THE INSANE KINGS OF THE BIBLE.*

BY D. R. BURRELL, M. D.,

Resident Physician, Brigham Hall, Canandaigua, N. Y.

The Bible reveals nothing more clearly than that man remains essentially the same from age to age. Were this not so, its great moral precepts would have been of only temporary application. The natural history of temptation and fall has not changed since the serpent commenced to beguile Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, showing that the picture by which we trace our resemblance to our first mother was taken before she fell, rather than after, as is usually taught. The alienist affirms that certain neuroses, particularly insanity, observed to-day, were prevalent in former ages as they are so clearly described in sacred and profane writings. He does not hold with his theological brother, who has not studied at the bed-side, or in the wards of an insane hospital, that the biblical instances of insanity are out of the common order because there appears to be about them a halo of the supernatural, and their assigned cause and purpose of a punitive character. He takes note of the significant fact that these instances of mental derangement did not appear to excite surprise, but rather fell in with the common experiences of daily life.

The Bible makes record of insanity, but only as manifested by great historical characters, or those who served to illustrate divine power; as in modern times the striking characters enter into history, while the common horde, vast in proportions, sinks out of sight, and is forgotten except statistically. The record is short, comprising, for the most part, certain of the Prophets who manifested some of the symptoms of insanity, the Demoniacs, and the Kings, Saul and Nebuchadnezzar.

The history of Saul, as recorded in the Bible, opens in a truly pastoral manner. He had been sent by his father, a powerful chief, in the company of a faithful servant, to seek for a drove of asses lost in the mountains. After hunting for several days, they

* Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Medico-Psychological Association held at Chicago, Ill., June 6-8, 1893.

endeavored to find a seer to obtain his oracle as to the fate of the animals. The seer proved to be Samuel the Prophet whom the people had long besought for a king to rule over them, and to deliver them from their numerous enemies, for "in those days there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes." Samuel made known to him his selection as king, but the youth, though submitting to the anointing with the consecrated oil, did not comprehend the full import of his words. While returning to his home, he met a company of Prophets descending a hill, playing upon musical instruments. Under the inspiration of their words and music, there appear to have been awakened within him higher thoughts of life and of himself than he had before conceived, and he experienced a change in character simulating, probably, what is now understood as conversion. Yet, later, when lots were cast for the selection of a king, and Saul was chosen, he was found concealed in the baggage of the camp, his bashfulness standing out in amusing contrast with his great physical proportions. His stature, from shoulders upward, towering above all the people, accorded with the popular idea of a king, and reconciled nearly all to his selection. He returned to his occupation, for he is next seen coming out of the fields at evening with the herds, when news is brought that his kinsmen beyond the Jordan are threatened by the Ammonites. Immediately his retiring disposition disappears, and is succeeded by the martial spirit that characterized his after life. Here his actual leadership and reign begin.

But as his reign advanced, and his power and authority increased, his unstable and undisciplined character became apparent. The Creator had not given him a sufficient amount of the spiritual to leaven his huge animal nature. True, while in the assemblies of the prophets, he entered into the "enjoyment of religion" in the most passionate manner, denuding himself, and lying upon the ground, for hours, in a state of trance. But when left to himself, he was more or less under the old heathenish superstitions of his youth. In his religious life he reminds one of those about us whose frequent conversions go to swell the statistics of revivals, as recurrent cases of insanity swelled the recovery rate in the earlier hospitals. After his victory over the Ammonites, he showed a noble trait of character in protecting those who had not acquiesced in his selection as king, and had spoken disparagingly of him, whose death his enthusiastic followers demanded. But later, without rea-

son, he destroyed those who were friendly to his people, and with whom Joshua had made a sacred covenant. Upon one of his campaigns, he rashly made a vow, to keep which necessitated putting to death his favorite son by whose valor victory had been secured. His more enlightened soldiers soon taught him that the age of Jephthah had passed away forever.

His intense anxiety to find a champion to successfully meet the giant of the Philistines, quickly changed to the bitter jealousy of a narrow mind as he heard the praises of the victor sung in loftier strains than were accorded to his own martial deeds. Under a narrow view of religion, he disobeyed the explicit commands of Samuel which he had accepted as commands from God, showing that it was not in his nature to be steadfast and obedient.

The knowledge that because of his disobedience the kingdom would be taken from his family and given to another, no doubt embittered him, and intensified his waywardness. The standard bearer of a new and better dispensation, he yet was unable to rise above the evil features of the old. So all through his history appears the same unstable equilibrium, the tendency to extremes, the rushing from the extreme of evil to good, and of good to evil. Possessed of such a nature, it is not surprising that some of the oscillations carried Saul over into the realm of actual insanity. What was at first simple depression, which yielded readily to the music of David, became more intense as the attacks were repeated, until merged into savage and homicidal insanity. It is not to be supposed that his insanity was constant, but it is evident that the attacks became longer as years advanced. He neglected the affairs of his kingdom for the mad pursuit of David, in the wilderness and on the mountains, and brutally slew those whom he suspected of having befriended the fugitive. A side light is thrown upon David in one of these pursuits, revealing him as the first recorded feigner of madness. Like the feigner and actor of to-day, he chose one of the coarser forms of insanity; "he scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard." Apparently he met with their usual success, for he disgusted the king of Gath, and so took his departure to the evident relief of his host whose distrusted loyalty had induced him "to play the madman" for safety.

The sudden revulsion of feeling that occurred twice when Saul discovered that his life had been spared by David, whose

life he was seeking, is hardly characteristic of one who is seeking to destroy an enemy of himself or of his country. He acknowledged his unreasonableness and sin, commended the faithfulness and loyalty of David, and for a short time appeared like his true self, manifesting the deep affection of those days when the music of the shepherd boy dispelled the "evil spirit." Though in his insane moments he pursued David, madly attempting to thwart the purpose of God, as had been revealed to him, that his kingdom would pass to another, yet when himself he appeared to be reconciled, having received the promise that "his seed should not be cut off after him."

His insanity was recognized, but, at a time when second causes were ignored, it was called "an evil spirit from the Lord." Judged in the light of the present, it was but the natural outcome of his character, a character made up of unstable elements easily and unfavorably affected by attending circumstances. In justice to him, it should be remembered that he was merely a herdsman's son upon whom was thrust royal dignity, authority and responsibility, without precedent to guide, for he was the "first King in Israel."

Jonathan and David evidently regarded him as irresponsible, for the one clung to him through all his misfortunes, and went down with him to the grave; while the other did not retaliate, but put himself beyond his reach. The misfortunes that attended Saul, and at length overwhelmed him and his house, undoubtedly resulted, in great measure, from his insanity.

It is stated that God ceased to reveal himself to Saul, as in the earlier part of his reign; and that when the aged king was in sore trouble, he called, but received no answer. May it not have been with him as with many to-day, even with those who have walked most closely with God, that he was unable, by reason of disease, to *apprehend* Him to whom he apparently appealed in vain?

The fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel consists of the account of the insanity of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. It purports to have been written after his recovery, and restoration to his throne. It takes the form of a proclamation "unto all people, nations and languages that dwell in all the earth," for the purpose of showing the signs and wonders that God had wrought towards him, and extolling and honoring the King of Heaven whom he acknowledged to be the Highest of all gods. The narrative begins,

“I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace: I saw a dream that made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me.” To the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers whom he summoned, he related the dream: “I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth. The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven: he cried aloud, and said thus—Hew down the tree, cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches: nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth: let his heart be changed from man’s, and let a beast’s heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him. This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men. The dream I king Nebuchadnezzar have seen.” The wise men having failed to interpret the dream, the king confidently called Daniel in whom he believed was the spirit of the holy gods. Having recovered from his astonishment, Daniel “answered and said, my lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine enemies.” . . . “It is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth.” . . . “This is the decree of the most High, which is come upon my lord the king: that they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after

thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule. Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity. All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. And the king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty? While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; the kingdom is departed from thee." He also heard the decree reaffirmed. "The same hour the thing was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws. And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored him that liveth forever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom from generation to generation. . . . At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honor and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me. Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase."

The statement that the king was at rest in his house, probably indicates that his reign was well advanced. His great generalship had brought his many campaigns to a successful termination, and had made him "the lord of the then known world from Greece to India." He was truly at rest and peace with many nations, for it could be said of them as with Tyre and Jerusalem, in the language of a later age, he had "made a desolation and called it peace." He was flourishing in that palace which was but one of the many evidences of his marvelous activity as a builder, a builder never equaled before or since.

The king states, "the visions of my head troubled me." The word translated "troubled," in the original conveys the idea of restlessness, insecurity, apprehension. May not this condition be the

same as that so frequently manifested as one of the earliest symptoms of approaching insanity, leading the patient to consult many physicians for an explanation and interpretation of his strange feelings, exciting even in him the fear that reason is about to give way? Perhaps the dream which followed was along the line of his apprehension. To Babylonian and Assyrian, the symbolism of much of the dream was perfectly natural, for the popular belief of a time or place may affect the dreams of the sane and insane. The tree was a familiar symbol indicative of regal exaltation, and its growth the increase of power and dominion. The watcher harmonized with the belief that every man had within him a tutelary genius who brought good or ill; that there were spirits of earth and heaven of all ranks; guardian spirits whose images beneath the threshold kept away evil; and spirits who executed the behests of greater spirits or gods. Probably the presence of the watcher or guardian did not trouble the king as did his decree. "Let his heart be changed," means, as the plural verb indicates, let the thoughts, the feelings of the heart be changed; in other words, let him undergo that *change* in which the insanity of an individual appears or consists.

It was natural that Daniel recognized the king in the symbol of the tree. To what extent the supernatural element entered into his interpretation, cannot be determined. Certain it is, he perceived in the king, or in his life, something that would lead to that change, or loss of reason. Indeed, it appears that what he observed was of such grave import that, even if his appeal was regarded, there would be only a lengthening of tranquillity, and not an avoidance of the final disaster. And yet, he was able to give a favorable prognosis, and to assure the king of his recovery. Occupying one of the highest official positions in the realm, and knowing the hold the king had upon his people, and the strength of the government, it was reasonable and easy for Daniel to give the further assurance that the kingdom would be sure unto Nebuchadnezzar. Every physician is often in much the same position as Daniel. He detects the premonitory symptoms of derangement; he urges the adoption of a certain course of treatment and of life; he gives warning of what may follow neglect. Too frequently he can only warn, then wait to be of service when calamity comes. He warns as did Daniel, though the latter expressed himself in accordance with the theological ætiology of his day.

It appears that the prediction of Daniel was realized, for at the end of twelve months the tranquillity was at an end, and active insanity was ushered in. Bearing in mind the early apprehension of the king, and the manifestations of the symptoms observed by Daniel, is it reasonable to suppose that in the full force of mental health he was in a moment transformed into a maniac? It is well to call to mind the fact of daily experience, that those unfamiliar with the insane date the commencement of insanity from some overt act, as violence, or even an attempt at suicide, not considering the steps leading up to the culmination through weeks and months, steps clearly revealed to the physician. The gradual change in the individual before insanity is acknowledged by the friends, frequently requires a hopeless prognosis.

Does not the boastful language, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?" reveal the exaltation frequently observed in incipient insanity? True, it is in harmony with his boastful language as appears in his inscriptions, but with the most unusual omission of a reference to Merodach, to whom he attributed his elevation and prosperity.

The king heard a voice from heaven repeating the decree he had received by dream and by interpretation. The insane hear many things which they claim and believe are told them by unseen individuals, or by God, and to them they give the most careful attention, and yield implicit obedience.

The cause of the insanity of Nebuchadnezzar is not given, but the purpose is stated in the words of the watcher. The usual teaching is that the insanity of the king was of the nature of punishment and abasement for cruelty, wickedness, pride, and his neglect to give God the glory for his exaltation and achievements. It therefore becomes necessary to consider his character to see if these charges are warranted. He lived in an age when human life was of little value except as it ministered to the purposes of kings and nobles. Cruelty, particularly to captives, was a habit. The cruelty of the king is instanced in his decree that the wise men and their people should be destroyed if they failed to make known to him a forgotten dream and its interpretation. But he was disgusted with their unwarranted pretensions and claims made when they did not expect to be brought to a test. Also, in the casting into the fiery furnace the three Hebrew

youths because they refused to worship the image of his god Merodach, or, if it was *his* image, as some hold, to worship the god through the image of the king whose glory was the gift of the god. But the king looked upon the youths as heretics; so certainly it is unbecoming in Christians, even of this day, to censure a far off heathen autocrat for so light a matter! The acts were cruel and unwarranted, but no more so than acts committed in the present generation with both the general and special sanction of representative Christians. He was proud of his achievements, and justly so, for they had indeed been wonderful; and like Eastern potentates he made record of them in boastful phrase. True, he did not give God the glory, but he was most particular to give *his* god the glory. Blended with his imperiousness, his violent temper impelling him to extreme measures, and his cruelty, were the most generous impulses, and a deeply religious spirit. A believer in the polytheism of his day, yet "no other Babylonian king is so markedly the votary of one god." Sir Henry Rawlinson says, "the inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar, are, for the most part, occupied with the praises of Merodach, and with prayers for the continuance of his favor. The king ascribes to him his elevation to his throne." "He speaks of Merodach accepting the devotion of his heart: and there is no reason to doubt that he speaks sincerely. He looks to his deities for blessings, beseeches them to sustain his life, to keep reverence for them in his heart,—and a record of his good deeds in their book." Another writer has said, "he was faithful to the orthodoxy of his day." Considering his position as an autocrat, his education, his environment, his reverence for Merodach, it is most remarkable that he so frankly acknowledged, by royal decree, and before his insanity, in regard to the God of the despised Hebrew captives, "there is no other God that can deliver after this sort." His catholicity is worthy of admiration and emulation to-day. His failure to heed the warning of Daniel is regarded by some as an evidence of hardness of heart. But multitudes of the most devout fail to heed warnings, and they secure the penalty attached to the breaking of physiological laws. He took the chances as it is ever man's nature to do.

There is no hint of domestic trouble acting as a cause. History states that his affection for his Midian wife induced him to erect the hanging gardens of Babylon to remind her of the hills of her native land. If prodigious activity, and the accomplishment

of great results, can break man down, it is reasonable to consider if overwork was not one element in causing the insanity of the king.

The treatment of Nebuchadnezzar is described in these words: "He was driven from men, he did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws." In the dream and the interpretation it was stated, "they shall drive thee," or, as the New Version expresses it, "thou shalt be driven." The verb in the original does not imply the force expressed in drive, but rather in move, or in lead forth. It may be well to question who shall drive, and who shall make to eat grass? What but his fancies would take him forth, his delusion that he was an animal? and what but a delusion could make him eat grass, or herbs as some translate the word? Where was he driven? Probably into one of the private royal parks in the palace enclosure, and connected directly with the palace itself, which were noted by Heroditus and other ancient travelers. While having thus the liberty of the "field," he was where he could be watched and protected. The long martial life of the king had accustomed him to exposure. Nudity in the East was not, and is not, an impropriety, and in that climate was no doubt a relief, as it often is now to the acutely insane who are irritated by the very touch of clothing. The insane king in his private park was less reckless of the sense of modesty than was naked David dancing before the Ark of the Lord upon its entrance into Jerusalem. He ate grass in imitation of the animal he claimed to be; in imitation only, as those now who think they are animals eat in imitation of those animals, but subsist upon the food of man. So those who assume to be historic, or even divine, characters retain their identity. The king never forgot, during the long period of mental confusion, that he was still Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. His hair and nails were unkempt, for who would dare to touch the sacred person of royalty against his will! and he probably objected because in that condition he more nearly resembled an animal. That sacred character of royalty still lingers in the East, and its disregard is followed by death.

In the statement of the treatment, nothing is said about mechanical restraint, though in the vision and the interpretation mention is made of a band of iron and brass. Scholars hold that

this expression is of the character of imagery, not indicating that the king was thus bound, but rather giving strength to the assurance that his kingdom would remain secure.

Those who regard the insanity of the king in the light of direct punishment for sin, speak as though he was neglected during his illness. This is an assumption, and not in harmony with the positive statement of scripture. He was an autocrat who held the life of every subject in his hand; his recovery had been assured by the wisest man in the realm; and his counsellors and his lords were ready to come unto him when ever he was ready to receive them. Who would have dared to neglect him, or to show him less respect than his rank demanded! In view of the sacredness of his person, his delusions, the climate and the private parks of Babylon, and the ideas as to nudity, his treatment was of the best. It was far better than that of George the Third, for he was restrained, pushed or knocked down, and housed in the most favorable weather.

It challenges our treatment of to-day, for it gave out-of-door life without stint, permitted the greatest activity, and employed neither mechanical, chemical, nor manual restraint.

There is uncertainty as to the duration of the attack, but it is usually believed to have been four or seven years. May not the word seven be used in this connection, as so frequently in the Bible, in the sense of sufficiency or completeness, as that the attack was, as we often say, "regular" or "complete," in accord with its natural history? But religious teachers have often conveyed the idea that the king was insane, was kept insane, until he had in some way relented, and acknowledged that the heavens ruled. This is absurd, for he could not "know" in any proper sense until improvement had far advanced, and he was nearly himself again. The lifting up of the eyes denoted the approach of understanding and of reason, and of that mental condition which would permit him to be "established in his kingdom."

Theologians have spoken of the king as abased and degraded, as bearing the stigma of disgrace. Unfortunately the same idea is occasionally attached to others in like affliction. True, they are "brought low," and they suggest the question so frequently asked, "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" But the alienist would indeed be "undevout" and "mad" should he use a word implying degradation and abasement in speaking of the eclipse of a once guiding mind.

Nothing could be truer to nature, and the daily manifestations of the insane, than the account of the recovery of the king; the coming out of chaos or self-absorption; the looking upon things about him and seeing them gradually assume their correct proportions; the return of understanding; the full return of reason; and then a heart overflowing with thankfulness, thankfulness that only those feel who have walked long in the valley of the shadow of death.

If we take this chapter from out the Sacred Canon, and study it with some knowledge of the far off past, and in the light of insanity as manifested to us to-day, we will discover that it is one of the most beautiful and concise descriptions of the premonition, the onset, the course, and the termination of a case of insanity that is recorded in any language.