which sheltered his head from the heat of the sun? Was not this a prophet of like passions with the other, as mean and selfish, but not as great, although the son of Amittai was a Hebrew, and lived in the light of a period nearly a thousand years subsequent to that of Balaam?

Nay, more : are Balaam and Jonah the only two men, or even the only two good men, who, while seeing and approving the better course, have taken the worse ; who have

points of close similarity between the history of this Prophet and that of Balaam, in his bearing before the hostile king, in the predictions he uttered, in the very terms in which he refused the reward offered him by Jeroboam, in his temptation and fall ; while in the contemptible old prophet who lied unto his "brother," and betrayed him to his death, he will recognize a far worse man than the son of Beor. Such a reader will do well to peruse also the sequel of this strange story in 2 Kings xxiii. 15-20.

left the path of righteousness to fall into the pit of transgression? Do none of *us* ever attempt to evade the pressure of unwelcome duties and commands, and seek how to take our own way and to gratify our own desires without altogether breaking with God and his law? Is even that special device of keeping a command in the letter, yet violating it in the spirit, wholly unknown in what we justly call "the religious world," since its denizens are at least as worldly as they are religious, and may be equally sincere both in their worldliness and their religion? We have only to recall men whom we ourselves have known to find many parallels to that combination of good with evil qualities which we have observed in Balaam; we have only to examine our own hearts to find a key to the anomaly which perplexes us in him.

3. But let us pass from these general considerations, and take up the two specific sins with which Balaam is charged, the two special anomalies which have made him an enigma to us; and see, here again, whether we cannot classify him, whether we cannot match him with other prophets as favoured and yet as faulty as himself; whether even we cannot find in ourselves the very complexities which puzzle us in him.

One of the sins brought home to him with extraordinary force and bitterness in the New Testament Scriptures is his venality. And it is impossible to study his career, and to note his ardent love and admiration of righteousness, yet not be struck with surprise and shame at discovering that he loved the wages of unrighteousness, and was capable of prostituting his rare and eminent gifts for hire. Still do we not find this same strange and pitiful combination of piety and covetousness in Jacob, who was surnamed Israel, "the Prince with God," and from whom the whole seed of Abraham have derived their name, and perhaps something more than their *name*? No candid student of

his history can deny that even from the first Jacob shewed a singular appreciation of spiritual things, a singular ambition for spiritual primacy and honour. Nor can any man who accepts the Bible record of him doubt that dreams and visions of the most ravishing beauty, pregnant with the most profound spiritual intention and promise, were vouchsafed him; or that, at least when he blessed his sons from his dying bed, his eyes were opened to behold things that were to befall them and their children years and centuries after he himself had been gathered to his fathers. Even the oracles of Balaam do not surpass the long series of dooms and benedictions which Jacob was then moved to utter.<sup>1</sup> Yet what was his whole life but, on the one side, a constant endeavour to enrich or secure himself at the cost of others, by superior craft or superior force; and, on the other side, a Divine discipline by which that worldly and grasping spirit was chastened out of him, in order that his genius for religion might have free play?

And, again, who can deny that this love of money, this covetousness which is idolatry, this selfish and grasping spirit, is of all sins that which always has been, and is, most common and prevalent in the Church, and even among sincerely religious men? It clothes itself with respectability as with a garment, and walks often unrebuked, often flattered even and admired, in almost every assembly of the saints. How many of *us* are there who, if we love righteousness, also hanker after the wages of unrighteousness, after the opulence, the gratifications, the success which can only come to us through a selfish and worldly, *i.e.* a sinful life! No transgression is more common than this among spiritual men, though none is more fatal to the spiritual life, since none renders a man more impervious to the rebukes of conscience or the warnings of the Word and Spirit of God.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis xlix.

Or take that other and grosser crime which we have seen brought home to Balaam, the sensuality that made the foul device by which the early innocence of Israel was debauched, familiar, or at best not impossible to him. Is it difficult to find a parallel to that? It would not be fair, though many would think it fair, to cite the example of David's well-known sin; for no sin was ever more deeply repented than his, as few have been more terribly avenged. But think of Solomon; think of the beauty and promise of his youth. Recall his choice of a wise and understanding heart above all the luxuries of wealth and all the flatteries of power. Read his wonderful prayer when he dedicated himself and all the resources of his kingdom to the service of Jehovah, and invoked a blessing on all who at any time and from any place should turn to the Temple and call on the name of the Lord. And then remember that this most religious king, this great prophet who "spake three thousand proverbs and whose psalms were a thousand and five,"<sup>1</sup> to whose heart God gave a largeness like that of the sea,<sup>2</sup> sank into the very sin of sensual idolatry with which Balaam betrayed Israel, suffering his wives and concubines to turn away his heart from the Lord his God, till at last he fell from his harem into his grave, an unloved tyrant, a jaded voluptuary, and probably a believer whose faith was shot through and through with a pessimistic scepticism.

Nor is this craving for sensual indulgence one of those defunct sins against which we need no longer strive. After covetousness, in its more or less pronounced forms, no sin is more common than this even in the Church; though this, not being a respectable sin, cannot be carried to such lengths or be so openly pursued.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings iv. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* iv. 29.

<sup>3</sup> It is curious to note that even in the first uninspired homily of which we have any record, the so-called "Second Epistle of Clement," the church of

These, indeed, are the two sins against which we are most constantly warned in the New Testament; and it is both curious and instructive to mark that between these two sins the writers of the New Testament see an occult connection, as if they were close neighbours, however far they may seem to stand apart, twin transgressions, although they wear so little likeness to each other. St. Paul ranks the sensual and the covetous in the same category more than once,<sup>1</sup> and hardly ever warns us against uncleanness without immediately adding a warning against covetousness;<sup>2</sup> and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews,<sup>3</sup> after bidding us honour the bed undefiled, instantly adds, "Be ye free from the love of money, content with such things as ye have." But if there be this occult connection between these two forms of self-pleasing, we need not be surprised to find both in the man in whom we find one of them; while, if even Solomon, to whom "the Lord had appeared twice," commanding him "concerning this very thing, that he should not go after other gods,"<sup>4</sup> nevertheless suffered many strange women to turn away his heart after many strange gods, we cannot much wonder that in a far ruder age, and under far less pure and happy conditions, Balaam did not keep himself unspotted by this transgression.

I am not unaware that we rarely find so many anomalies, so many "jarring contrasts of incompatible qualities" in a single character as we have discovered in that of Balaam; nor do I wish to forget that we have had to look in many quarters to discover cases parallel with his. It is no part of my duty, or of my aim, either to make light of his

Corinth (in the second century) is rebuked for so "holding the essential sinfulness of matter as to deny the resurrection of the body, and to minimize the sinfulness of fleshly lusts." And no one can have forgotten the severity with which St. Paul rebuked their fathers for the selfsame sin.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. v. 10, and vi. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. v. 3; Col. iii. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. xiii. 4, 5.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings xi. 9, 10.

transgressions, or to contend that there is no problem to solve before we can frame any reasonable estimate of the man. That a man so great in virtues and gifts should fall into vices so vulgar and glaring must always, I hope, remain in some measure a mystery to us. But I submit that in thus comparing him with Jacob and Solomon, with Saul and Jonah, we do, to a large extent, discover the class to which he belongs, and reduce our problem to more practicable dimensions. For these too were men of rare and eminent gifts, gifts which, as Browning says, "a man may waste, desecrate, yet never quite lose;" they were men chosen by God for distinguished and honourable service, men who were moved, taught, and chastened by his wise and holy Spirit; and yet, among them, they display the very vices and disgrace themselves by the very transgressions which we recognize and deplore in him.<sup>1</sup> And taking him for all in all, remembering and making due allowance for his age, his blood, his breeding, his temptations, I for one should hesitate to pronounce him a worse man on the whole than Saul, or Solomon, or Jonah. They had advantages denied to him. He had disadvantages—defects of will and taints of blood, a bias of hereditary habit, a license of custom, a force of temptation—unknown to them. If God could use and inspire *them*, why should He not call and inspire *him*? If God could make large allowance for them, and chasten them from their sins, and make their hearts perfect with Him before all was done, why should Balaam be "cast as rubbish to the void"? Why may not the same just and merciful

<sup>1</sup> "Is there not reason to doubt whether a natural predisposition to the cardinal virtues is the best outfit for the prophet, the artist, or even the preacher? Saints from of old have been more readily made out of publicans and sinners than out of Pharisees, who pay tithes of all they possess. The artist, the writer, and even the philosopher, equally need passion to do great work; and genuine passion is ever apt to be unruly, though by stronger men eventually subdued."—Morison's *Macaulay*, p. 57.

God have long since clothed him in the righteousness which he loved and desired, chastening him, in this world and in the next, from the taints which marred a character in much so high and noble, and not suffering a soul so capable and precious to perish everlastingly?

To the ordinary reader of the Bible, who has not carefully observed how graciously, and for what high ends, God condescends to use even the most imperfect and unlikely instruments, the main difficulty of this narrative springs, I suppose, from the fact that the pure Spirit of God came upon and possessed a man in whom there was so much that was impure, opening his eyes on visions so far-reaching, quickening in him powers so rare, and lifting him to the conception of a moral ideal so lofty. They can understand that, as we read in the Book of Wisdom (vii. 27), "Wisdom in all ages, entering into *holy* souls, maketh friends of God and prophets;" but they are staggered at the thought that this holy and divine Wisdom should enter into souls *not* holy, or even unholy. That difficulty has been in great part removed, I trust, by the cases I have already cited. But that it may be removed altogether, that it may be made clear and indubitable that God does deign to employ and inspire men far worse than Balaam, it may be worth while to refer to the gifts conferred upon the members of the Corinthian Church in Apostolic times, and to cite an instance which will put an end to all doubt.

The Corinthian converts were not by any means the pure and sinless persons we are apt to imagine all the members of the primitive Church to have been. They indulged themselves in a license which St. Paul had to rebuke with unsparing severity, admitting to their fellowship licentious and covetous men,<sup>1</sup> wrangling about meats, shewing off their gifts in church with emulous vanity, pouncing greedily on the food spread on their common

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. v. 11; vi. 15-20.

table, capable even of being "drunken" at the supper of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> And yet St. Paul says of them<sup>2</sup> that, when they came together, every one of them had a psalm, or a teaching, or a revelation, or a tongue, or an interpretation; and implies that they possessed among them all the gifts of the Spirit,—words of wisdom and knowledge, inspirations of truth, the faith which removes mountains, power to heal, power to rule, power to work miracles, power to prophesy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even this is nothing as compared with the case of Caiaphas, the High Priest. It is almost impossible to conceive a worse man than the bad bold ecclesiastic who wore the robes of Aaron and sat in Moses' chair. It is on him mainly that we must lay the guilt of the Crucifixion, of the death of Him who knew no sin but went about doing good. And yet when this bad bold priest stood up in the hesitating Sanhedrin, and said, with a scorn he took no pains to conceal: "Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not"; we are expressly told: "And this spake he not of himself, but being high priest that year, he *prophesied*,—prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation, and not for that nation only, but that he might also gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad."<sup>4</sup> So that the divinest prophecy of all time fell from lips as foul as any that ever breathed!

And why should we marvel at this grace and condescension as at some strange thing? We should rather take comfort from it and hope. Does not the Spirit of God strive with the spirit of every man, however guilty and depraved he may be, quickening in him pure memories and aspirations, gracious impulses and motions, seeking by all means to redeem him to the love and pursuit of righteousness? What hope would there be for us, what hope for

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xi. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xii. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xiv. 26.

<sup>4</sup> John xi. 49-52.

the world, if God put his pure Word and his cleansing Spirit only into hearts already clean? Would his Word dwell in *our* hearts, or his Spirit abide with *us*? Instead of marvelling at the grace shewn to Balaam, and to men even more sinful than he, it behoves us rather to adore that grace, and to draw from it the inspiration of a hope that He who sitteth above the heavens, and in whose sight even the heavens are not pure, will come down and dwell in us if only, despite our manifold offences against Him, we are of a humble and a contrite spirit.

It might well seem as if it were impossible to carry our argument further; but there is still another stage to which we must pursue it, and that perhaps the most satisfactory and conclusive of all. For all the men who have hitherto been cited—Jacob, Saul, Solomon, Jonah—belong to a dubious class; there is not one of them whose character and fate have not been long and often disputed. I myself have heard it gravely discussed from the pulpit whether it were possible to entertain any hope of Solomon's ultimate salvation; and few of the evangelical clergy would hesitate, I suppose, to pronounce a damnatory verdict on Saul, although he was a king: Jacob is condemned every day by every bluff John Bull who prides himself, not always with sufficient reason, on his honesty and straightforwardness; and Jonah, who was perhaps as irritable as poets are said to be, is set down as but a sorry and peevish specimen of the prophetic race, to whom judgment may have long since been meted out in the very measure in which he himself meted it to others. I do not hold with these verdicts. Those who do hold with them seem to me to be singularly destitute of the historical spirit, and still more strangely forgetful of what they themselves are like. But they are common verdicts. And to me it appears that our argument would gain much in force if, instead of disputing

these verdicts, we were to consider the examples of men who are universally recognized as good and great, but who, nevertheless, had to endure that very conflict between the good and evil qualities of their nature which we have marked in Balaam. They may have conquered, and he may have been defeated, in the strife; but, none the less, if that strife was obviously waged in their hearts, waged so strenuously and bitterly and long that even to them the issue of the conflict must often have seemed uncertain, we cannot be amazed that this heathen diviner should have been torn by it, or even that he should have succumbed to the powers of evil; he cannot any longer seem to us either an impossible monster or an insoluble enigma.

And it is only too easy to adduce such examples. I suspect, indeed I am sure, that, if only we could read their inner history, we should find that all the best men who have ever breathed, save only He who was more than man, were agitated, and often all but overthrown, in this inward war. Few men are more generally recognized as heroically good and great, and none, I suppose, has been favoured with a greater abundance of the visions and revelations which have altered the face and the heart of the world, than St. Peter and St. Paul. Yet not only did these two chiefest apostles share in the agony of this mysterious conflict, but in their history we can trace its main crises, and note how it extended to the very close of their career.

Take, first, the case of St. Peter. Was not he a man of two minds, and therefore unstable in his ways—unfaithful to the Word with which he was charged, and to the Spirit that inspired and sanctified him? The story of that fall, in which one of the boldest of men played the coward, one of the truest turned false, one of the best plunged into an almost incredible sin, is too well known to need comment. And yet who would not hesitate to say that Balaam sinned

more heinously when, against the clear dictate of conscience, and the direct command of God, he tempted Israel into the licentious idolatries of Midian, than did the Apostle who, in the hour of his Master's utmost need, denied all knowledge of Him, all concern in Him, with oaths and curses ?

“ Yes,” it may be said, “ but Peter bitterly repented and nobly retrieved that sin. When once it was forgiven him, he became a new man, unfaltering in his loyalty to Christ, stedfast as the Rock after which he was named. You never catch him tripping again, never find him untrue to the Spirit of Christ when once that Spirit had descended upon him at Pentecost.” *That*, I know, is the common impression of him, and is often heard from men who profess to be students of the New Testament,—to the mere amazement of all who really study it. For not only has this conception of St. Peter no warrant in the New Testament Scriptures ; it is absolutely contradicted by them. Many years after Pentecost, St. Peter sinned against the Holy Ghost as heinously as he had before sinned against the Son of Man. By an express and immediate vision from Heaven, he had been taught to call no man, whether Gentile or Jew, common and unclean. Obedient to the heavenly vision, he had preached the Gospel to Cornelius the centurion, and admitted him, uncircumcised, into the Church. He had even persuaded the Christian Jews at Jerusalem to grant this liberty to all their non-Jewish brethren. And yet more than fifteen years after Pentecost, when he came to Antioch, though at first he entered into full brotherly communion with the Gentile converts of that city, afterward, when certain men came from Jerusalem with whom he wished to stand well, “ he drew back and separated himself ” from them, “ fearing them that were of the circumcision.” St. Paul had to withstand him to the face ; to tell him that he stood self-condemned ; and even to launch at this inspired Apostle the tremendous charge of “ hypocrisy,”

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which our Version mercifully modulates into "dissimulation."<sup>1</sup>

Could we have any clearer proof than this that St. Peter was still a man of two minds, still capable of betraying the cause of his Master and of sinning against the Spirit of all truth and holiness? that the brave man might still play the coward, and fear men more than God? There may be no truth in the legend which relates how, to escape the persecution of Nero, St. Peter fled from Rome, but had hardly got beyond the Gate when he met the Lord carrying his cross, and asked Him, "Lord, whither goest Thou?" and that Jesus replied, "I go to Rome, to be crucified *again, for thee.*" Whereupon the Apostle returned to Rome, was seized, tried, condemned to the cross; but, at his own request, was crucified head downwards, because he held himself unworthy to die in the same manner as the Lord. But if the legend be not true, it is well invented: it is characteristic of the man, of the cowardice with which his ardent courage was streaked, of the noble humility and devotion with which he retrieved the errors into which he fell. The legend may not be true; but the story of his "hypocrisy" at Antioch, of his sin against the Spirit by whom he was inspired, of his disobedience to the revelation vouchsafed him, *is* true past all doubt. And that being so, how can we accept Balaam's disobedience, his sin against the Spirit which came upon him, as fatal to all claim to a sincere goodness?

Take, secondly, the case of St. Paul. The seventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, which was written when he was nearly sixty years of age, when therefore he had been a Christian and an Apostle some twenty years, has always been read in an autobiographical sense: *i.e.* it has been assumed that in this Chapter St. Paul generalized the facts of his own spiritual experience. Nor do I see how

<sup>1</sup> Gal. ii. 11-14.

it can be read in any other sense when we remember the constant allusions which he makes to an inward conflict in himself resembling that depicted here. For here he tells us only a little more at large what he elsewhere confesses again and again: viz. that within the narrow continent of his single being he found two laws, two minds, two men at strife, insomuch that he could not do the good he would, but the evil which he would not that he did; and groans, a wretched captive, to be delivered from the body of this death. And it is not a little remarkable that St. Paul, of all men, should have been conscious of this terrible struggle, and should have depicted it more fully and more pathetically than any other of the Apostles; for as we study his life, though we constantly detect the signs of this struggle in it, even the eyes of malice can detect no proof that he at any time yielded to the inferior law, mind, or man which he recognized in himself. If, as he confesses, he did the evil he hated, yet which of us has discovered any evil in him, albeit the workings of that mighty and passionate spirit are laid bare to us with an unparalleled frankness, and we know *him* more intimately than we know any of our neighbours? Yet he knew himself even better than we know him; and if he was conscious of this internecine war in which he was perpetually being worsted and "brought into captivity to the law of sin," how can we possibly doubt that God may inspire and employ in his service men in whom the spirits of good and ill wage a constant strife? How can we possibly deny that there may have been much that was genuinely good in Balaam, although there was much also that was unquestionably evil?

By another autobiographical confession of about the same date, though it refers to an earlier period in his history, St. Paul enables us to run the parallel closer still. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians he tells us that, fourteen years before he wrote to them, he was caught up into the

third heaven, into Paradise, where he saw visions so glorious, and heard such "unwordable words," that, in his ecstasy, he could not be sure whether he was in the body or out of it. But, he goes on to say that, lest he should be overmuch lifted up by the exceeding greatness of these revelations, there was given him a stake in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him. So intolerable was the agony of this trial, that he thrice besought the Lord that it might depart from him. Yet it did not depart. He had to rest, and he was able not to rest only but to rejoice, in the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for strength is made perfect in weakness."<sup>1</sup> It is impossible for us to read these verses without being reminded of the abundance of visions and revelations vouchsafed to Balaam, and of the well-nigh unutterable words he heard from the Almighty,<sup>2</sup> and of the danger of being lifted up by them, in which, as we have seen, he stood,<sup>3</sup>—his exposure to the assaults of an evil spirit when the Spirit of God departed from him. And if *he* fell in the strife in which St. Paul overcame, if the grace conceded to him did not prove sufficient for him, if in his case strength, so far from being made perfect, was lost in weakness, still it behoves us to remember the immense disadvantage at which he stood as compared with the Apostle of the Gentiles: for then we shall frankly admit that his position was most perilous—a position in which even St. Paul himself might have fallen; we shall confess that there may have been much that was good in the man, although he succumbed to, instead of defeating, the messenger of Satan sent to buffet him. His very elation at being so highly favoured among men may have contributed to his fall; and the abundance of his revelations may have lifted him up only to cast him down.

On the whole, then, I think we may claim to have classi-

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. xii. 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Num. xxiv. 15-24.

<sup>3</sup> See comments on Num. xxiv. 3, 4, and 15, 16.

ged our Prophet—to have brought him within the recognized limits of humanity. We have found similar combinations of contradictory qualities in seers of whom we have a right to expect more than from him—in Jacob, in Saul, in Solomon, in Jonah, who succumbed to the selfsame temptations before which he fell; while even in St. Peter and St. Paul we have seen the very conflict between good and evil in which he was engaged, although, by the grace of God, they overcame in that inward strife in which he was overthrown. And hence we cannot admit that he lies beyond either the limits of our humanity or the pale of our sympathies. He was a man of like passions with us, spirit of our spirit as well as flesh of our flesh, though he was at once greater and baser, better and worse, than most of us. We recognize our own image and likeness in him, though in him its lines are both larger and darker than they are in us; and we can hail him as a comrade in the war in which we too are enlisted, although we have to sigh over him as he lies defeated, and in some measure disgraced, upon the field which we still occupy. He is not altogether unworthy a place in our ranks, or even of the great Captain of our warfare. He did valiant service once, and stood with splendid fidelity in a post of honour and of danger which many of us might have deserted. And if at last he proved a recreant and a traitor, we must not forget either the noble service he once rendered, or that he was not drilled and led and sustained as we are now. If *we* should prove faithful to the last, it will not be because we are better and braver than he, but because we come of a purer strain, or have enjoyed a more auspicious training, or have received a more sufficient grace. And hence we may look back on him with pity, not unmixed with admiration, if it be also touched with shame and regret.

Lest, however, in thus classifying Balaam I should sug-

gest to some of my readers a far larger and more difficult problem than that of his personal character, it may be well to add a few words—and they shall be very few—on a question which is sure to present itself, sooner or later, to every thoughtful mind. The question, which looks very difficult and perplexing at first, is this: How comes it to pass that God should have selected for special gifts and special service men who were capable and guilty of such heinous faults and crimes as Jacob, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, and even Peter himself? Difficult as the question seems, the answer to it is very simple, very obvious, and springs straight from facts with which we are all familiar. For, obviously, no man has ever told widely and deeply on the world in whose nature there was not a certain largeness, force, volume. Men conspicuous for energy, capacity, power, are the only instruments by which God can move and raise the great mass of their fellows. But is it not human to err? Are not even the best men still human? And if great men err, will they not err greatly, and shew the same force of character when they do evil that they bring to the doing of that which is good? If, then, God elects for the service of the world the only men who are able to serve it, must He not inevitably choose men who, when they sin, will sin heinously and conspicuously, and who can be chastened from their sin only by the heavier strokes of his rod, only by the sharper and more steadfast discipline of his providence?

It only remains that we gather up and lay to heart the lesson of this great yet wasted life,—a life not wholly wasted, however, if it serve to teach us and our fellows lessons of wisdom and humility, and help to make us more faithful in few things than Balaam was in many. For though *we* see no vision and utter no oracle, we lie open to his temptations, and may fall into his sins. We may com-

bine his love of righteousness with his hankering after the wages of unrighteousness, or his admiration of holiness with his unclean addiction to sins of the flesh. We *must* be in danger of falling into these sins, despite our piety, or we should not be so often and gravely warned against them.

Many lessons are suggested by this narrative, and at some of them we have already glanced; but none springs from it so directly as this warning against that combination of covetousness or sensuality with religion of which even the Church has yielded so many examples. This was the warning which Bishop Butler drew from the story of Balaam and which was in his mind when, in his measured and weighty phraseology, he affirmed that it is impossible to justify men's "so strong attachment to this present world. Our hopes and fears and pursuits are in degrees beyond all proportion to the known value of the things they respect." And, as he reminds us, there are many to whom this excessive addiction to the gains and gratifications of the present time would be impossible did they not beguile their conscience with religious equivocations, subterfuges, palliations, and partial regards to duty, like those of Balaam. Like him, they are apt to protest too much, and to do too little; to boast of the fidelity with which they meet some part of the demands which God makes upon them—their scrupulous observance of the Sabbath to wit; or their devotion to the worship and sacraments of the Church, their diligence in reading the Bible, the orthodoxy of their belief, or even their breadth of thought, their wide toleration, their superiority to creeds and forms; while yet they neglect the weightier matters of the law, and do not make it their chief and ruling aim to do justice, to shew mercy, and to walk in a constant dependence and fellowship with God.

They will not openly rebel against Him. Oh, no! But "they are for making a composition with the Almighty." *These* commands which jump with their inclinations, or

which do not too severely cross their inclinations, they will sedulously observe. "But as to others; why, they will make all the atonements in their power; the ambitious, the covetous, the dissolute man, each in a way which shall not contradict his respective pursuit;" but they will not wholly renounce the special sin they have a mind to, or, at best, they will not give it up at once, but wait for a more convenient season.

Yet herein, he continues, they stand self-condemned, like Peter at Antioch. For no man is so bad but that "after having had the pleasure or the advantage of a vicious action"—or course of action—"he would choose to be free from the guilt of it," and die the death of the righteous, even if he has not been at the pains to live their life. And this of itself "shews a disturbance and an implicit dissatisfaction in vice. If we inquire into the grounds of it, we shall find that it proceeds partly from an immediate sense of having done evil, and partly from an impression that this inward sense will, one time or other, be seconded by a higher judgment, upon which our whole being depends." It is to quell or allay this inward dissatisfaction that men palter and equivocate with themselves, and would fain persuade themselves that they may atone for moral delinquencies by attention to religious duties; forgetting that religion itself is but a means to which a pure and complete morality is the end.

This is, substantially, the lesson which one of the sagest of Englishmen, who had carefully studied the character of Balaam, drew from the story before us. Nor do I see how we are to improve upon it. It is the true moral of our narrative, and only needs such modification as we may each make for himself, to come home to every man's experience and conscience and heart.

SAMUEL COX.

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