

THE HEATHEN ORACLES.

CONCLUDED FROM OUR LAST. (From "The Fall of Calicut," by the Rev. W. Adams, M.A.)

Mr. M. There is another no less remarkable instance of the moral teaching of Balaam, which forms part of his reply to Balak, as recorded by the prophet Micah:—"Where with shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah vi. 6.) I mention it, because it so closely resembles the warning of a prophet of God to a king of Israel.

Constance. I think I know the passage to which you refer. It was when Saul spared the cattle of the Amalekites, under the pretence of making an offering to God; and Samuel told him that to obey was better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.—(1 Sam. xv. 22.)

Mr. M. You are right, Constance; and there are many similar passages in the Psalms; for David, as well as Samuel, was able to look beyond the types and shadows of the ceremonial law. When, therefore, we find Balaam insisting on the same truths which were taught by these holy men, though they were at variance with his life, we have every reason to believe his assertion, that the words were not his own, but such as God put into his mouth.

Constance. And you think that in the same way God was the author of the moral teaching of the ancient Oracles?

Mr. M. I do, Constance; yet we must be careful not to press the parallel between them and Balaam too closely. The only instance in which he appears before us is in connexion with the history of the Jewish people. And certainly, on that occasion, he was gifted with a far higher degree of inspiration than we can imagine to have been vouchsafed to the priestess of Delphi. He was in his own words, one "which knew the knowledge of the Most High, which saw the vision of the Almighty falling into a trance, but having his eyes open," (Numbers xxiv. 16.) and seems to have been specially raised up by God, not only to declare the immediate result of the war which he was consulted, but to deliver a clear and distinct prediction concerning the future glory of the Israelites until the advent of Christ. Now, I have said that we cannot ascribe any such gift of prophecy to the ancient Oracles. They appear on the contrary, to have been self-appointed to the prophetic office, and on this account more nearly resembled the false prophets of the kingdom of Israel. Yet we know from Holy Scripture that even these received at times a partial inspiration from God.

Walter. Were there then false prophets among the Jews?

Mr. M. There were, Walter; and, as it would seem, at almost every period of their history. They were called false, not so much because their predictions were for the most part untrue, as because they were not prophets of the true God. Whenever the people fell into idolatry, they had recourse to such prophets as these to answer those questions which they were afraid to ask of the prophets of the Lord.

Edward. And were the false prophets ever really inspired? I had imagined they merely pretended to know the future for their own interest, and invented such predictions as would best please the people.

Mr. M. Sometimes, undoubtedly, they were left to themselves, as also were the ancient Oracles. But there were occasions on which God himself interfered and put such answers into their mouths as might bring punishment on those who consulted them. We know this from the following passage in the prophet Ezekiel:—"Thus saith the Lord God. . . . Every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up idols in his heart, and putteth the stumbling block of his iniquity before my face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by myself." And again, "If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet." (Ezekiel xiv. 6, 7, 9.) I think also you must remember an example in the history of the kings of Israel, by which this general declaration is in a remarkable manner confirmed.

Edward. You mean when Ahab was persuaded by false prophets to go up to Ramoth-Gilead, to make war with the king of Syria?

Mr. M. I do. The four hundred prophets whom he consulted all agreed in promising success to an expedition which was in reality to bring upon him defeat and death. But how do we know that this general agreement in an erroneous prediction was anything more than the result of accident?

Edward. Because Micah the prophet of the Lord, whom he afterwards sent for at the request of Jehoshaphat, told him that it was God who had put a lying spirit into their mouths.

Mr. M. The description which Micah gave of his vision is so full of mystery that it will be better to describe it in the exact words of Scripture. "I saw," he said, "the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? and one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him, Where with? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee." (1 Kings xxii. 19-23.) There is of course much in this vision which we cannot understand, owing to the indistinctness of our knowledge of the spiritual world; but we may at least gather from it that the false prophets were under the influence of a kind of inspiration which they delivered the prediction which brought destruction upon Ahab.

Edward. Yet, is it not a difficulty, in supposing God to have made men to believe what was untrue?

Mr. M. No; for there is nothing in it contrary to the general laws of his providence. God cannot indeed be the author of evil; but we know that evil as well as good is always overruled by Him to work out his just and righteous decrees, and we are expressly told in the New Testament, that He punishes the wicked by sending them a strong delusion, so that they believe a lie. (2 Thes. ii. 11.) Now there can be no difficulty in supposing this to be brought about at times through the direct agency of evil spirits, as well as by more ordinary means. If Ahab had not in the first instance fallen away from God, He could not have been deceived.

Edward. But was not Jehoshaphat, though he was a good king, deceived also?

Mr. M. Only so far as he was a sharer in the sin of Ahab; for we may observe that when, at his entreaty, Micah was sent for, the whole truth was plainly declared to him. It was his own fault that afterwards he persisted in the expedition, and preferred the promises of the four hundred false prophets to the warning of one whom he knew to be a prophet of the Lord.

Constance. Were the false prophets ever so inspired that they could deliver true predictions?

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Constance. You mean the witch of Endor?

Mr. M. I do. We are told that when Saul found himself cut off, by his sins, from that communion with God, which as an anointed king of Israel, he had once enjoyed, and no answer was vouchsafed to his prayers, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by the prophets, he at length went to a woman with a familiar spirit, and entreated her to divine for him.

Walter. What is meant by a familiar spirit?

Mr. M. A spirit which was to a certain extent obedient to her, and enabled her to discover the secrets of the unseen world. This is the same kind of inspiration that was claimed by the ancient Oracles, but which, as I have said, could not of itself have enabled them to foretell the future. But did not Saul in the present instance succeed in obtaining a true prediction from this unhallowed source?

Constance. He did; for the spirit of the holy Samuel appeared to him, and predicted his overthrow and death.

Mr. M. And yet the spirit of the holy Samuel could not have been recalled from the grave without the express sanction of God. We cannot therefore doubt that God controlled the enchantment of the woman, and gave the answer which he had before withheld. But he did so in order to punish Saul by inflicting on him the burden of a fore-knowledge of his fate. The whole passage affords a striking illustration of the warning afterwards given by Ezekiel, to which I have already alluded. The king had separated himself from the Lord, and then came to a prophetess to inquire concerning Him, and the Lord answered him by Himself.

Constance. But the answers of the ancient Oracles were not always such as to bring punishment on those who consulted them—were they, uncle?

Mr. M. No, Constance; and in this respect they differ materially from those of the false prophets.—But I think you will have no difficulty in assigning a reason for this difference.

Constance. It was, I suppose, because the Jews had a knowledge of the true God which was not vouchsafed to the heathen.

Mr. M. They not only had a knowledge of Him, but He raised up among them a succession of inspired teachers to reveal His will. They were therefore turning away from Him, and not seeking Him, when they applied for counsel to the false prophets. But there was no corresponding channel of inspiration in pagan lands. The heathen felt that, if God spoke openly to them at all, it must be by their Oracles; for they afforded their only medium of communication with the unseen world.

Constance. Then you think the heathen were right in consulting them?

Mr. M. I do, Constance, if they were led to do so from a true sense of their own dependence, or from a desire to obtain a public sanction to the dictates of conscience. But, as I said yesterday, they were wrong, if they consulted them from mere curiosity, or like Glaucus to seek an excuse for sin. And I think also, that the answers brought upon them a blessing or a burden according as they were actuated by the one motive or the other. But tell me whether you now understand the view that I have taken of the inspiration of the Oracles.

Constance. I believe that I do. You mean that the priests and priestesses, who gave the answers, had recourse to evil spirits; but that those spirits were at times directed and controlled by God, and forced to speak in accordance with His will.

Mr. M. Exactly so. I will now conclude the conversation with an illustration from the New Testament, which perhaps affords a more exact parallel than any I have yet given you, do you recollect the damsel, said to be possessed with a spirit of divination, who persisted in following St. Paul and his companions at Philippi?

Constance. Yes. She cried after them, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation." Acts xvi. 16.

Mr. M. She did this for many days. And yet the Greek word, which describes the nature of her possession, proves it to have been the same with that of the priestesses of Delphi; and also, like them, she must have usually exercised the art of divination for money, since in consequence of the evil spirit being driven out of her by St. Paul, we are told that her masters found that their hopes of gain were at an end. Now, was the declaration that she made under the influence of this spirit true or false, and likely to bring a blessing or a curse on those who believed it?

Constance. It was certainly true, and likely to bring a blessing.

Mr. M. It was so. And in all probability it actually did contribute to further the progress of the gospel; for, afterwards, when St. Paul and Silas were put into prison, and God interposed by an earthquake to deliver them, the first question that the jailor asked in his terror was, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" as though the words "which show unto us the way of salvation" had already exercised a secret influence on his mind. Yet these, undoubtedly, were the words of an evil spirit. This then may serve to throw light on the moral teaching of the ancient Oracles. We can have no difficulty in imagining that they were, however unwilling, obliged to proclaim their evidence in favour of the truths of natural religion, just as the damsel at Philippi bore witness to the divine commission of the apostles.

Walter. There is still one question that I wish to ask. Would it not be very wrong for Christians to apply to the Oracles for advice?

Mr. M. It would, Walter be far more wrong in us now than it was even in an anointed king of Israel; because God no longer reveals Himself to us from time to time by prophecy, as he did to the Jewish Church, but has put his Holy Spirit into the hearts of every one of us, and promised to answer us whenever we have recourse to him in prayer. We may rest assured that he will tell us much as it is for our real happiness to know; and it is most inexcusable in us to have recourse to any means for obtaining an insight into futurity which are unsanctioned by Him.—But the consulting Oracles is a temptation to which Christians have never been exposed. Their answers ceased with the Advent of Christ. And this circumstance confirms my belief that they had at one time some real connection with the spiritual world. If their predictions had been the result of mere human artifice, they would in all probability, have still continued to deliver them; for it must ever have been the interest of some party or other to keep up the same delusion. But if they were given by evil spirits, the case is now changed; for persons and places are not haunted by evil spirits in the same way that they were before the coming of Christ. The earth, as the dwelling-place of the Church, has now become holy ground; and it is for this reason that the voice of the Oracles are no longer heard.

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Mr. M. Only so far as he was a sharer in the sin of Ahab; for we may observe that when, at his entreaty, Micah was sent for, the whole truth was plainly declared to him. It was his own fault that afterwards he persisted in the expedition, and preferred the promises of the four hundred false prophets to the warning of one whom he knew to be a prophet of the Lord.

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Apartment with Board. MRS. I. B. STREET has taken the Brick House, No. 59 York Street, where she will be able to provide 6 or 8 gentlemen with comfortable rooms, and good board. She is permitted to refer to Mr. Clampton, at the Church Society's House. 531

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