

## Balaam — Old Testament Bible History

by Alfred Edersheim

### CHAPTER 1

#### **Israel about to take Possession of the Land of Promise—Decisive Contest showing the real Character of Heathenism—Character and History of Balaam (Numb. 22)**

THE WILDERNESS-LIFE AND THE EARLY CONTESTS OF ISRAEL WERE OVER. ISRAEL STOOD on the threshold of the promised possession, separated from it only by the waters of Jordan. But, before crossing that boundary-line, it was absolutely necessary that the people should, once and for all, gain full knowledge of the real character of heathenism in its relation to the kingdom of God. Israel must learn that the heathen nations were not only hostile *political* powers, opposing their progress, but that heathenism itself was in its nature antagonistic to the kingdom of God. The two were incompatible, and therefore no alliance could ever be formed with heathenism, no intercourse cultivated, nor even its presence tolerated. This was the lesson which, on the eve of entering Palestine, Israel was to learn by painful experience in connection with the history of Balaam. Its importance at that particular period will readily be understood. Again and again was the same lesson taught throughout the history of Israel, as each alliance or even contact with the kingdoms of this world brought fresh sorrow and trouble. Nor is its application to the Church of God, so far as concerns the danger of commixture with, and conformity to the world, less obvious. And so the history of Balak and of Balaam has, besides its direct lessons, a deep meaning for all times.

With the decisive victories over Sihon and over Og, all who could have barred access to the Land of Promise had been either left behind, or else scattered and defeated. And now the camp of Israel had moved forward, in the language of Scripture, to "the other side Jordan from Jericho." 1 Their tents were pitched in rich meadow-land, watered by many streams, which rush down from the neighbouring mountains—the *Arboth*, or lowlands of *Moab*, as the country on this and that side the river was still called, after its more ancient inhabitants. 2 As the vast camp lay scattered over a width of several miles, from *Abel Shittim*, "the meadow of the acacias," in the north, to *Beth Jeshimoth*, "the house of desolations," on the edge of the desert, close to the Dead Sea, in the south (Numb. 33:49), it might have seemed as if the lion of Judah were couching ready for his spring on the prey. But was he the lion of Judah, and were the promises of God to him indeed "yea and amen?" A fiercer assault, and one in which heathenism would wield other arms than those which had so lately been broken in their hands, would soon decide that question.

We can perceive many reasons why Moab, though apparently not immediately threatened, should, at that special moment, have come forward as the champion and representative of heathenism (Numb. 22:1-3). True, Israel had left their land untouched, restrained by express Divine command from invading it (Deut. 2:9). But their close neighbourhood was dangerous. Besides, had not all that land north of the Arnon, which Israel had just wrested from the Amorites, been till lately Moabitish—the very name of Moab still lingering on mountain-plateau and lowland plains; and might not Moab again have what once it held? But there was far more involved than either fear or cupidity suggested. The existence alike of heathen nations and of heathenism itself depended on the issue. There can be no doubt that the prophetic anticipation of the song of Moses (Exod. 15:14-16) had already in great part been fulfilled. "The nations" *had* "heard" of God's marvellous doings for Israel, and were afraid; "the mighty men of Moab, trembling" *had* taken "hold upon them." Among the wandering tribes of the east, tidings, especially of this kind, travel fast. Jethro had heard them long before (Exod. 18:1), and the testimony of Rahab (Josh. 2:9) shows how fear and dread had fallen upon the inhabitants of the land. Force of arms had been tried against them. The Amorites, who had been able to wrest from Moab all the land north of the Arnon, had boldly marched against Israel under the leadership of

Sihon their king, and been not only defeated but almost exterminated. A similar fate had befallen the brave king of Bashan and his people. There could be no question that so far Jehovah, the God of Israel, had proved true to His word, and stronger than the gods of the nations who had been subdued. Farther progress, then, in the same direction might prove fatal alike to their national existence, their national deities, and their national religion.

In trying to realise the views and feelings of heathenism under such circumstances, we must beware of transporting into them our modern ideas. In our days the the question is as to the acknowledgment or else the denial of Jehovah God. In those days it turned upon the acknowledgment or the opposite of Jehovah as the *only* true and living God, as this is expressed in the first commandment. Heathenism would never have thought of denying the existence or power of Jehovah as the national God of the Hebrews (see, for example, 1 Kings 20:23; 2 Kings 18:25, 33-35). What it controverted was, that Jehovah was the *only* God—all others being merely idols, the work of men's hands. Prepared as they were to acknowledge Jehovah as the national Deity of the Hebrews, the question before them would be, whether *He* or their gods were the more powerful. It was a point of the deepest interest to them, since, if anything were known of Jehovah, it would be this, that He was "a jealous God," and that the rites by which He was worshipped were so different from theirs, as to involve an entire change, not only of religion, but of popular habits and manners. From what has been stated, it will be understood why, in attempting to break the power of Israel, whose God had hitherto—whether from accident, fate, or inherent power—proved Himself superior to those of the nations, the king of Moab had, in the first place, recourse to "divination," and why he was so specially anxious to secure the services of Balaam.

Balaam, or rather Bileam, the son of Beor, 3 belonged apparently to a family of magicians who resided at Pethor, possibly, as has been suggested, a city of professional soothsayers or students of that craft, but certainly situated in "Aram" or Mesopotamia, and on the banks of the Euphrates (Numb. 22:5; 23:7; Deut. 23:4). His name, which means "devourer," or "swallow up," and that of his father, which means "burner up," or "destroyer"—whether given them at birth, or, as is so common in the East, from their supposed characteristics—indicate alike the claims which they put forth and the estimate in which they were popularly held. 4 If, as has been conjectured, 5 Balak, the king of Moab, was of Midianitish origin (his father having been a Midianitish usurper), it becomes all the more intelligible that in his peculiar circumstances he would apply for advice and help to the Midianites; that he would ally himself with them; and that through them he would come to know of, and along with them send for, Balaam (Numb. 22:4, 7, etc.). At any rate, those Midianite wanderers of the desert which stretched between Mesopotamia and the dominions of Moab would, like modern Bedawin under similar circumstances, not only know of the existence of a celebrated magician like Balaam, but probably greatly exaggerate his power. Moreover, being themselves unable to attack Israel, they would nevertheless gladly make common cause with Moab, and that, although for the present their territory was not directly threatened, any more than that of the Moabites. This explains the alliance of Moab and Midian and their common embassy to Balaam.

The object in view was twofold. As already explained, the success of Israel as against the nations, or rather that of Israel's God against their deities, might, in their opinion, arise from one of two causes. Either their own national deities—Chemosh and Baal—had not been sufficiently propitiated—sufficient influence or power had not been brought to bear upon them; or else Jehovah was *really* stronger than they. In either case Balaam would bring invaluable, and, if he only chose to exert it, *sure* help. For, according to heathen views, a magician had absolute and irresistible power with the gods; power was inherent in him or in the incantations which he used. And herein lay one of the fundamental differences between heathenism and the Old Testament, between magic and miracles. In the former it was all of man, in the latter it was shown to be all of God. No prophet of the Lord ever had or claimed power, like the magicians; but in every case the gracious influence was specially, and for that time, transmitted directly from God. Only the God-Man had power in Himself, so that His every contact brought health and life. And in the

Christian dispensation also, however much of the supernatural there may be experienced and witnessed, nothing is magical; there is no mere exercise of power or of authority; but all is conveyed to us through the free promises of God, and in the dispensation of His grace.

But to return. Supposing that Jehovah were really superior to Chemosh and Baal, the king of Moab and his associates would none the less desire the aid of Balaam. For it was a further principle of heathenism, that national deities might be induced to transfer their blessing and protection from one nation to another. Thus the ancient Romans were wont, when laying siege to a foreign city, solemnly to invite its special gods to come out to them and join their side, promising them in return not only equal but higher honours than they had hitherto enjoyed. And if something of this kind were now needful—if influence was to be exerted on the God of the Israelites, who was so capable of it as Balaam, both from his profession as a dealer with the gods, and from his special qualifications? And this leads up to the principal personage in this history, to his character, and to the question of his religion. 7

What has been said of the knowledge which the king of Moab must have possessed of Jehovah's dealings in reference to Israel (Exod. 15:14-16) applies, of course, with much greater force to Balaam himself. As a professional magician, belonging to a family of magicians, and residing at one of their chief seats, it was alike his duty and his interest to acquaint himself with such matters. Moreover, we ought not to forget that, in the place of his residence, traditions of Abraham would linger with that Eastern local tenacity which we have already had so frequent occasion to notice. Indeed, we have positive evidence that Balaam's inquiries had gone back far beyond the recent dealings of Jehovah to His original covenant-relationship towards His people. A comparison of the promise of God to Abraham in Gen. 13:16 with the mode of expression used by Balaam in Numb. 23:10; still more—the correspondence between Gen. 49:9 and Numb. 23:24, 24:9 in his description of Judah; but most of all, the virtual repetition of the prophecy Gen. 49:10 in Numb. 24:17, prove beyond doubt that Balaam had made himself fully acquainted with the promises of Jehovah to Israel. That a professional soothsayer like Balaam should have been quite ready, upon a review of their whole history, to acknowledge Jehovah as the national God of Israel, and to enter—if the expression may be allowed—into professional relationship with such a powerful Deity, seems only natural in the circumstances. This explains *his* conduct in speaking to and of Jehovah, and apparently owning Him. *But in all this Balaam did not advance a step beyond the mere heathen point of view*, any more than Simon Magus when, "beholding the miracles and signs which were done," "he was baptised" (Acts 8:13); nor did his conduct bring him nearer to the true service of Jehovah than were those seven sons of Sceva to that of Christ, when they endeavoured to cast out evil spirits in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:13, 14). In fact, Scripture designates him uniformly by the word *Kosem*, which is the distinctive term for heathen soothsayers in opposition to prophets of the Lord. And with this his whole conduct agrees. Had he possessed even the most elementary knowledge of Jehovah as *the only true and living God*, or the most rudimentary understanding of His covenant-purposes, he could not, *considering his acquaintance with previous prophecy*, have for a moment entertained the idea of allying himself with Balak against Israel. On the other hand, if, according to his view of the matter, he could have succeeded in making the God of Israel, so to speak, one of his patron-deities, and if, upon his own terms, he could have become one of His prophets; still more, if he could have gained such influence with Him as to turn Him from His purpose regarding Israel, then would he have reached the goal of his ambition, and become by far the most powerful magician in the world. Thus, in our opinion, from the time when we first meet him, standing where the two roads part, to the bitter end of his treachery, when, receiving the reward of Judas, he was swept away in the destruction of Midian, his conduct was throughout consistently *heathen*, and his progress rapid in the downward course.

Where the two roads part! In every great crisis of history, and, we feel persuaded, in the great crisis of every individual life, there is such a meeting and parting of the two ways—to life or to destruction. It was so in the case of Pharaoh, when Moses first brought him the summons of the Lord to let His people go free, proving his authority by indubitable signs. And Balaam stood at the

meeting and parting of the two ways that night when the ambassadors of Balak and the elders of Midian were for the first time under his roof. *That embassy was the crisis in his history.* He had advanced to the knowledge that Jehovah, the God of Israel, was God. The question now came: Would he recognise Him as the only true and living God, with Whom no such relationship could exist as those which heathenism supposed; towards Whom every relationship must be moral and spiritual, not magical—one of heart and of life service, not of influence and power? To use New Testament language, in his general acknowledgment of Jehovah, Balaam had advanced to the position described in the words: "he that is not against us is for us" (Luke 9:50). But this is only, as it were, the meeting and parting of the two roads. The next question which comes is far deeper, and decisive, so far as each individual is concerned. It refers to our relationship to the Person of Christ. And in regard to this we read: "He that is not with Me is against Me" (Matt. 12:30).

As always in such circumstances, God's great mercy and infinite patience and condescension were not wanting to help Balaam in the crisis of his life. There could, at least, be no doubt on two points. Balak's avowed wish had been, by the help of Balaam, to "smite" Israel and "drive them out of the land" (Numb. 22:6); and his expressed conviction, "he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed." Now, not to speak of the implied magical power thus attributed to him, Balaam must have known that Balak's intention ran directly counter to Jehovah's purpose, while the words, in which the power of blessing and cursing was ascribed to Balaam, were not only a transference to man of what belonged to God alone, *but must have been known to Balaam* as the very words in which Jehovah had originally bestowed the blessing on Abraham: "I will bless them that curse thee, and curse him that curseth thee" (Gen. 12:3). That Balaam so knew these words appears from his own quotation of them in Numb. 24:9. The proposal of Balak therefore ran directly counter to the fundamental purpose of God, as Balaam knew it—and yet he could hesitate even for a single moment! But this is not all. In His infinite long-suffering, not willing that any should perish, God even now condescended to Balaam. He had proposed to the ambassadors of Balak that they should "lodge" with him that night, and that on the morrow he would make his reply, as Jehovah would speak unto him. And Jehovah did condescend to meet Balaam in his own way, and that night fully communicated to him His will. The garbled and misrepresenting account of it, which Balaam in the morning gave to his guests, finally marked his choice and decided his fate.

But why did Jehovah God appear to, or deal with such an one as Balaam? Questions like these ought, with our limited knowledge of God's purposes, not always to be entertained. In the present instance, however, we can suggest at least some answer. Of God's purpose, so far as Balaam's personal condition was concerned, we have already spoken. But a wider issue was here to be tried. Balak had sent for Balaam in order through his magic to destroy Israel, or rather to arrest and turn aside the wonder-working power of Jehovah. It was, therefore, really a contest between heathenism and Israel as the people of God, which would exhibit and decide the real relationship between Israel and the heathen world, or in other words, between the Church of God and the kingdoms of this world. And as formerly God had raised up Pharaoh to be the instrument of bringing down the gods of Egypt, so would He now decide this contest through the very man whom Balak had chosen as its champion—using him as a willing instrument, if he yielded, or as an unwilling, if he rebelled, but in any case as an *efficient* instrument for carrying out His own purposes. It is in this manner that we regard God's meeting Balaam, and His speaking both to him and through him.

Three brief but emphatic utterances had God in that first night made to Balaam: "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed" (Numb. 22:12). Of these Balaam, in his reply to the ambassadors next morning, had deliberately suppressed the last two (22:13). Yet they were the most important, as showing the utter hopelessness of the undertaking, and the utter powerlessness of any man to control or influence the purpose of God. He thus withheld knowledge of the utmost importance for understanding alike the character of the true God and that of his true servants, who simply obey, but do not seek to control, His will.

But even in what he did repeat of God's message there was grievous misrepresentation. For this statement, "Jehovah refuses to give me leave to go with you" (22:13), implied an ungrounded arbitrariness on the part of God; confirmed Balak in his heathen views; and perhaps encouraged him to hope for better results under more favourable circumstances. As for Balaam himself, we may be allowed to infer, that he misunderstood God's appearance to, and conversation with him, as implying a sort of league with, or acknowledgment of him, while all the time he had irrevocably departed from God, and entered the way of sin and of judgment. Accordingly, we find Balaam thenceforth speaking of Jehovah as "my God," and confidently assuming the character of His servant. At the same time, he secured for himself the presents of Balak, while, in his reply, he took care not to lose the favour of the king, but rather to make him all the more anxious to gain his aid, since he was owned of Jehovah, Who had only refused a leave which on another occasion He might grant.

It was under these circumstances that a second embassy from Balak and Midian, more honourable than the first, and with almost unlimited promises, came again to ask Balaam "to curse this people" (ver. 17). The king had well judged. With no spiritual, only a heathen acknowledgment of Jehovah, covetousness and ambition were the main actuating motives of Balaam. In the pithy language of the New Testament (2 Pet. 2:15), he "loved the wages of unrighteousness." But already his course was sealed. Refusing to yield himself a willing, he would not be made the unwilling instrument of exalting Jehovah. And thus God gave him leave to do that on which he had set his heart, with this important reservation, however: "But yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do." Balaam, whose blinded self-satisfaction had already appeared in his profession to the ambassadors, that he could "not go beyond the word of Jehovah his God," understood not the terrible judgment upon himself implied in this "let him alone," which gave up the false prophet to his own lusts. He had no doubt been so far honest, although he was grossly and wilfully ignorant of all that concerned Jehovah, when he proposed to consult God a second time, whether he might curse Israel. And now it seemed as if God had indeed inclined to him. Balaam was as near reaching the ideal of a magician, and having "power," as was Simon Magus when he offered the apostles money to bestow on him the power of imparting the Holy Ghost.

It was no doubt on account of this spirit of deluded self-satisfaction, in which next morning he accompanied the ambassadors of Balak, that "God's anger was kindled because he went," 8 and that "the angel of Jehovah stood in the way for an adversary against him"—significantly, the angel of the covenant with a drawn sword, threatening destruction. The main object of what happened to him on the journey was, if possible, to arouse Balaam to a sense of his utter ignorance of, and alienation from Jehovah. And so even "the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbid the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:16). We know, indeed, that animals are often more sensitive to the presence or nearness of danger than man—as it were, perceive what escapes our senses. But in this case the humiliating lesson was, that while the self-satisfied prophet had absolutely seen nothing, his ass had perceived the presence of the angel, and, by going out of the way, or falling down, saved the life of his master; and that, even so, Balaam still continued blinded, perverse, and misunderstanding, till God opened the mouth of the dumb animal, so that with man's voice it might forbid the madness of the prophet. To show Balaam himself as he really was, and the consequences of his conduct; and to do so in the strongest, that is, in this case, in the most humiliating manner, such was the object of the apparition of the angel, and of the human language in which Balaam heard the ass reproving him. 9

But even this produced no real effect—only an offer on the part of Balaam to get him back again, if it displeased the angel of Jehovah (22:34). The proposal was as blundering, and argued as deep ignorance, as his former readiness to go with the ambassadors. For the question was not simply one of going or not going, but of glorifying God, and acknowledging the supremacy of His covenant-purpose. Balaam might have gone and returned without doing this; but Jehovah would now do it Himself through Balaam. And already the elders of Moab and Midian had hurried on along with Balaam's own servants, to announce the arrival of the prophet. Presently from the

lonely, terrible interview with the angel was he to pass into the presence of the representative of that heathenism against which the drawn sword in the angel's hand was really stretched out.

### Footnotes

1. Or, "across the Jordan of Jericho," *i.e.*, that part of the Jordan which watered Jericho.
2. The name *Arboth* still survives in the *Arabah*, which stretches from a little farther south to the Elanitic Gulf of the Red Sea.
3. By a peculiar Aramaic interchange of letters, St. Peter writes the name *Bosor*] THE MEETING BETWEEN THE KING OF MOAB AND THE SOOTHSAYER TOOK PLACE AT IR Moab, the "city" or capital of Moab, close by its northern boundary. 10 It commenced with gentle reproaches on the part of the monarch, which, Eastern-like, covered large promises, to which the soothsayer replied by repeating his old profession of being only able to speak the word that God would put in his mouth. There is no need of assuming hypocrisy on his part; both monarch and soothsayer acted quite in character and quite consistently. From Ir Moab they proceeded to Kirjath Huzoth, "the city of streets," the later Kiriathaim. 11 Here, or in the immediate neighbourhood, the first sacrifices were offered, Balaam as well as "the princes" taking part in the sacrificial meal. Next morning Balak took the soothsayer to the lofty heights of Mount Attarus, to *Bamoth Baal*, "the heights of Baal," so-called because that plateau was dedicated to the service of Baal. The spot, which also bears the names of Ball-meon, Beth Baal-meon, and Beth-meon, commands a magnificent view. Although "too far recessed to show the depression of the Dead Sea," the view northwards stretches as far as Jerusalem, Gerizim, Tabor, Hermon, and Mount Gilead. 12 But, although the eye could sweep so far over the Land of Promise, he would, from the conformation of the mountains, only see "the utmost part of the people" (Numb. 22:41), that is, the outskirts of the camp of Israel.

In accordance with the sacred significance which, as Balaam knew, attached to the number *seven* in the worship of Jehovah, seven altars were now built on the heights of Baal, and seven bullocks and seven rams offered upon them—a bullock and a ram on each altar. Leaving Balak and the princes of Moab by the altars, Balaam went forth in the regular heathen manner, in the hope of meeting Jehovah (Numb. 23:3), which is explained by Numb. 24:1 as meaning "to seek auguries," such as heathen soothsayers saw in certain natural appearances or portents. And there, on the top of "a bare height," 13 God did meet Balaam, not in auguries, but by putting "a word in Balaam's mouth." As the man shared not in it otherwise than by being the outward instrument of its communication, this "word" was to him only "a parable," and is designated as such in Scripture. Never before so clearly as in presence of the powers of heathenism, assembled to contend against Israel, did Jehovah show forth His almighty power, alike in making use of an instrument almost passive in His hand, and in disclosing His eternal purpose. 14

### First "Parable" of Balaam. 15

*From Aram brought me Balak,  
The king of Moab from the mountains of the east—  
Come, curse me Jacob,  
And come, threaten 16 Israel!  
How shall I curse whom God doth not curse,  
And how shall I threaten whom Jehovah threatens not?  
For, from the top of the rocks I see him,  
And from the hills I behold him:  
Lo, a people dwelling 17 alone.  
And not reckoning itself among the nations (the Gentiles)!  
Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
And the number of the fourth part 18 of Israel?  
Let me die the death of the righteous 19,*

*And let my latter end be like his!*

Two things will be noted, without entering into special criticism. First, as to the form of this parable: each thought is embodied in two sentences, with rapid, almost abrupt, transitions from one thought to the other. Secondly, the outward and inward separation of Israel (the former as symbol of the latter) is singled out as the grand characteristic of God's people—a primary truth this of the Old Testament, and, in its spiritual application, of the New Testament also. But even in its literality it has proved true in the history is not yet finished; that God has not forgotten His people; and that a purpose of mercy yet awaits them, in accordance with His former dealings. Such a people Balaam could not curse. On the contrary, he could only wish that his death should be like theirs whom God's ordinances and institutions kept separate outwardly, and made righteous inwardly, referring in this, of course, to Israel not as individuals, but in their totality as the people of God. In the language of a German critic, 20 "The pious Israelite could look back with calm satisfaction, in the hour of his death, upon a life rich in proofs of the blessing, forgiving, protecting, delivering, saving mercy of God. With the same calm satisfaction would he look upon his children, and children's children, in whom he lived again, and in whom also he would still take part in the high calling of his nation, and in the ultimate fulfilment of the glorious promise which it had received from God. ... And for himself, the man who died in the consciousness of possessing the mercy and love of God, knew also that he would carry them with him as an inalienable possession, a light in the darkness of Sheol. He knew that he would be 'gathered to his fathers'—a thought which must have been a very plenteous source of consolation, of hope, and of joy."

### **The Second "Parable" of Balaam.**

It was but natural that Balak should have been equally surprised and incensed at the words of the soothsayer. The only solution he could suggest was, that a fuller view of the camp of Israel might change the disposition of the magician. "Come, I pray thee, with me unto another place, from whence thou mayest see them (viz., in their totality); only the end (utmost part) of them seest thou, but the whole of them thou seest not—and from thence curse me them." 21 The station now selected was on "the field of the watchers," on the top of Pisgah, affording not only a full view of the camp, but of the Land of Promise itself. Here Moses, not long afterwards, took his farewell prospect of the goodly heritage which the Lord had assigned to His people. 22 The same formalities as before having been gone through, in regard to altars and sacrifices, Balaam once more returned to Balak with the following message:

*Rise up, Balak, and hear,  
Hearken to me, son of Zippor!  
Not man is God that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man that He should repent!  
Hath He said, and shall He not do it,  
Hath He spoken, and shall He not fulfil it!  
Behold, to bless, I have received—  
And He hath blessed, and I cannot turn it back!  
He beholdeth not iniquity in Jacob,  
And He looketh not upon distress in Israel:  
Jehovah his God is with him,  
And the king's jubilee in the midst of him. 23*

*God bringeth them out of Egypt—  
As the unwearied strength of the buffalo is his. 24  
For, no augury in Jacob, no soothsaying 25 in Israel,  
According to the time it is said to Jacob and to Israel what God doeth. 26  
Behold, the people, like a lioness it riseth,  
And like a lion it raiseth itself up—  
He shall not lie down, till he has eaten the prey, 27*

*And drink the blood of the slain.*

The meaning of this second "parable" needs no special explanation. Only it will be noticed, that the progress of thought is successively marked by *four lines*—the last two always expressing the ground, or showing the foundation of the two first. The centre couplet is the most important. It marks for ever, that the Covenant-Presence of God in Israel, or, as we should now express it, that the grace of God, is the ultimate cause of the forgiveness of sins, and that the happy realisation of Jehovah as the King is the ground of joy. Whenever and wherever that Presence is wanting only unforgiven sin is beheld; wherever that shout is not heard only misery is felt.

### **The Third "Parable" of Balaam.**

In his despair Balak now proposed to try the issue from yet a third locality. This time a ridge somewhat farther north was selected—"the top of Peor that looketh toward Jeshimon." A third time seven altars were built and sevenfold sacrifices offered. But there was a marked difference in the present instance. Balaam went no more "as at other times to seek for auguries" (Numb. 24:1). Nor did Jehovah now, as formerly (23:5, 16), "put a word in his mouth." But "the Spirit of God came upon him" (24:2), in the same manner as afterwards upon Saul (1 Sam. 19:23)—he was in the ecstatic state, powerless and almost unconscious, or, as Balaam himself describes it, with his *outward* eyes shut (ver. 3), and "falling," as if struck down, while seeing "the vision of the Almighty," and "having his (inner) eyes opened" (ver. 4).

*Saith Balaam, the son of Beor,  
And saith the man with closed eye, 28  
Saith He, hearing the words of God,  
Beholding the vision of the Almighty: he beholdeth—falling down—and with open eyes!  
How good are thy tabernacles, Jacob,  
Thy dwellings, O Israel—  
Like (watered) valleys they stretch, like gardens by a river,  
Like aloes Jehovah planted, like cedars by the waters. 29*

*Flow waters from his twin buckets—and his seed by many waters,  
Higher than Agag 30 shall be his king—and his kingdom be exalted.  
God brings him from Egypt—his the unwearied strength of the buffalo—  
He shall eat the nations (Gentiles) his enemies—and their bones shall he gnaw—and his  
arrows shall he split. 31  
He coucheth, lieth down like a lion and like a lioness—who shall rouse him?  
Blessed he that blesseth thee, and cursed he that curseth thee!*

We can scarcely wonder that the bitter disappointment of Balak should now have broken forth in angry reproaches. But Balaam had not yet finished his task. Before leaving the king he must deliver another part of the message, which he had already received from Jehovah, 32 but not yet spoken. "Come, I will advise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days" (24:14).

### **Prophetic Message through Balaam in Four "Parables."**

*First "parable," descriptive first of the "latter days," and then referring to Moab, as the representative of heathenism:*

*Saith Balaam, the son of Beor, and saith the man with closed eye,  
Saith he, hearing the words of God, and knowing the knowledge of the Most High,  
Beholding the vision of the Almighty: he beholdeth—falling down—and with open eyes:  
I behold Him, but not now—I descry Him, but not nigh!  
Cometh 33 a Star from Jacob, and rises a Sceptre from Israel,  
And dasheth the two sides of Moab, and overthroweth the sons of tumult. 34  
And Edom shall be a possession, and a possession shall be Seir 35—his enemies 36—  
And Israel is doing mighty things! 37*

*And shall come from Jacob (a ruler)  
And shall destroy what remaineth out of the cities.*

Second "parable" against Amalek—as the representative of heathenism in its *first* contest against Israel:

*And he beheld Amalek, and he took up his parable, and said:  
First of the Gentiles Amalek—and his latter end even unto destruction.*

Third "parable" in favour of the Kenites as the friends and allies of Israel:

*And he beheld the Kenites, and he took up his parable, and said:  
Durable thy dwelling-place, and placed on the rock thy nest.  
For shall Kajan be for destruction,  
Until Asshur shall lead thee away?*

Fourth "parable" concerning the Assyrian empire, and the kingdoms of this world, or prophecy of "the end," appropriately beginning with a "woe:"

*And he took up his parable, and said: 38  
Woe! who shall live when God putteth this? 39  
And ships from the side of Chittim—and afflict Asshur, and afflict Eber—  
And he also unto destruction!*

This latter may, indeed, be characterised as the most wonderful of prophecies. More than a thousand years before the event, not only the rising of the great world-empire of the West is here predicted, with its conquest of Asshur and Eber (*i.e.*, of the descendants of Eber) (Gen. 10:21), but far beyond this the final destruction of that world-empire is foretold! In fact, we have here a series of prophecies, commencing with the appearance of the Messiah and closing with the destruction of Anti-Christ. To this there is no parallel in Scripture, except in the visions of Daniel. No ingenuity of hostile criticism can take from, or explain away the import of this marvellous prediction.

And now the two parted—the king to go to his people, the soothsayer, as we gather from the sequel, to the tents of Midian. But we meet Balaam only too soon again. One who had entered on such a course could not stop short of the terrible end. He had sought to turn away Jehovah from His people, and failed. He would now endeavour to turn the people from Jehovah. If he succeeded in this, the consequences to Israel would be such as Balak had desired to obtain. By his advice (Numb. 31:16; Rev. 2:14), the children of Israel were seduced into idolatry and all the vile abominations connected with it. 40 In the judgment which ensued, not fewer than 24,000 Israelites perished, till the zeal of Phinehas stayed the plague, when in his representative capacity he showed that Israel, as a nation, abhorred idolatry and the sins connected with it, as the greatest crime against Jehovah. But on "the evil men and seducers" speedy judgment came. By God's command the children of Israel were avenged of the Midianites. In the universal slaughter of Midian, Balaam also perished.

The figure of Balaam stands out alone in the history of the Old Testament. The only counterpart to it is that of Judas, the traitor. Balaam represented the opposition of heathenism; Judas that of Judaism. Both went some length in following the truth; Balaam honestly acknowledged the God of Israel, and followed His directions: Judas owned the Messianic appearance in Jesus, and joined His disciples. But in the crisis of their inner history, when that came which, in one form or another, must be to every one the decisive question—each failed. Both had stood at the meeting and parting of the two ways, and both chose that course which rapidly ended in their destruction. Balaam had expected the service of Jehovah to be quite other from what he found it; and, trying to make it such as he imagined and wished, he not only failed, but stumbled, fell, and was broken. Judas, also, if we may be allowed the suggestion, had expected the Messiah to be quite other than he found Him; disappointment, perhaps failure in the attempt to induce Him to alter His course, and an increasingly widening gulf of distance between them, drove him, step by step,

to ruin. Even the besetting sins of Balaam and of Judas—covetousness and ambition—are the same. And as, when Balaam failed in turning Jehovah from Israel, he sought—only too successfully—to turn Israel from the Lord; so when Judas could not turn the Christ from His purpose towards His people, he also succeeded in turning Israel, as a nation, from their King. In both instances, also, for a moment a light more bright than before was cast upon the scene. In the case of Balaam we have the remarkable prophetic utterances, reaching far beyond the ordinary range of prophetic vision; at the betrayal of Judas, we hear the prophetic saying of the High-priest going far beyond the knowledge of the time, that Jesus should die, not only for His own people, but for a ruined world. And, lastly, in their terrible end, they each present to us most solemn warning of the danger of missing the right answer to the great question—that of absolute and implicit submission of mind, heart, and life to the revealed Covenant-Will of God.

### Footnotes

1. Canon Tristram identifies this with the old *Ar*, or *Rabbath Moab* (*Land of Moab*, p. 110). But this latter seems too far south for the requirements of the text.
2. Josh. 13:19; Ezek. 25:9 etc. See the description of the place, and of the prospect from it, in Tristram, *u.s.*, pp. 270, 276.
3. Tristram, p. 304.
4. So literally; Numb. 23:3.
5. The prophecies of Balaam certainly go far beyond the range of the prophetic vision of that time. Could it be, because Balaam was so entirely passive, as it were transmitting, without absorbing, any of the rays of light, nor yet mingling them with the colouring in his own mind?
6. Of course, we translate literally.
7. Literally: pronounce wrath.
8. We have put it so as to include both the present and the future tense.
9. Bishop H. Browne prefers the rendering "progeny." But "the fourth part" seems to refer to the square arrangement of the camp of Israel, each side of the square being occupied by three tribes.
10. In the *plural* number, referring to Israel.
11. Kurtz, *History of the Old Covenant*, vol. 3, p. 432, Engl. Trans.
12. Numb. 23:13. So literally; the critical discussion see in Keil, *Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 313.
13. A description of the view from Pisgah is given in a subsequent chapter.
14. That is, the shout of jubilee on account of the abiding presence of Jehovah as their King is in the midst of the camp of Israel. This is symbolised by the blast of the trumpets, which is designated by the same word as that rendered "jubilee."
15. Viz., Israel's.
16. The same word by which Balaam himself is uniformly designated as "the soothsayer."
17. In due time God reveals by His word to Israel His purpose.
18. Literally, "the torn," what he had torn in pieces.
19. The Targum Onkelos, however, renders, "the man who saw clearly."
20. Targum Onkelos: "as rivers flowing onward; as the watered garden by Euphrates—as aromatic shrubs planted by the Lord; as cedars by the waters."
21. *Agag*—literally, "the fiery"—was not the name of one special king (1 Sam. 15:8), but the general designation of the kings of Amalek, as Abimelech that of the kings of Philistia, and Pharaoh of Egypt.
22. The rendering of this clause is exceedingly difficult and doubtful. I have taken the verb in its original meaning, *divide*, *split*, as in Judges 5:26, "When she had split and stricken through his temples."
23. This we gather from the addition of the words, "knowing the knowledge of the Most

- High" (24:16) besides, "beholding the vision of the Almighty" (ver. 4).
24. Literally, makes its way.
  25. Among all nations "the star" has been associated with the future glory of great kings. The application of it to the Messiah is not only constant in Scripture, but was universally acknowledged by the ancient Jews. Both the Targum Onkelos and that of Jonathan apply it in this manner. "The two sides of Moab," *i.e.*, from end to end of the land. "The sons of tumult," *i.e.*, the rebellious nations.
  26. Edom is the people; Seir the country.
  27. "His enemies," viz., those of Israel; the language is very abrupt.
  28. Onkelos: "prosper in riches."
  29. Of course, the Assyrian empire was as yet in the far future, and could not therefore be "beheld" like Moab, Amalek, and the Kenites.
  30. Who shall be able to abide when God doeth all this?
  31. The service of Baal-Peor represents the vilest form of idolatry. See FÃ¼r, Dict. *sub voce*.