

BALAAAM'S PARABLES.

Numbers XXII—XXIV.

THE history of Balaam, as related in Numbers 22-24, and which we are to consider, is a striking illustration of the faithfulness of God in His promise to Israel as expressed in Isa. 54. 17 :—"No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn."

There are varied opinions as to the character of Balaam, some regarding him as a prophet of the Lord, led astray by his love of money, others as being entirely a false prophet.

His home was in Pethor in Mesopotamia, the country where Abraham and Jacob sojourned, and where traditions of the living God and His dealings with them would still exist. He apparently had some knowledge of God, for he speaks of "the Lord my God" (ch. 22. 18); but on the other hand he was evidently a worshipper of Baal as is shown by his building altars and offering sacrifices in the high places of Baal (22. 41).

In Joshua 13. 22, he is called "the sooth-sayer" or "Kosem," a term employed in Scripture only of false prophets. That he was a magician of some repute is evidenced by Balak's message to him, "I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed" (22. 6).

The name, "Balaam," or "Bileam" means "to swallow up," or "destroy the people." It is akin to the Greek name "Nicolaus" from which is derived the term "Nicolaitanes" in Rev. 2. 6-15, where the Church of Ephesus is commended for its hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitanes; while the Church of Smyrna is re-proved for encouraging them and for holding the

doctrines of Balaam. Though foiled in his purpose of cursing Israel he was still their destroyer for he counselled Balak to incite them to idolatry, thus bringing upon them God's judgment in the plague at Shittim, when 24,000 Israelites died (Num. 25. 1-9; Micah 6. 5; Rev. 2. 14).

Two other striking references to Balaam in the New Testament seem to give the keynote of his character. In 2 Peter 2. 15, the Apostle condemns those who "have forsaken the right way . . . following the way of Balaam, who loved the wages of unrighteousness." Again in Jude 11 a woe is pronounced upon those false teachers who "ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward."

Alarmed at the victories of Israel over the Canaanites and Amorites (Num. 21), and fearful lest his kingdom should next be attacked, Balak, King of Moab, sent to Balaam entreating his help by pronouncing a curse upon them that should enable him to prevail against them. Being expressly forbidden by God, Balaam refused to go. Balak then sent a more princely embassy with the promise of very great honour and reward. This time God told him that if the men came to call him he might go, but should only speak the word which He would give. Balaam eagerly embraced this half permission, and without waiting for the princes to call him, rose up in the morning to go with them. Not even the marvellous incidents of his journey, "the dumb ass speaking with man's voice," and the appearance and warning words of the angel of the Lord, could turn his heart from his set purpose to earn the promised reward by cursing Israel, though he was obliged to acknowledge to Balak his utter powerlessness to curse the people whom God had blessed.

The parables or prophecies of Balaam are seven in number, four dealing exclusively with Israel, and three shorter ones dealing with the surrounding nations.

The first parable was spoken from Bamoth Baal, the high places of Baal where he saw only a part of the people, probably one of the four camps into which Israel was divided. Here, after offering sacrifices he went forth to seek auguries, after the manner of the heathen, but God met him and put the word into his mouth. "Balak, the king of Moab, hath brought me from Aram out of the mountains of the east, saying, 'Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel.' How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom Jehovah hath not defied? For from the top of the rocks I see him and from the hills I behold him; lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his" (Num. 23. 7-10).

From the commencement of their history, God's purpose for Israel was that they should be a separated people. To this end He gave them laws relating not only to religious observances, but to food and dress, and to family and social relationships which marked them off from other nations. Marriage with other nations was expressly forbidden. How wonderfully has this prophecy been fulfilled in the history of this people all through the centuries! Scattered among all the nations, in every country under heaven, yet dwelling alone, a separated race, and since their rejection of their Messiah, with

no national standing or home; truly they have not been reckoned among the nations.

In his words, "who can count the dust of Jacob?" Balaam apparently refers to God's promise to Abraham in Gen. 13. 16, "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered." And in Gen. 22. 17, "I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore."

These promises to Abraham will have their fulfilment not only in his natural seed, but in his spiritual also. "That the promise might be sure to all the seed, not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham who is the father of us all (Rom. 4. 16). "Therefore sprang there even of one . . . as many as the stars of the sky in multitude" (Heb. 11. 12). The prophet Hosea, reiterates the same promise in chap. 1. 10, where, speaking of Israel's restoration, he says, "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered." As he thus views Israel's unique position of blessedness, Balaam gives expression to the desire that he may "die the death of the righteous" and that his last end may be like his.

Disappointed at Balaam's utterances, Balak now takes him to the field of Zophim, the "field of the watchers," to the top of Pisgah, hoping that would be a more propitious place for him to curse Israel. It was from this spot that Moses afterwards viewed the Land of Promise, but with quite a different motive.

Once again he seeks for auguries, and once again God meets him and gives him the word to speak. Dominated by a higher power he is forced to confess his utter inability to frustrate

the unalterable purposes of God in relation to Israel, and has to exclaim, "God is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent; hath He said and shall He not do it? or hath He spoken and shall He not make it good? Behold I have received commandment to bless, and He hath blessed and I cannot reverse it. He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel: Jehovah His God is with him and the shout of a king is among them" (23. 18-21). Jehovah, the unchanging God, would fulfil the promises He had made to Abraham. In Mal 3. 6, He says, "I am Jehovah, I change not." Israel was His chosen people whom He designed to bless, and His purposes of mercy towards them are immutable. All the efforts of Balaam and Balak to curse them were utterly futile, and he was forced to acknowledge, "there is no enchantment against Jacob neither is there any divination against Israel." "He hath blessed and I cannot reverse it." The God Who by His mighty power brought them out of Egypt would be with them still. And in these latter days no hatred of man whether of Arab or Russian, no Anti-Semitism can ultimately avail against Israel for, as Isa. 61. 9, tells us, "they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed"; and Micah 7. 20 says, "'Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham which Thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old."

In verse 21 Balaam draws a picture of Israel's position of privilege. "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel; the Lord his God is with him." The presence of God amongst them marked them out as a holy people, notwithstanding their murmurings and backslidings, and His Divine

Presence gave them victory over their enemies. In God's sight they were a justified people. Their righteousness was an imputed righteousness, but the day is coming when it will be an imparted righteousness, for Zeph. 3. 13-17 declares, "The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth. . . . The Lord hath taken away thy judgment, He hath cast out thine enemy; the King of Israel, even Jehovah is in the midst of thee; thou shalt not see evil any more."

What comfort and joy may we also draw from these words of Balaam. For if in His earthly people God did not behold iniquity, neither does He in those who are in Christ Jesus, in whom His Spirit dwells, though we may be conscious of failure and shortcoming. Israel's righteousness and ours is all of God's sovereign grace in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus, and concerning both it may be truly said, "What hath God wrought!"

Seeing the futility of Balaam's efforts, and still clinging to the false hope that his desire to curse Israel may be fulfilled, Balak now takes him to the high point of Peor, that looks out towards Jeshimon or "the waste places," where he could see the whole encampment of Israel according to their tribes under their different standards. Again at Balaam's request he builds seven altars and offers a bullock and a ram on every altar.

This time Balaam does not seek for auguries for he realises at last that all his efforts are useless as "the Lord was pleased to bless Israel," but the Spirit of God comes upon him just as in later days He fell upon Saul and his messengers (1 Sam. 10. 10; and 19. 20-23).

There is a difference now in his utterances. He commences his parable, "Balaam the son of Beor hath said." The term he employs is "neum," which means "oracular demonstration," and is used by the prophets when they speak in the name of Jehovah. In his former parables, when he seeks for enchantments, Balaam does not use this word. It is noticeable also that his predictions instead of being negative—what Israel was not—are now positive—what Israel should be—and more distinctly Messianic. As he looks upon Israel in their tents he draws a beautiful picture of their future prosperity and fruitfulness. "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel. As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the riverside, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted."

Frequently in Scripture Israel is compared to trees. In Isa. 61. 3, they are called "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord." The lign aloe or wood aloe, sometimes called Eagle wood, is not the ordinary aloe from which medicine is obtained, but one whose wood is highly valued, sometimes worth its weight in gold, and which gives forth a sweet aromatic odour. The cedar, with its roots going down to the water is a picture of beauty and strength, and both symbols speak of Israel's blessedness and prosperity in the day when their king is in the midst of them. Many passages of Scripture foretell this, particularly the beautiful prophecy of Hosea 14. 5, 6. "I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily and cast forth his roots as

Lebanon (i.e., as the cedars of Lebanon). His branches shall spread and his beauty shall be as the olive tree and his smell as Lebanon." Having themselves drunk of the water of life that followed them, they shall pour water out of their buckets, i.e., carry the water of salvation to others. This has been true in measure through this dispensation, for all the spiritual blessings we enjoy have come to us through the well of Israel, but in that day it will be true in a fuller sense.

It is generally thought that "Agag" was the official title of the kings of Amalek, just as "Abimelech" was of the Philistines, and "Pharaoh" of the Egyptians, but we have no Scripture proof that this was so, as the name only occurs once, in 1 Sam. 15. 8. It is very striking that in the Septuagint and the Samaritan version (which is considered very valuable and reliable) the word "Agag" is rendered "Gog." Does this prophecy look forward to the final victory that Israel's King Messiah is to gain over the confederacy of nations under their leader Gog as detailed in Ezek. 38 and 39? It seems so, and is certainly more in harmony with other passages of Scripture. Agag was only king of a small nomadic tribe who never attained any eminence, while Gog will be the head of the greatest confederacy of people that the world has ever known, and will meet his doom under Israel's King. "His kingdom shall be exalted." This can only refer in its fullest sense to the Messiah. Of David (who was a type of Christ) we read in 2 Sam. 5. 12 that "David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel's sake"; while of Solomon it is recorded in

1 Kings 4. 21, that he "reigned over all kingdoms, from the river even unto the land of the Philistines and unto the border of Egypt; they brought presents and served Solomon all the days of his life." Thus his power extended over all the land which God had promised to Abraham in Gen. 15. 18. But the brightest glory of Solomon's kingdom was but a faint shadow of that of the Messiah, for "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth" *Psa.* 72. 8; *Zech.* 9. 10. The prophet Daniel (*chap.* 7. 13, 14), gives us a picture of that wonderful kingdom. "I saw in the night visions, and behold one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him, and there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed," and in verse 27, "Whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and all dominions shall serve and obey Him." Again *Psa.* 145. 11 states "They shall speak of the glory of Thy kingdom and talk of Thy power, Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and Thy dominion endureth throughout all generations." "Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever" (*Isa.* 9. 7). As we contemplate the glory and exaltation of God's King we pray with all our hearts, "Thy kingdom come."

Twice in his parables Balaam refers to the miracle of God's bringing the people out of Egypt

(chap. 23. 22 and 24. 8) as the sign of what He will ultimately do for them. He also recalls the prophecy of Jacob concerning Judah in Gen. 49. 9, and applies it to the whole nation, first (chap. 23. 24) as a lion rising up to seize his prey, and then (chap. 24. 9) as a lion lying down satisfied and at ease, having conquered all his enemies. This parable closes with the reiteration of the promise of God to Abraham (Gen. 12. 3), "Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee."

The fourth and most important Messianic prediction was spoken in defiance of Balak's angry expostulation and dismissal. That it refers to the days of the Messiah is evidenced by his use of the expression "the latter days" a term which denotes the future which forms the close of the course of history. "I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days" (chap. 24. 14). Again he speaks of himself as "the man whose eyes were opened" and who "saw the visions of the Almighty" which he could not have done apart from the Spirit of God coming upon him. "I shall see Him but not now; I shall behold Him but not nigh; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth (or as Jeremiah 48. 45 expresses it, 'sons of tumult'). And Edom shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly. Out of Jacob shall come He that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city" (chap. 24. 17-19).

The ancient Jews interpreted verse 17 of the Messiah. The Targum Onkelos paraphrases it, "When a King shall arise out of Jacob and an anointed or Messiah shall become great out

of Israel." It was probably in reference to this verse that, when in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian there arose a pretender to the title of Messiah, the Jews gave him the name of "Bar Cochbha," "the son of a star."

Amongst the ancients the star was the symbol of an illustrious king or ruler. Hengstenberg says, "A star is so natural an image and symbol of imperial greatness and splendour that it has been employed in this sense by almost every nation, and the fact that this figure is so natural may serve to explain the belief of the ancient world that the birth and accession of great kings was announced by the appearance of stars." In this connection we recall the words of the Magi at the birth of Christ. "We have seen His star in the east" (Matt. 2. 2). Zacharias also in his song of praise speaks of "the dayspring from on high" which was to give light to "them that sit in darkness" (Luke 1. 78-98).

The Lord Jesus also applies this title to Himself, for in Rev. 22. 16, He says, "I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and Morning Star." As the stars shine in the darkness of night so did He come as a light into this dark world. He speaks of Himself thus in John 8. 12, "I am the light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Thus was His first coming foretold in Isa. 9. 2, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light," while in Isa. 60, 1, repentant Israel is bidden "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." And in the holy city, the New Jerusalem, there will be no need of sun or moon, to shine in it, for the glory of God will lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof (Rev. 21. 23).

The sceptre here speaks of kingly rule and power, and reminds us of the prophecy of Gen. 49. 10. "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah . . . until Shiloh come." The ruler who should come out of Jacob was not David, but his greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ Who alone shall have dominion from sea to sea, and Who shall tread down the enemies of His people.

Moab and Edom were the nations more closely related to Israel, the Moabites being descended from Lot, and the Edomites from Esau, and both pursued Israel with relentless hatred. The prediction of Moab's destruction was partially fulfilled when David smote Moab and "the Moabites became David's servants and brought gifts" (2 Sam. 8. 2). Jer. 48 foretells a further destruction of Moab, and says, "Moab shall be destroyed from being a people" (verse 42), which has been literally fulfilled, but gives promise of a future restoration, "Yet will I bring again the captivity of Moab in the latter days, saith the Lord." From Isa. 16. 5. "Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab, be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler," it would appear that the land of Moab is to become a place of refuge to the Jews from the terrible persecution of the Antichrist. It may be that this is the reason for the restoration of Moab.

Edom was also conquered by David when "he put garrisons in Edom . . . and all they of Edom became David's servants" (2 Sam. 8. 14), thus fulfilling also the prediction of Gen. 25. 23, given before the birth of Esau and Jacob, that "the elder shall serve the younger." Amaziah the king of Judah also slew of Edom in the valley of salt ten thousand (2 Kings 14. 7). In both of these instances Edom became a possession for the Israelites. For Edom there is no

promise of future restoration, they are "the people against whom the Lord had indignation for ever," and the reason for this is their "perpetual hatred" of Israel (Ezek. 35. 5), and their rejoicing in his downfall (Obad. 10. 15). Isaiah 63. 1-6 gives us a vivid picture of the Lord as coming from Edom "with dyed garments from Bozrah" to execute judgment upon the enemies of His people. Obadiah 18 declares that "the house of Jacob shall be a fire . . . and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau, for the Lord hath spoken it," "and they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau" (Obad. 19).

In the remaining three parables Balaam deals with the surrounding nations and predicts their downfall. "And when he looked on Amalek, he took up his parable and said, Amalek was the first of the nations, but his latter end shall be that he perish for ever" (chap. 24. 20).

The Amalekites were descended from Amalek the grandson of Esau (Gen. 36. 12). They were the first nation to fight against Israel in their journey through the wilderness (Ex. 17. 8-16), coming upon them when they were faint and weary (Deut. 25. 17-19). God gave victory to the Israelites but commanded that the name of Amalek should be blotted out from under heaven. How truly was this prediction fulfilled! Saul was commanded to smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have (1 Sam. 15. 2), which command he only partially obeyed and so lost his kingdom. David also conquered bands of Amalekites on two occasions while he was dwelling at the court of Achish, king of Gath (1 Sam. 27. 8-9; 30. 1-20). And in the reign of Hezekiah, five hundred men of the tribe of

Simeon "smote the rest of the Amalekites that escaped" and dwelt in their stead. It is usually thought that Haman, the enemy of Mordecai, was an Amalekite as he is called the Agagite; but there is no proof of this, though it is possible that Agag was an Amalekite name and would thus show his origin, and account for his bitter hostility to the Jews. It would also show the certainty of God's judgment upon His people's foes, for Haman was hanged upon the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, and his ten sons perished in the destruction carried out by the Jews at Shushan.

The Kenites, whom Balaam next mentions, were apparently a branch of the Midianites who also were descendants of Abraham through Keturah (Gen. 25. 5). Moses had married the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and that particular tribe maintained friendly relations with Israel all through their history. In Judges 1. 16, we are told "that the children of the Kenites . . . went up out of the city of palm trees with the children of Judah into the wilderness of Judah which lieth on the south of Arad"; though later on, one of them, Heber, separated himself from the rest of the Kenites, and travelling northward pitched his tent at Kadesh (Judges 4. 11). It was his wife, Jael, who slew Sisera, the Canaanite general, and in Deborah's song of praise was pronounced "blessed above women." Balaam here predicts their future as being wasted until carried into captivity by Assyria. They probably shared the fate of the ten tribed kingdom of Israel, for in 1 Chron. 2. 55 we find mention of the Kenites amongst the names of those who returned from the captivity.

In his final parables Balaam foretells a time of

fearful judgment exclaiming, "Alas, who shall live when God doeth this." "And ships shall come from the coast of Chittim and shall afflict Asshur and shall afflict Eber, and he also shall perish for ever."

Chittim was the son of Javan, the grandson of Noah (Gen. 10. 2. 4), and according to Josephus his posterity settled in Cilicia, Macedonia, Cyprus and Italy. Chittim in Scripture is usually understood to be Cyprus. Balaam here foresees the destruction of the Assyrians by the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, and the final defeat of all "the sons of tumult" at the close of this dispensation. In reference to this passage Dr. Edersheim says, "This latter may be characterised as the most wonderful of prophecies. More than a thousand years before the event, not only the rising of the great world-wide empire of the west is here predicted, with its conquest of Asshur and Eber (i.e., the descendants of Eber) but far beyond this the final destruction of that world-wide 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 Antichrist. 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."

In this month's "Advent Witness," an interesting article on the "Last Great Pre-millennial War" alludes to this prophecy. The writer says, "The man whose eyes are open" perceived the things that were to happen amongst the nations of the earth right up to the very time that we seem now to border upon. . . . In this most remarkable prophecy, Asshur, or Assyria,

represents the Eastern power, and Chittim the Western. . . . At the time of the end the Western league will enter into conflict with the Eastern powers and will gain a certain success. This seems likely enough to any serious observer of the present political situation. As far as she can, Russia is stirring up the eastern peoples against the West. Quite possibly this may result in the actual fulfilment of verse 24, "ships shall come from the side of Chittim and shall afflict Asshur (the eastern powers), they will also afflict Eber (i.e., the land of Israel), but he (i.e., Chittim) also shall perish for ever."

How truly were Balaam's words, "cursed is he that curseth thee," fulfilled in his own history. He had sought to curse, and by his evil counsel to Balak had brought the judgment of God upon Israel, but the curse came upon himself, for in the war of vengeance against Midian which Israel undertook at God's command, he was slain with the princes of Moab (Num. 31.8; Josh. 13. 22).

Will they not be fulfilled also upon all the enemies of God's people? "For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted" (Isa. 60. 12).

Though now for a time cast off on account of their sins, Israel is still the people whom the Lord loves, and He takes account of any injury done to them, as He says in Zech. 2. 8, "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye." They are indeed "the people whom the Lord hath blessed," and if we too would share in His blessing we shall seek to bless His people, and shall, as He has commanded, "pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper that love thee" (Psa. 122. 6).