

## Chapter 19

### Manna in the Desert; Murmuring; Balaam

THE NECESSITY for the miracles noticed in the last chapter will be admitted on the most common reflection. The insubordination of the Israelitish assembly could not have been terminated without them. The law could not have been established in their midst. The wilderness journey could not have been brought to the intended conclusion; God's purpose to plant His name in the earth through the divinely-directed military triumph of Israel over the Canaanites, and their national occupation of the land of Palestine, would have been completely frustrated if God Himself had not carefully guarded the execution of that purpose at its several vital points, in feeding the assembly from heaven, speaking to them audibly from Sinai, and exterminating the rebellion, root and branch, from their midst, by the overthrow of the company of Korah.

One or two remaining incidents will complete our survey of the wilderness incidents. We have already considered the manna, and the people's weariness with it. We look now at one result of their murmuring on this head, at a later stage in their history. They said "Our soul loatheth this light bread." Their murmuring was, perhaps, not unnatural. They had subsisted upon manna for many years: they were nearing the close of the forty years' wandering in the wilderness; they were approaching the confines of Edom: the way was rugged and sterile: there were no smiling cornfields, or inviting vale or wood. All was stern and desolate. Moses describes it as "that great and terrible wilderness, where-in were fiery serpents and scorpions and drought; where there was no water." No wonder we read that "the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way" ([Num. 21:4](#)). As little wonderful was it that they complained of the light monotonous diet on which they were fed. They were fed on such diet for a reason which we have already had to consider. The reason was good; but the process was irksome to flesh and blood, as all trial for divine ends is. They gave way under the trial. "They spake against God and against Moses;" they murmured at the manna diet. "And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died." This would be very wonderful, and very sad, if it stood alone; but that which came after takes away the sadness, while it increases the wonderfulness. The people, in the agonies of the serpent plague, realised the position, and they "came to Moses and said, *We have sinned*: for we have spoken against the Lord and against thee: pray unto the Lord that he take away the serpents from us." It was this that led to the exhibition of the visible hand of God in a more signal form than the serpents. "Yahweh said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass that *every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live*." Here was merciful kindness of the midst of the rigour. The rigour of the serpent visitation had brought them to their knees. It had broken the stout heart, and that waywardness which springs from that mere enjoyment of created things which leaves the Creator out of account. In this frame of mind, men are unthankful in the possession of privilege, and full of murmur and insubordination when trouble comes. Is it not so in our own day? Men, lovers of pleasure, more than lovers of God, are "unthankful, unholy."

What is the object of those dispensations of chastisement which have been meted out to the house of God from the beginning, even as now, but to teach them that God must be first in their eyes, and that in themselves, they are but permitted and dependent forms of life, to whom the only reasonable frame of mind is that of gratitude when mercies are allowed, and resignation when trouble is sent.

“And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole; and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass he lived.” Here was healing dispensed to the obedience that came from faith. If Moses had had no faith, he would not have made a thing in which a merely natural man would have said there was no use; if the children of Israel had had no faith, they would not have taken the trouble to come near the serpent-surmounted pole, in which there could be no virtue by any natural principle. They believed it would be as God had said, for no other reason than because He said it. Therefore they did what they did. Their faith brought forth works; and their obedient faith secured for them the healing blessing of Yahweh. It was a miracle—*i.e.*, an unusual work of God. There was no virtue in the brass of the serpent or in the shape into which the brass had been wrought. At a later stage of Israel’s history, when Israel worshipped the brazen serpent, under a mistaken idea of its power, Hezekiah, with the divine approbation, broke it in pieces, calling it “a piece of brass.” The healing performed on the looking Israelites was performed direct by God. The brazen serpent had nothing to do with it except as supplying the form of obedience appropriate to the case. The miracle was necessary for the spiritual object of making God visible to the congregation in His moral relations to them. Its nature is illustrated every time a cure of any kind takes place: for the only difference between a miraculous cure and a natural one is that the miraculous cure is effected by power directly applied, and therefore instantaneously operative, while a natural cure results from a slow rectification of the disturbed conditions through the working of the natural power that has been made a part of the organisation. Disease is a question of chemistry and physiological structure: both, when interfered with, can be affected more or less by appliances operating in conjunction with the *vis medicatrix* of the system; but they can be much more thoroughly and quickly affected when acted on by the underlying controlling power that holds all things in itself. Men easily believe in the natural because they see it: they with difficulty credit the miraculous because they have not seen. Intrinsically, there is no more difficulty in receiving the one than the other. A truly rational frame of mind will limit a man’s question to whether the thing has happened: not whether it can happen. The question of “can” takes a poor mortal out of his depth. But of course there are those of whom Solomon speaks: men of shallow mind, smart but superficial—wiser in their own conceits than ten men that can render a reason. He dismisses them with a graphic epithet “fools.” The race has by no means died out. Unhappily, the case stands the other way: the garden, for want of tillage, is overgrown with weeds, thriving and robust, and so accustomed to be let alone as to have imagined that they are the veritable crop for which the garden exists. Alas for them, but to the blessedness of the world, a remedy is at the door that will clear the ground of the noxious tangle, and establish the garden of the Lord, in all the glory of diversified colour and enchanting fragrance, filling the earth with gladness and praise.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” So said Jesus in the days of his flesh. This justifies the discernment of an analogy in the Mosaic incident, to things relating to ourselves in the gospel. The analogy is almost glaringly obvious in every feature. We have been bitten because of our sins. To Christ crucified we are asked to look for healing, the look in our case not being a literal act as with the Israelites, but the discernment

of what was accomplished in Christ, and the obedient submission thereto in the act of baptism. The healing is no more in the cross than it was in the literal serpent. It is no more in baptism than it was in the literal turning of Israelitish eyes. It comes from God. Yet as it came not to the Israelite who did not look at the uplifted serpent, so it comes not to us if we do not receive Christ, and put on his name in the way appointed. What God appoints for men to do as the form and occasion of their obedience, with a view to His blessing, is as indispensably vital for them to do as if the blessing came directly from the institutions themselves. Where this principle is recognised, there is an end to the foolish modern difficulty about the essentiality of the gospel and its requirements.

Before leaving the wilderness, it will be serviceable to glance for a moment at the second instance of the miraculous provision of water. The first occurred in Rephidim, shortly after the crossing of the Red Sea, before the congregation had met God at Sinai. The second was in Kadesh, long after that event, even after they had completed the circuit of camping stations enumerated in [Num. 33](#). In the first instance, Moses was commanded to strike the rock—([Ex. 17:6](#))—upon which the water came out in abundant supply. In the second, he was commanded to speak only to the rock, with the assurance that the rock so spoken to, would “give forth his water.” But in this case, Moses went beyond his instructions. He spoke to the rock truly; but he did more. “Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock; and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses *lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice*, and the water came out abundantly” ([Num. 20:10–11](#)). What was the motive in Moses thus exceeding his instructions, we are not informed. Possibly, he may have been influenced by the fact that he smote the rock on the first occasion by divine direction. It is evident from his words to the people that he acted under a state of irritation. At all events, the deviation from the directions given displeased Yahweh. It is the very next matter placed on record that “Yahweh spake to Moses and Aaron, Because *ye believed me not*, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them” ([Num. 20:12](#)). Unbelief, it seems, was at the bottom of the miscarriage—momentary unbelief—a feeling that it would not be sufficient to speak to the rock: that it was necessary to smite it. The effect of smiting instead of speaking to the rock was to divert attention from Yahweh’s participation in the act of providing the water, and this effect would be heightened by the words of Moses, “Must WE (Moses and Aaron) fetch you water out of this rock?” (This was drawing attention to Moses and Aaron: it was standing between God and the people instead of exhibiting and honouring God before them. It was a grave offence, as evidenced by the immediate abbreviation of the commission of Moses in punishment. As regards Aaron, the punishment was more prompt. At the very next stoppage of the assembly, after leaving Kadesh, Yahweh said, “Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, for he shall not enter into the land which I have given unto the children of Israel, because *ye rebelled against my word at the water of Meribah*. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up into Mount Hor, and strip Aaron of his garments and put them upon Eleazar, his son, and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people and shall die there. And Moses did as the Lord commanded, and they went up into Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there in the top of the mount; and Moses and Eleazar came down from the top of the mount” ([Num. 21:24, 29](#)).

This melancholy termination of Aaron’s career—(brought about what men would consider so slight a cause)—was the enforcement of a lesson much disregarded in our day. So also was the consequence following to Moses—in his case even more melancholy: for he, more than Aaron,

had been “faithful in all his house.” The consequence was similar, but did not come so quickly. It was some time afterwards, when the work of subjugation had actually begun, so far as the Amorites in Gilead and Bashan (to the east of Jordan) were concerned, not long before the crossing of the Jordan. Yahweh thus addressed Moses: “Get thee up unto this mount Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the children of Israel, and when thou hast seen it, thou also shalt be gathered unto thy people, as Aaron thy brother was gathered. For *ye rebelled against my commandment* in the desert of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify me at the water before their eyes” ([Num. 27:12](#)). Moses made no demur to this decree. His only anxiety was about the position in which the vacant leadership would leave the people. “Let Yahweh, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation who may go out before them; that the congregation of Yahweh be not as sheep which have no shepherd.” His anxiety on this point was allayed by the nomination of Joshua. His own desire to see the promised goodness in the land of Canaan revived, however, in the presence of the victorious events by which Bashan and Gilead had been placed in Israel’s hands. He made it the subject of petition, if peradventure the divine decree might be relaxed. So he informed Israel at the final rehearsal on the plains of Moab: “I besought Yahweh at that time, saying, O Lord God, Thou hast begun to show Thy servant Thy greatness, and Thy mighty hand ... I pray Thee, let me go over and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon. *But Yahweh was wroth with me for your sakes*, and WOULD NOT HEAR ME: and Yahweh said unto me, Let it suffice thee: speak no more unto Me of this matter” ([Deut. 3:23](#)). There is something unspeakably sad in this allusion to the matter. David puts it well in [Psalm 106:32](#): “It went ill with Moses for their sakes, because they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips.”

The lesson is one that is totally forgotten so far as the mass of mankind are concerned. It is this, that Yahweh is greatly to be held in reverence, and that His word—His commandment—His appointment—His will—is of fearful force; that it is not to be abridged or altered in any way to suit the fancies of men, but to be strictly upheld and implicitly obeyed with child-like docility and godly fear. The lesson has been several times inculcated in striking form. Nothing could exceed the opening incident of human history, in this respect. Adam, for one breach, was driven from Eden (and we in him) to exile and death. We are invited to approach Him in reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ, in whose bloodshedding his righteousness has been declared: but this does not mean there is any slackening of this first of all first principles. It is, rather, an illustration of it, that we cannot approach Yahweh except with the blood of His slain Lamb sprinkled upon our consciences in the belief and obedience of the truth. Men will find under the Gospel, as under all dispensations of His will, that God is a great King, and dreadful ([Mal. 1:14](#)), and that He will not be mocked ([Gal. 6:8](#)); that He will be sanctified in them that approach unto Him ([Lev. 10:3](#)). It is still a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God ([Heb. 10:31](#); [12:29](#)). Those who are not thus attuned to the fear of God will discover that there is no use for them in a kingdom where Yahweh’s glory is the highest aim and the brightest light.

Before leaving Moses, we may take a parting glimpse of the visible hand of God in the contemplation of the case of Balaam. This was in the nature of a side event after the conquest of the Amorites by Moses. Of this conquest we are told that “Moab saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites; and was sore afraid,” and that Balak, their King, “sent messengers, therefore, unto Balaam, the Son of Beor of Pethor ... saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me. Come now, therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people: for they are too mighty for me” ([Num. 22](#)). Balak sent this request by the hand of influential messengers, on whose arrival, God said to Balaam, “Thou shalt

not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people, for they are blessed.” Balaam, receiving this command, sent the messengers away, and they, returning to Balak, said: “Balaam refuseth to come with us.” Balak, not understanding the nature of the refusal, sent other messengers of higher rank, saying: “Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me, for I will promote thee unto very great honour.” Balaam, who ought to have dismissed these messengers at once, received them in the hope that God would alter His mind, and allow him to go. “And God came to Balaam at night, and said, If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them.” With all alacrity, in hope of the rewards Balak was prepared to bestow, and without any earnest concern for the purpose of God in the matter, Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his ass, and set off with his visitors to Balak. These communications were themselves instances of the visible hand of God, such as the present age is not permitted to experience: but it was on the journey that the most remarkable instance occurred. Though God had given Balaam permission to go (intending to turn the curse into a blessing), still, contemplating the unholy and avaricious haste with which Balaam pursued his journey, God’s anger was kindled, and “the angel of Yahweh stood in the way for an adversary, against him.” Balaam was not allowed to see the obstructing angel, but the beast on which he rode saw the brightness, and shied out of the path into the field by the side of the road. Balaam, incensed at this, “smote the ass, to turn her into the way.” The ass returned into the way and the angel moved on ahead to a place where the path went through vineyards between two walls. Here the angel stood, and, on the ass arriving at the spot she shied again, crushing Balaam’s foot against the wall. Balaam, angry at the animal’s unusual waywardness, beat the unoffending creature, and the angel went on further, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn right or left. Arriving there, the ass refused to proceed, and fell down under her avaricious master, who started belabouring the animal with a stick. Here the marvel occurred: Yahweh opened the mouth of the ass, and the animal spoke to her enraged owner. “What have I done unto thee that thou hast smitten me these three times?” Balaam replied that the creature had mocked him, and that if he had a sword, he would kill her. The ass enquired if she had ever been in the habit of so behaving in former times. When Balaam had answered in the negative, “Yahweh opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of Yahweh standing in the way.” He at once prostrated himself in the presence of the angel, who upbraided him with his violent treatment of the ass, informing him that he (the angel) had come out to with-stand him because of the perverseness of his way, and that if the ass had not stopped short in the way for which he had punished her, the angel would have killed Balaam. Balaam, abashed, pleaded his ignorance of the angel’s presence, and offered to return at once if his journey was displeasing. The angel told him to go on, but to speak only the words he should be instructed to speak.

Peter ([2 Epist. 2:15](#)) refers to this incident, speaking of Balaam as a lover of “the wages of unrighteousness,” who “was rebuked for his iniquity, the dumb ass, speaking with man’s Voice, forbidding the madness of the prophet.” It was a miracle—a wonderful miracle—but presenting no difficulty if miracle in any case be admitted. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” This was Yahweh’s own question to Sarah when she was incredulous at the promise of her having a son in her old age. It is a question that settles all difficulty connected with the case in question. Though it is beyond the ordinary action of ass-nature to speak, why should we conceive it impossible that the ass-mechanism should yield to the impulse of speech when the impulse was divinely upon it with that intent. A man must either take the position of a fool and say there is no God; or he must admit that anything is possible with God, and that therefore it was just as easy for Him to impart the gift of utterance temporarily to a four-footed creature, as to endow some other creatures with

it permanently who show no special aptitude for its wise use. Of course, the anatomical technicians would be ready with their difficulties. They would tell us of the construction of the larynx, and the impossibility of accommodating the ass throat to human sound. We need not stay to debate with their arrogant learnedness. Whatever modifications were necessary, it would be in the power of God to produce for the moment: and it would not be beyond His power to use an ass throat in the enunciation of human speech without any modification whatever. It is credibly testified that the ass spoke: and before this, all questions of improbability and mechanical difficulty must fly to the winds. The account is embedded in the Mosaic narrative, and the Mosaic narrative received the seal of Christ, and Christ rose from the dead. The adversary has to dig away the foundation before he can bring down the standing ground of that which is on the top of the building: and destroy the foundation, he cannot.

The incident was by no means unsuitable to the situation. Israel were on their victorious way in the execution of Yahweh's work: here was an intrigue on the part of the enemy against them: it was an interesting triumph of divine wisdom to turn it thus to the confusion of those who were concerned in it.

The position of Balaam has been a difficulty with many. He was evidently a believer in the true God, which surprises many in view of his character as a soothsayer. This need not occasion surprise when it is remembered that the true faith existed in the family of Noah. From that family, the faith of the true God would descend to some of those who came after, though it might be in a corrupt form. Traces of it are found in the case of Abimelech, king of Gerar ([Gen. 26:26–29](#)). Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God in the days of Abraham, is an illustration of it in its purity.

But Balaam was also a soothsayer ([Josh. 13:22](#)), a practiser of magical arts, so called, and a pretended reader of destiny. This profession is often referred to in the writings of the prophets, and always denounced as an imposture, and its practisers as false prophets, though some of them might sincerely imagine that the magnetic power which they possessed to influence those subject to them for good or evil (which all men possess in a greater or less degree) was a divine faculty conferring authority. Balaam had acquired a great reputation in this line of things among the Moabites and other idolatrous nations. Balak shows this in the remark, "I wot that whom thou blessest is blessed, and whom thou cursest is cursed." Balaam used his imaginary gift for gain. Avarice actuated him in his occupation: this is manifest from all the allusions to him. Though he believed in Yahweh as the only true God, he was not animated by the enlightened love and fear of Him, or inspired by a desire to do His will or bless his fellows. Self-enrichment by the exercise of a supposed divine gift was the peculiar feature of his case. Yahweh had nothing to do with Balaam's natural gift of soothsaying, except as He has to do with all natural power. It was merely the life-energy natural to Balaam's animal organisation, concentrated and applied in a particular way with results having a certain reality about them which fostered the illusion that he was divinely endowed. He might suppose that Yahweh, in whom he believed, had to do with it, and that he was the object of his favour and the depositary of his power. The same thing is exemplified in witches and spiritualists in our day, in another form. When, however, he (Balaam), was summoned to curse a nation who was under Yahweh's protection, Yahweh did speak to him by His angel, to deter him from the enterprise, and afterwards to turn the curse Balaam wished to imprecate for hire, into a blessing.

As for the "meeting of God," alluded to throughout the narrative, Balaam's retiring from Balak would be as when a man retires to pray. He would retire for privacy, and not that there was a particular place or spot where God was accessible. God is everywhere present, and can

manifest Himself anywhere; but the man receiving the manifestation naturally withdraws from contact with other objects of attention. Balaam would not be surprised at the manifestation, because, so far as his perceptions went, it would seem akin to what he was accustomed to. When a man of high electrical power throws himself into a trance for preternatural perceptions, he is subjectively in a state similar to that in which a man is thrown when the hand of God is really upon him by the Spirit. The difference lies in the impressions made upon him in that state. In natural trances there are no impressions beyond those that come from nature, which are as useless for real prophecy or any other spiritual purpose, as the perceptions of the faculties in their normal state. "In the spirit." God speaks to the man with a result very palpably different in the nature of the communications he receives. Balaam was in the hand of God, and felt he was powerless to direct his thoughts or speech in opposition to the afflatus upon him, but it would not strike him as an extraordinary thing, in view of his ordinary practice of divination, and in view of his belief in Yahweh.