

*THE EXPERIENCE OF BALAAM AS SYMBOLIC OF
THE ORIGINS OF PROPHECY.*¹

THE story of Balaam has engaged the genius and been illuminated by the expository powers of some of the greatest preachers of Christianity; conspicuous among whom (as we all know) are Bishop Butler with his sermon on the Character of Balaam and John Henry Newman in his discourse on Obedience without Love. Both of these classics display a rich sagacity and a solemn power of searching the heart. But they take different views of the character of this extraordinary heathen, and of his conduct upon first coming under the influence of the true God.

Such differences between high authorities, equally honest in seeking the meaning of Scripture, are to be explained by the discovery, made since their time, of the complex structure of the story, woven as it is from two differing and even contradictory traditions. We now, also, enjoy a fuller knowledge of the historical situation and the religious atmosphere in which Balaam is represented as acting. We are more able to place him on his proper stage in the history of religion—slowly making its long way up to Christ—and therefore more able to read the lessons which his story is fitted to afford us for our own faith and conduct.

¹ A sermon preached in King's College Chapel, University of Aberdeen, October 20, 1912, from these texts: *And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel he went not as at other times to seek for omens, but he set his face towards the wilderness* (Num. xxiii. 23). *Henceforth I call you not slaves, for the slave knoweth not what his lord doeth, but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you* (John's Gospel, xiv. 15).

You remember the outlines of the story. Alarmed by Israel's defeat of Sihon, the king of the Amorites, Balak king of Moab sent across the Arabian wilderness for a distant prophet named Balaam, the son of Beor, to come and curse this people which threatened to devour the others. But under the influence of Israel's God Balaam, after some reluctance and doubt, refused to curse; and in four metrical *Redes* or *Oracles* he blessed Israel, acknowledging their irresistibility under Divine Providence and predicting their dominion over their neighbours.

The prose narrative, which tells us all this, is one of the finest in the Old Testament. Partly from the language, partly from inconsistencies among the things told, it is clear that the writer has used (as I have said) two different traditions of the story and worked them, with some alterations, into the finished form which excites our admiration. His indifference to certain discrepancies of detail, which he has left standing, is the indifference of a powerfully dramatic spirit, absorbed by the conflict of rival religious influences, and by the victory, even in a heathen mind, of that purer and more potential faith with which Israel was identified. Our interest in so lofty an issue is not disturbed by the facts that Balaam is described now as an Aramean from as far away as the Euphrates, and again as an Ammonite riding into Moab upon his own ass from the immediately neighbouring province¹; now as conveyed by the princes of Balak, and again as accompanied by only two servants; now as receiving God's permission to go to Balak, and again as exciting God's wrath by consenting to go. Indeed the last of these differences, and the most curious, may be due not to two

¹ Numbers xxii. 5a and xxiii. 7 from Aram; but the rest of xxii. 5 appears (from the Samaritan, Syriac and Vulgate) to have been originally *to the land of the children of Ammon*. For many other proofs of a double narrative see the commentaries, especially Prof. G. B. Gray's.

discrepant traditions, but to the naïve effort of one and the same narrator to convey the first confused effects upon Balaam's mind of a religious force purer than the spirit in which he was accustomed to perform his offices. Such an ambiguity would be natural in a man dazzled by his encounter with the new light; and the narrator was only following the methods of his age if he articulated that ambiguity into a tale of two opposite commands from God. It is curious that Balaam himself contradicts his biographer. *God*, he says in one of his *Redes*,

*God is not man to belie,
Neither man's son to repent.*¹

This, however, is a subsidiary question, and cannot affect our reading of the writer's treatment of the mind and character of Balaam. In Balaam himself the writer is interested throughout. Recently this interest has been ignored or denied, as if Balaam's character did not matter much in the development of the drama. It is true that the religious interests of the story dominate the psychological. The main issue is between the purpose of God with Israel and the human powers which from Pharaoh to Sihon and Balak have sought to frustrate it. But this conflict is described—in detail and with zest—as being waged, and as issuing to the assurance of Israel's victory, within the mental experience of Balaam himself. I sympathise, therefore, with the older expositors who concentrate their attention upon the behaviour of this strange being, and take his character as the pivot of the story; only I agree that some of them have wrongly interpreted that character. Bishop Butler, for instance, treats Balaam as if his besetting sin were avarice. But except for an ambiguous statement—in only

¹ Num. xxiii. 9. So evident a contradiction testifies to the original independence of the poetical *Redes* and the prose narrative; and, so far as it goes, is evidence for the earlier date of the *Redes*.

one of the traditions—there is no imputation of avarice to Balaam. On the contrary, when Balak's promise of reward is repeated Balaam becomes only more decided not to disobey the word of God. Newman's explanation, that Balaam illustrates the insufficiency and the danger of obedience without love, is nearer the truth¹; but it lacks a full intelligence of the issues. There is a conflict in Balaam's mind, but this is not between duty and avarice or ambition. It is a conflict between the habits and ideas under which the prophets of the heathen worked and the religious influence of a higher order which is represented as coming upon Balaam from the God of Israel. The issue is between the spirit of Israel's religion and the less rational tempers of the other religions of the time, and it is worked out in the experience of one of the prophets of these religions, when brought face to face with the facts of Israel's history.

Balaam is essentially an Arab seer of an early type—the type which combined the priest's office of ritual, the diviner's reliance upon spells and lots, and the prophet's use of ecstasy and trance. Some of these men rose to great fame in Arabia, and were frequently called from a great distance, as Balaam was called by Balak, to assist chiefs or tribes who were in difficulty. One of the principal functions for which they were employed was to curse the foes of their employers; and this was regarded as a sacred function of divine efficacy, and was accompanied by sacrifices and other rites and by the reading of omens and the casting of lots.

To such practices our text states that Balaam was accustomed. He himself directs the building of altars and the elaborate sacrifices which precede his oracles, and he goes to seek for omens. Observe also in chapter xxiii. that when

¹ Newman indeed denies that Balaam "made up his mind for himself according to the suggestions of avarice or ambition."

one site for these performances proves inauspicious and fails to compel him to curse Israel, he consents on Balak's motion to change the stage on the chance that his message may change with it. That is a resource characteristic of paganism all the world over ; and along with other features of the story proves the writer's fidelity to the religious conditions of the time.

But while continuing to try all these, his professional rites and shifts, Balaam holds true to one thing, that he will only speak the word which God shall speak to him. To this he is constant, making it plain both before he will consent to come with Balak's messengers and throughout the course of gambling artifices which after his coming are employed to influence his message. His faithfulness is rewarded and his patience to listen receives an answer. The word comes to him, and it is a word not to curse but to bless.

On what does Balaam base the conviction for which he has waited so impartially, and which when it arrives is strong enough to overwhelm his former practices and ideas ? He rests it on the fact that God has already blessed Israel. There is no use in him, Balaam, fighting against a Divine Fact. That is the whole matter—very simple and very clear.

He puts it in his opening words—

*From Arám Balák doth bring me,
Moáb's king from hills of the East.*

*“ Go curse thou me Jacob,
And go damn Israel ! ”*

*How curse I, whom God curseth not,
How damn whom the LORD hath not damned ?¹*

* * * * *

*Behold, to bless I have gotten,
And blessing I cannot reverse it !²*

¹ xxiii. 7-8.

² xxiii. 20.

The facts are there, and in his various oracles he tells us how he sees them. The people of Israel already bears to his eye that strange aspect of peculiarity and aloofness which even through the centuries of their dispersion has marked them out as separate from the rest of humanity.

*For from the rock's head I see them,
From the heights I behold them.
Lo, a people that dwelleth alone,
Nor reckons itself of the nations!*¹

There is nothing in their condition which is ominous of disaster, or which justifies a curse.

*I mark nothing wrong with Jacob,
Nor see any strain on Israel—*²

any trace of weariness or stress. He points to their great numbers—

*Who hath measured the dust of Jacob,
Or counted Israel's myriads?—*³

to their wonderful progress out of Egypt—

*'Tis God out of Egypt that brought them,
And theirs is the strength of the wild ox;—*⁴

to the goodly appearance of their camps, to their fertility, to the power of their movements, to the ease with which they defeat their foes:—

*How goodly thy tents, O Jacob,
Thy dwellings, Israel!
Like valleys they spread,
Like riverside gardens,
Like cedars God planted,
Like oaks upon water!*⁵

* * * * *

¹ xxiii. 9.

² xxiii. 21.

³ xxiii. 10 after the Greek.

⁴ xxiii. 22, xxiv. 8.

⁵ xxiv. 5, 6 (the last two lines from an emended text).

*Lo, the folk like a lioness riseth,
Like a lion uprears.
Nor will couch till he eateth the prey,
And drinketh the blood of the slain.¹*

And finally he, a stranger and alien to the commonwealth of Israel, appreciates the faith and enthusiasm with which the strength of this people is instinct.

*The LORD his God is with him,
And the sound of a King is upon him.²*

It is in these facts, obvious to the plain man but rhythmic and eloquent to the poet, that Balaam finds the Presence and the Will of God, with the substance of the message he is to give to those who have asked him for it. Against such a tide of reality what does it avail to set up bulwarks of altars, of ritual and of magic? Of what use are spells, enchantments and omens? You will observe that Balaam does not speak of morality. He has not the conscience of the later prophets, nor any idea of God's demands for penitence, purity and service from men. It is historical and obvious facts on which he insists. Yet Balaam has his own sense of religion and of the character of God. He is at least awake to the Divine consistency; and with some anticipation both of the religious faith and the rational science of still distant days—which is startling to find in so early and rude a figure—he affirms the regularity and faithfulness of all God's working:

*Arise and hearken, Balák,
Give ear to me, son of Sippór!
God is not man to belie,
Neither man's son to repent.
Hath He said and doth not perform,
Or spoken and will not fulfil it?³*

¹ xxiii. 24.

² xxiii. 21.

³ xxiii. 18, 19.

There you have his whole equipment and character. Brought up in the irrational methods of heathenism, accustomed to believe in the omnipotence of rites and spells, and anxious to magnify his office, Balaam has yet a certain openness of mind to facts, a capacity of his own to read their consistency and rhythm and a courage to face their consequences, which prevail over the prejudices and interests by which he is swayed. There is a primitive integrity of mind and a primitive reverence in the man which grips our respect—grips our respect and also lets us see how God in all ages has chosen and equipped His prophets.

Nor is our appreciation of this mind, groping so far back there on the confines of light and darkness, lessened by the fact that it did not rise clear of all the passion of its time but is described as working heavily in trance or ecstasy.

*Rede of Balaam, Beór's son,
Rede of the eye-sealed (?) man :
In vision he sees the Almighty,
Falling yet open of eye (?).¹*

In Israel the beginnings of prophecy were also in trance ; and uncontrollable excitement has characterised the origins of genuinely religious movements within Christianity itself. Balaam has the servile temper which does not understand the fulness of the truth that has come to him and staggers beneath it. He grovels under the approach of his convictions, but he honestly utters them when they arrive. If I may take another Arabian prophet, upon much the same stage of development as Balaam, I would remind you that Mohammed behaved very similarly under the earliest impulses of his calling—a bemused, ecstatic, perhaps epileptic man : yet he lived to bring all Arabia to his feet.

¹ xxiv. 15, 16.

For this is the kind of man whom, though blinded and prostrate, God shall one day call to stand up and send upon his way in full control of his faculties. This is the spirit which, if it has been faithful as the slave of the truth, shall at last hear the glad words : *Henceforth I call you not slaves, for the slave knoweth not what his lord doeth but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known to you.* In Balaam we have one end of that long course of gradual revelation of which the other is reached in Christ and His disciples.

For in no other way did God raise up the long succession of Hebrew prophets who led to Christ. In early Israel we see Prophecy so evidently rising out of the same low religious environment and by means of the same convictions of inspiration by God, that the experience attributed to Balaam may well stand as the symbol of the origins of Prophecy¹; just as at the other end of the history of Israel the equally curious figure of Jonah is the symbol of some of the later experiences of prophecy. God picked His prophets man by man out of a state of religion little removed from heathenism, and educated their primitive power, to see and to be true to facts, into the clear knowledge of His nature and His Will. Like those of their Arab kinsmen the early Hebrew seers were engaged with a rude ritual—common to all the peoples of their race—with divination by omens and lots, with blessing the arms of their people and banning their foes ; while the trance and the dream were their frequent means of seeking the Divine Will. But gradually

¹ Several features both in the prose and in the poetry converge on the probability that the date of the story as we have it (whatever earlier elements it may contain) is that of the early kingdom of Israel when the nation was rich in instincts of power and growth, and when the new order of prophecy, recently arisen under Samuel, was emerging from its rudimentary conditions. See my Schweich Lectures before the British Academy on *The Early Poetry of Israel in its Physical and Social Origins*, 70, 71.

they discarded all these things. Under Samuel prophecy was separated from the ritual with its paralysing influences. From Samuel onwards prophecy repudiated divination and magic. With men like Elijah and Amos it threw off allegiance to political patrons ; and in time it rose even free of ecstasy, till, as St. Paul says, the spirits of the prophets were subject to the prophets. And all these advances and emancipations depended on the individual prophet's own mental integrity, on his eye for facts and on his courage to face them : the facts of his people's history and the truth of their present condition ; the facts of the moral world and their enduring and impregnable firmness. There, of course, the prophets soared into realms undreamt of by Balaam. It was this loyalty to facts which gave them their scorn of ritual and magic and their uncompromising courage against the political interests of kings and the vulgar unethical ideals of the people. It was this, and this alone, which to the last constituted the distinction of the true prophets from the false ; who also claimed to speak in the name of God and many of whom, though stupid, were not insincere in the convictions they expressed. Personal character then, this mental integrity which saw the fact, moral or historical, and read it and was brave to be loyal to it, was the basis and condition of the true prophet.

Such men, bred like Balaam in more or less servile relations to the truth, subject in many ways to the superstitions and false science of their age, God lifted out of their slavery and, in the words of Christ, made them His friends. They enjoyed, as they tell us, a close communion with Himself. They were forgiven and they were trusted afresh by His Grace, past all their deserts or abilities. They were steeped in His purity, His patience and His love. He led them into the secrets of His nature and His will. He made them partners with Himself in His passion for en.

By their own sufferings for the sins of others, ¹ He gave them an understanding of His very heart ; and they felt how it was not only full of travail for the spiritual victory of His children, but itself bore to the uttermost weight the shame and the misery of their sins and defeats.

That was the friendship to which God lifted the prophets and Christ lifted His disciples, and that was the Gospel they won from it for all mankind.

For all mankind—you remember the prayer of one who was himself a great prophet : *Would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put His spirit upon them !*

My brethren, for you and for me, the lessons of this long, slow and painful history of our religion are these.

God deals with us one by one on the ground and the temper of our own character. It is true that His Grace does meet and touch the very lowest—mentally and morally the very lowest. And of them he can make the highest, for He maketh all things new.

But He must have on our part a certain truthfulness, if even He is to work anything with us ; a certain mental integrity, however ignorant ; a heart, above all, for facts. He must have in us reverence and deep awe before the facts of His moral world ; honesty and courage to face the facts of our own characters and conduct. For these things mean penitence, and with the penitent alone He can work. *Behold Thou desirest truth in the inward parts.* If that is there, the rest by His Grace shall follow. Of His slaves He shall make His friends, lifting us through Christ into His Love—into the freedom and the trustfulness and the security, which no sincerity, nor courage, nor any other strength of character may assure—however indispensable they all are ; but which His Love alone and a daily communion with Him can bring to our weak wills and feeble hearts.

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¹ As notably in the case of Hosea.