

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

The Journal *of* *Theological Studies*

JANUARY, 1901

BALAAM

(A Sermon preached before the University of Oxford on the Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, Nov. 18, 1900.)

'Balaam also, the soothsayer, did the children of Israel slay with the sword.'
Joshua xiii 22.

THE character of Balaam offers us an enigma which has always exercised a great fascination for those interested in the analysis of the religious life. The early Christians, following the tradition of the Jews, saw in him the type of the false teacher, greedy of gain, enticing to immorality; and when similar teachers appeared in the Christian Church they were denounced as 'following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the hire of wrongdoing' (2 P. ii 15), 'they ran riotously in the error of Balaam for hire' (Jude 11 cf. Rev. ii 14). To Bishop Butler the character seemed to present the type of self-deceit, the case of a man who longs to die the death of the righteous and yet to live the life of the unrighteous: of one who refuses to listen to the first clear dictates of conscience that a thing is wrong, and tries to make a composition with the Almighty, and to persuade himself that what he knows to be wrong may after all be right, 'he wanted to do what he knew to be very wicked and contrary to the express command of God; he had inward checks and restraints which he could not entirely get over; he therefore casts about for ways to reconcile this wickedness with his duty¹.'

¹ Butler's *Sermons* vii.

And in the great religious stirring which moved English minds in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, there was scarcely one leader of thought who did not turn back to look at this strange religious leader and to endeavour to interpret his motives.

Mr. Newman saw in it the story of obedience without love. Balaam was the highly-gifted man, who yet in the main is on the side of God's enemies, 'his end was not to please God, but to keep straight with him, he was not content with ascertaining God's will; but he attempted to change it'; 'his endeavour was not to please God, but to please self without displeasing God¹.'

Dr. Arnold's interpretation is closely allied to this. Balaam was one who had the gifts of the Holy Spirit without the graces: he was one who set up his idols in his heart and yet went to enquire of God; and so God answered him according to his idols; and he was sent upon a course from which he could not turn back, and which ultimately led to his death².

Mr. Keble more simply follows the lead of the New Testament writers, and sees in his ruin the result of avarice:

No sun or star so bright
In all the world of light
That they should draw to Heaven his downward eye:
He hears the Almighty's word,
He sees the Angel's sword,
Yet low upon the earth his heart and treasure lie³.

Mr. Frederick Denison Maurice, in a sermon which shows much greater insight into the historical problem of the narrative, treats him as the heathen seer to whom God really speaks, and who yet becomes a false prophet because he has been ruined by the sense of his own strange power of insight, which he has tried to strengthen by charms and divinations, until the spiritual has become unreal to him, and material things have grown to be of the strongest attraction. So God strives to educate him by permitting him to feel the effects of his own self-will; by lifting him out of himself by the sight of a righteous nation: yet he

¹ Newman, *Parochial Sermons* iv pp. 32, 33, 35.

² Arnold, *Sermons Chiefly on the Interpretation of Scripture* p. 53.

³ *The Christian Year*. The Second Sunday after Easter.

falls back and his language is the utterance of a melancholy spirit, conscious that he is not true to himself¹.

Mr. F. W. Robertson, taking selfishness as the root of his hollowness, dwells on the perversion of great gifts by ambition and avarice and the perversion of the conscience by insincerity².

All find a puzzle hard to read: 'Good God,' cries Bishop Butler, 'what an inconsistency, what a perplexity is here!' 'It was an almost inconceivable character,' writes Archbishop Benson, 'one dramatist only has ever lived who could have traced all the windings of a spirit so lofty and so depraved, through light so intense and through shadow so deathly³.'

Now when we feel this perplexity, we are tempted to welcome a solution which is held out to us by the critical analysis of the Hebrew text; according to which three different accounts have been combined to form the present narrative. There is the Elohist account, according to which Balaam is a selfish, grasping man, coveting the rewards of Balak, and only restrained from taking them by sordid fear of God, content to know God's will, yet trying by every means to cajole God into changing his mind: there is the Jehovistic account, in which Balaam acts up to his light with perfect consistency and is loyal to Jehovah: and there is also the Priestly account, in which he is the Midianite soothsayer, the wicked counsellor who persuaded his people to seduce the Israelites by means of immoral rites⁴. We gratefully accept this analysis as explaining many minor inconsistencies; and we recognize that each writer has emphasized one feature of the character; but when we are asked further to believe that the writers are dealing with two if not three different men, we must hesitate very much to accept such a solution of the problem, however plausible. We have to face the fact that there are not only three different traditions, but that the compiler of JE combined the first two so closely that they are almost inextricable, and that the ultimate compiler of the Hexateuch, perhaps with a deeper insight into human nature than some of his modern interpreters, has had no scruple in combining the three and

¹ *Patriarchs and Lawgivers of the O. T.* xii.

² *Sermons.* Fourth Series iv, v.

³ Archbishop Benson, *Fishers of Men* p. 136.

⁴ Summarized from Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible* s.v.

treating them all as features of one and the same character ; nor did Bishop Butler with all his sense of the inconsistency and perplexity of the character ever doubt for a moment that this inconsistency is truly human. The terrible warning of the character remains, then, still untouched, an awful lesson to all religious men who hold parley with suggestions of avarice: an appalling portrait of the double-hearted man unstable in all his ways ; a warning especially to the preacher that no beauty of utterance, however flawlessly beautiful, no heralding of truth to others, however unqualifiedly true, is sufficient to prevent a man from being himself a castaway.

Yet while the story has all this ethical interest, my present purpose is to suggest that the ethical interest was essentially subordinate in the mind of the narrator and in the permanent lesson of the narrative. The primary interest is not ethical but religious: the narrative is not a study in ethics, but an episode in the history of comparative religion: Balaam comes before us as a type of a lower religion which confronts that of Jehovah, which fails to conquer it, and which stands condemned for ever. The New Testament counterpart of Balaam is not so much Judas Iscariot as Simon Magus,—he too a soothsayer, he too one to whom they all gave heed from the least to the greatest, he too attracted by a higher religion, he too with a heart not right with God but bent on avarice, he too, if tradition may be trusted, falling back from the highest that he sees and becoming a source of danger and corruption to the true believers. And the New Testament antithesis to Balaam is Saul—himself the representative of that which has become a lower religion in the contrasted glory of Christianity, himself half seeing the greater glory of the higher and kicking against the pricks, himself journeying to destroy the representatives of the higher, himself arrested in his journey by a message from heaven ; but *he* listens whole-heartedly to the message, he is willing to sacrifice all for the higher, and the higher passes into his nature, and moulds it from the very centre.

Balaam then represents Gentile religion : he is essentially that which my text calls him, the *μάντις* and not the *προφήτης*, he is the soothsayer, whose fame spreads throughout the East, who has a supernatural power to bless and to curse, to whom ambassadors

come with the rewards of divination in their hands, who takes his post on the mountain top whence his curse may be effective, who goes out to meet with enchantments, to whom the Elohim speak. It is quite true that he is also regarded as doing Jehovah's work: the angel of Jehovah meets him and Jehovah also speaks through his lips; and this may either be explained by the common supposition that a tradition of the true God lingered in the eastern country from which he came, or, perhaps more likely, the later Jehovistic narrator has felt how truly Jehovah had used Balaam for his own purposes, so that we have his later but truer way of describing what really happened. Gentile religion, with its instincts that point to a true God, though they have not yet learnt to worship Him, is brought face to face with the true religion, and against its will is made to bear witness to its essential truth. It is the 'testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae.'

Let me illustrate this a little more in detail.

The method of Balaam's inspiration is Gentile and not Jewish. The description of it is very noble, but it is that of the entranced seer:

Balaam the son of Beor saith,
 The man whose eye was closed saith:
 He saith, which heareth the words of God,
 Which seeth the vision of the Almighty,
 Falling down, and having his eyes open.

Such a description draws nearer to a mechanical than to a dynamical view of inspiration, and so Josephus interprets it, for he makes Balaam say to Balak 'The Spirit of God causes us to utter words such as he wills, *and speeches without our knowledge . . . for when he has entered into us, nothing that is in us is any longer our own*¹.'

There is surely a real line which separates this from the Jewish idea of the prophet as the friend of God, to whom he telleth his secrets, the essential characteristic of whom is 'moral converse with Jehovah.' Balaam's attitude before Balak, high and courageous as it is, is not the attitude of Isaiah before Ahaz or of Jeremiah before Jehoiachim or of John the Baptist before

¹ *Ant.* IV vi 5.

Herod, but rather of Teiresias before Oedipus, struggling to keep back the prediction that must give offence, yet forced against his will to utter it. It is no doubt true that as the narrative proceeds the heathen element falls off, and Balaam approaches nearer to the true prophet. 'And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments; but he set his face toward the wilderness,' i.e. he looked down upon the tents of Israel, seeking no charms but drawing his inspiration for the future from the facts of the present: yet his subsequent history shows how little any real change had entered into his soul.

Origen notes that the Lord is said to put a word into the mouth of Balaam and not into his heart; and though this verbal criticism could not be pressed, it points to a very real truth, that Balaam's own essential character remains untouched by the revelation of which he is the organ. When the whole incident was over, Balaam 'rose up and went and returned to his place' the same man as he had come, returning to the same place whence he had come. That wisdom which 'in all ages entering into holy souls maketh them friends of God and prophets' had not entered into him; he returned to his place, a soothsayer still, with an unconverted heart.

But the nature of the inspiration does not stand alone as marking the heathen type of religion. The venal character of the soothsayer, the rewards of divination carried to him, the promise to promote him to very great honour, find a parallel not in the true Jewish prophet but in the Greek *μάντις* so often denounced for his venality in the Greek tragedians. And side by side with this venality of the prophet goes (how truly!) the thought of the venality of God. There is a striking parallel between the presents offered to the seer,—the rewards of divination, the offer of promotion, the mission of the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, the second mission of princes more and more honourable than they,—with the sacrifices offered from higher and higher heights to tempt Jehovah to give his curse. Yet here, too, it is striking to notice how Balaam himself when brought into contact with the truth gradually drops the heathen conception and rises to a nobler view of God. At first he calls on Balak to build him the seven altars, and to prepare seven

bullocks and seven rams: together with Balak he offers on every altar a bullock and a ram: and he pleads this as a ground of prevailing with God. 'I have prepared the seven altars and I have offered up a bullock and a ram on every altar' (xxiii 1-4). On the next occasion Balak alone builds the altars and offers the bullock and the ram, and Balaam no longer pleads this before God (14-16). On the third occasion he calls again upon Balak to build the altars and to make the offerings, but he himself goes not as at other times to meet with enchantments, but the Spirit of God comes upon him (29—xxiv 1). On the last occasion there are no altars built, no bullocks or rams offered. The degrading thought that God can be bribed by a few more offerings is burnt out of *his* soul at least, though it remains with the king and the princes of Moab, and stamps the whole incident with the stamp of heathenism.

No less clearly-marked is the heathen conception of the curse of the soothsayer. Students of Arabic mythology tell us how strong was the belief among the Arabian tribes in what has been called the 'Fetich-power of the uttered word,' and how elaborately organized the method for pronouncing it. The poet-seer was stationed at a sacred place, at a moment of religious service; he was supposed to be in alliance with the powerful spirits of evil, and in their strength to have power to force the God to do his will. Then in rhythmic chant he uttered his solemn imprecation: in the exact Arabian phrase he shot forth 'the arrows of the night,' and so realistic was the belief in them that the man against whom they were aimed was supposed to be only able to escape them by lying down on his side till they had passed by¹. And Philo's description of Balaam is worth quoting in this context as showing the Jewish tradition of the terror felt of him. 'He was renowned above all men for his experience as a diviner and a prophet, as he had in many instances foretold to many people incredible and most important events: for on one occasion he had predicted heavy rain to one nation at the height of summer; to another a drought and burning heat in the middle of winter . . . he had predicted the inundations of rivers or their falling greatly and becoming dried up, and the departure of pestilential disease and ten

¹ Cf. Goldziher, *Abhandlungen zur arab. Philologie* pp. 26-44.

thousand other things . . . his glory had spread everywhere and was continually increasing¹.’ Now we know from Greek Tragedy and Greek History the power of a curse to impose itself upon the minds of men and to bring its fulfilment with it; and it is hard to imagine what effect it might have had upon Israel’s history had there been known to have been uttered over it the curse of the most famous of Oriental seers, a curse such as lay upon the houses of Pelops and Alcmaeon; but theirs was at least a righteous curse, a curse upon unnatural vice, upon filial ingratitude, upon impiety: this curse implies a far lower conception. It is a curse, arbitrary, capricious, purchased by money: it is the curse of the weaker against the stronger, because he is the stronger; it is the curse which strives by artificial methods to undermine God’s natural differences between mankind; it is parallel to the love-charms by which lovers have striven again and again, aye and are said to strive still in parts of Christian England, to destroy their rivals. All that is meant by magic, by witchcraft, by the fascination of the evil eye is here arrayed against Israel and fails. The nation goes forward on its way free from the terror of the magic curse, and in the strength of this escape a later prophet is bold to scorn the magic of Babylon, even though the king himself ‘stood at the parting of the way, and shook the arrows to and fro and consulted the teraphim and looked in the liver’ (Ezek. xxi 21).

My next illustration I hazard with more diffidence, but it has long seemed to me that this is the right point of view from which to look upon the incident of the ass speaking with human voice. With the exception of the speech of the serpent in the book of Genesis, this is the only incident in the Bible in which an animal is made to speak, and this incident occurs when a veil is drawn back and we get a glimpse into Gentile religions. We are in the region of all the folk-lore that abounds in animal speech: we are in the region again of auguries and auspices, in which God was supposed to reveal his will through the cries or movements of animals, the animal being supposed to know what he tells to man². There may even be a conscious antithesis

¹ *On the Life of Moses* i 48.

² Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites* Lect. iii and Note A.

hinted at in the narrative: it is the prophet who is accustomed to go out to meet the bird-omens, *εἰς συνάντησιν τοῖς οἰωνοῖς* (xxiv 1), to whom an ass speaks: perhaps, too, a touch of irony, afterwards drawn out by St. Peter: the famous seer is rebuked by his own ass, 'the dumb ass speaking with man's voice stayed the madness of the prophet' (2 P. ii 16).

When Achilles reproached his war-horses for leaving the body of Patroclus dead upon the Trojan plain, Homer tells that Heré gifted the swift-footed Xanthus with a human voice, and he foretold the death of his master (*Il.* xix 400): and Livy tells us that Rome was once startled because, before Cneius Domitius left for his province, one of his oxen uttered the warning, *Roma, cave tibi* (*Liv.* xxxv 21).

Now while the story of Balaam's ass rises above these illustrations in its ethical purpose, yet it belongs to the same category of events. Theologians have never agreed whether it is to be taken literally. We are free to rationalize it, if we will, and to say that as Balaam was going on his journey, with his conscience ill at ease about his task, the ass stumbled and shied at some real danger; that there was something unusual in its startled cry, some appealing protesting look in the eyes; and that these spoke to the uneasy conscience with as clear a voice as any with which man ever spake. This is the essential lesson of the incident; that when man is untrue to his conscience the instincts of mere animals rebuke him, and God can use even them to convey a real truth to the sinner's conscience. The very same lesson was applied afterwards to the whole nation of Israel in the first words of Isaiah (i 3), 'The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.' The amount of belief that we place in the narrative is not parallel to the amount of belief which we place in the miracles of Our Lord (God forbid), nor even in other miracles wrought within the sphere of Revelation and recorded in the Old Testament; but it depends upon the answer which we give to the question whether we believe in the Divine Dispensation of Paganism, whether we are willing to sweep away all the methods of divining the future which heathen nations have used as mere superstition, or whether we believe that in them, too, God did not leave Himself without witness.

This however is an incident in the main narrative. The essential point of that is that, as Israel is marching forward to its inheritance, the forces of heathenism, its religion and its immoralities, are marshalled to bar the way. The venal seer, the venal conception of God, the divinations and enchantments, the arbitrary curse, the immoral rites, all combine to stop the true development of the righteous nation and they all fail. This is precisely the way in which the incident is appealed to, as one of the great acts of God's deliverance of his people, by the prophet Micah :

'O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me. For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of bondage; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him; remember from Shittim unto Gilgal, that ye may know the righteous acts of the Lord' (vi 3-5).

But these heathen conceptions not only fail to conquer the true: but also by their failure they stand condemned as parts of true religion. The incident may in this respect be compared with that of the sacrifice of Isaac; there the heathen conception of human sacrifice seems to be on the point of being drawn within the circle of Judaism: the true element in it, the surrender of our best to God, is drawn out from it and has Jehovah's blessing pronounced over it, but the cruelty is put aside and rejected for ever out of Jewish sacrificial thought. Here other great heathen conceptions draw into close contact with Judaism. The revelation of God's will through animals is treated with respect as a reality in heathenism, but it is never taken up into Judaism; though the appeal to animal instinct, on which it is grounded, remains. The conception of the entranced seer lifted out of himself into mechanical prediction and into power to read and influence the future, this too is used by Jehovah, its truth of insight is recognized; but it is stripped of everything fanciful, capricious, malignant, of all that is *φθονερὸν καὶ παραχῶδες*; such power, if on Jehovah's side, can only be used in conformity with Jehovah's laws. The kernel of the narrative lies in two great oracles of Balaam :

God is not a man, that he should lie;
Neither the son of man, that he should repent.

That condemns for ever the idea that God's judgments can be bought off by external sacrifices.

And again :

Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob,
Neither is there any divination against Israel ;

or perhaps it may be translated :

Surely there is no enchantment in (or *with*) Jacob,
Neither is there any divination in (or *with*) Israel.

That condemns all sorcery and witchcraft among the Jews.

The Levitical law 'Neither shall ye use enchantments nor practise augury' (Lev. xix 26) is the expression of the lesson taught by this incident. Witchcraft skulks henceforth in the holes and corners of the land, like the home of the witch of Endor, and the Book of Proverbs sums up the belief in the powerlessness of the magical curse when it says :

As the sparrow in her wandering, as the swallow in her flying,
So the curse that is causeless lighteth not (xxvi 2).

An interesting parallel has been quoted from later Jewish history. When, about the year 64 B.C., Hyrcanus was, with the help of the Arabian king Aretas, warring against Aristobulus and besieging him in Jerusalem, the soldiers in the besiegers' camp seized upon Onias, a righteous, God-loving Jew, who was held in high esteem because his prayers had brought rain in time of drought, and tried to compel him to utter solemn curses against Aristobulus and his party. But he refused to invoke God's curse in a civil war in which neither party seemed to him in the right: 'O God, King of the Universe,' he prayed, 'since those who stand with me are thy people and those who are besieged are thy priests, I pray thee neither to listen to the wish of those against these, nor to accomplish that which these ask for against those;' and the wicked among the Jews stoned him to death¹. The venal seer, the venal conception of God, the malignant curse, the use of animal speech as the organ of the Divine voice, these pass for ever out of the things which have

¹ Josephus, *Ant.* XIV ii 1, quoted by Goldziher *ubi supra*.

charms or terror for the true Jew, out of the purview of true religion. Centuries after, when the children of Israel returned from a later contact with Eastern religions, and when they tried to purify their own religion: 'they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that an Ammonite and a Moabite should not enter into the assembly of God for ever; because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. And it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that *they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude*' (Neh. xiii 1-3).

The incident when viewed in this light is not only one of great historical interest, but also of spiritual appeal; for it is a permanent challenge to ourselves to consider whether the heathen conceptions of religion which are herein condemned are still alive in the world without or lurking even in our own hearts. In our own hearts, the venal cowardice which would sacrifice truth through dread of unpopularity; the prayer which strives to wrest from God an answer which shall suit our self-will and bribe him with offerings to undo the consequences of our ill-doings; the prayer which is said mechanically, as a formula learnt in childhood, but never prayed with the mind of the grown-up man; the materialistic conception of Sacraments as operative in themselves; the desire of jealousy to malign and undermine those whose superiority clashes with ourselves; the refusal to recognize righteousness outside our own circle; the claim to special inspiration for suggestions coming suddenly, capriciously, semi-rationally; the religion that touches our emotion or our intellect without bracing our will: all and each of these is akin to the heathen conceptions which were condemned in contrast with the worship of Israel; and how much more therefore with the religion of the Holy Spirit. For in that, the Holy Spirit, rooted in the very heart of our Personality, should send out its forces through all the regions in which Personality acts, in will, in emotion or in intellect; it should make prayer the utterance of a son's heart asking to know his Father's will and setting himself to do it; it should make us look out upon the facts of life and of the world, and watching their tendencies try to mould them to the Father's purpose; it welcomes goodness wherever seen; it makes us rise in the

Sacraments to meet, and to be refreshed by, the real presence of its own spiritual source : it sends each communicant away from Communion a stronger, more conscious, more dependent Personality.

And if we look into the wider world without, we see how many millions of mankind have failed to rise as yet above these heathen conceptions in their crudest form. The natives of Africa urged on to war by their medicine-men ; the hosts of the Mahdi rushing in a spirit of fatalism and at the guidance of half-mad dervishes against our forces ; the most recent movement in China with the religious initiation of its members, and their superstitious faith that they bear a charmed life¹ : probe each of these and you will find religion no whit higher than in the subjects of Balak. Are we going to acquiesce in this ? or is our only weapon going to be the sword of the Israelites for dealing with it ? Shall we not rather win them to a higher faith by the exhibition of a truer justice and more perfect righteousness before their eyes ? Shall we not reconsider and refurbish and reinforce our missionary weapons, and wield more effectually the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God ? And though things lower dark upon the coming century, yet we will have hope enough to take upon our own lips with a willing faith and with a deeper understanding the oracle which was wrested from the half-conscious Gentile soothsayer :

I see him, but not now :
 I behold him, but not nigh :
 There shall come forth a star out of Jacob,
 And a sceptre shall rise out of Israel,
 And shall smite through the corners of Moab,
 And break down *all the sons of tumult.*

WALTER LOCK.

¹ Cf. Sir Robert Hart in *The Fortnightly Review*, Nov. 1900, p. 77 : 'Something akin to hypnotism or mesmerism seems connected with Boxer initiation and action : the members bow to the south-east, recite certain mystical sentences, and then with closed eyes fall on their backs : after this they arise, eyes glazed and staring, possessed of the strength and agility of maniacs, mount trees and walls, and wield swords and spears in a way that they are unable to at any other time.'