

*John Wansbrough*

## *Let Not the Lord Speak*

“**W**E PRAYED FOR two nights and all of the day between. We had reached the end of our journey. At least we supposed we had, though we were not certain. And so we prayed. You can see for yourself the results. I have had to explain to so many who come here, traders like yourself, travellers and others who have heard and are merely curious. We are rather out of the way, don't you think? I know of course that you must pass near to us and that others will. It is, after all, the ancient silk route, and can as easily be used by car and truck, and for commodities more fashionable these days than silk. What indeed was the use of silk? It had, as you see, not much effect upon our community. But the machines you bring, and the pipeline which must one day dissect our narrow valley, may prove less ephemeral. It could even, in the end, change our way of life. Not so easy, however, as you might be tempted to think.

“Allow me, please, to describe the quality of resistance. You are, I know, longing to hear the story of our major attraction, but let me first describe our very peculiar landscape. From where we stand, atop the town hall, you see a bank of dull white sand, hardened to a slaggy crust. Easy going for vehicles like yours, but, let me assure you, hard on the feet. Beyond that is a ridge which, as you see, slopes away at a gentle angle, disappearing finally between two massive walls of light stone. At the top of that ridge lie rough cubes of basalt, erupted, it might seem, in the wake of some disorder in the remote viscera of the earth. Wait, I am coming to that. Of course I know why you are here, but do please observe the landscape. A drapery of black lava swirls its solid fold about the furthestmost of those cubes, washed away into a petrified infinity of shallow craters. See how the heat shimmers on the vitreous crust of sand. Gashed and whipped by brutal nature,

its surface evokes the turbulence of a choppy sea. Silhouettes of sandstone loom prognathously along the flanks of those two walls opposite.

“We call them birthmarks. Yes, in a moment I will explain why. But notice beyond the walls, through the narrow pass where they almost meet, how the sand flattens and diffuses softly into the horizon. There the crust is no longer solid, there among the fragments of basalt the loose sand lies waiting. Waiting for what, you ask? Indeed. Here we feel that it waits, not yet hardened, because this process, of which we are ourselves the material, is incomplete. Will it be? You mean, when will it be? That, I think, is a matter of prayer.

“Prayer, indeed that is our difficulty. We have prayed before, often, almost incessantly, and yet you can see for yourself what it has brought us. Now, if we were absolutely certain what we do when we pray, we should continue and thus permit completion of the process. Of what process, you ask? Even of that we are not certain, but surely you can understand why we might, just at this point, pause to take our bearings. You can? It could be fear, though we have never been a fearful people. To that our entire history is witness. Consider the expulsion and the flood, the bursting of the dam and the trek through the wilderness, the wars and the several destructions of our sanctuary, the siege and the long captivity. All that we survived. We had help, you say? Of course we had help: we prayed. And that is why we continue to pray, even when the answer is difficult to understand, awkward to accept. Tell me, do you pray? Perhaps you could show us how you go about it. It seems clear that something went wrong with our method. But let me continue: I know that you are anxious to be on your way.

“To begin with, we asked in our prayers for

a sign. What sort of sign? About that we had not agreed, but I thought at the time that it should be simply a sign of recognition. You know, something to assure us that we had reached our goal, that we had made the right move. But somehow things got out of hand, and we began to pray for more than that. We became demanding, insistent. I have no doubt now that it was a grave error, but after an arduous trek such as ours had been we expected some tangible reward, an explicit acknowledgement of our effort. It was all too easy then to suppose that a promise had been made, a contract agreed, and that we had now a moral, even legal, claim to recognition. To withhold the sign would be to break the promise. It is difficult to say where that kind of reasoning will stop. Does it ever stop? You think not. Well, I am inclined now to agree. Should it stop? You do not see why. There I would dissent. I suspect one ought, as they say, to let well alone. When is that? Precisely, my friend, but let me return to the story. We did ask for a sign. It seemed to us a simple enough request. What was it? I am coming to that. As you have perhaps heard, we were wanderers, required no more than pasture for our cattle and the chance to buy dates and cereals as we needed. There had always been people ready to provide these, more inclined than ourselves to the sedentary life. For our part, we elected to stay on the move. But we needed land for that, an area in which to circulate, to permit one grazing ground to grow rich while we used another, and so on, a kind of eternal rotation within our allotted sphere. It was, indeed, the vision of an undisputed allotment which got us this far, in fact to this very place. And it is here that betrayal of our heritage began. How? Let me try to explain.

“**W** E SOUGHT A TOKEN of acknowledgement, and so we prayed. And our prayer was answered. That mountain, of which you see only the peculiar ridge I indicated a moment ago, is the proof. It took some time: our petition was repeated for days, weeks, the reply was months in coming. You see, we asked for a mare in foal. Not so strange a request, really. We have for so long depended upon our camels, for meat and for

milk as well as for transport, that it seemed to us quite in order to ask for one which could satisfy our needs for some time, vast and fruitful, with no duty beyond the modest one of bolstering our confidence and serving our prosperity. Not quite so modest, you say? Well, to continue, that mountain began to rumble and to quake, like the volcanoes in the north. But rather than fire and molten rock, there was, as you see, some of that too, there appeared the enormous camel which we had invoked. An extraordinary beast, if you can imagine one whose udders were the height of a man from the ground, whose legs were as thick as mature palms, and whose hump was a mountain peak. And her mouth, her mouth was prodigious, but not quite a blessing, as we were soon to discover. She seemed docile enough and required neither to be hobbled nor tethered.

“And thus we waited for some months, gaping in awe, until she bore her calf. On holidays families would pack lunches and go to one of the dunes outside our encampment, just to sit and stare at her. Others did the same even on workdays, but that had of course to be discouraged. For there are jobs to be done during the week, such as mending saddles and tents, crushing and mixing grain, churning our milk for butter and cheese. So we waited, and at the end of her time, with considerable noise and effort, she was at last delivered. Now, as you may know, we usually tie up all but one udder for the calf. It was almost unbelievable. Her milk sufficed for the entire community. We had no need to call upon the other cattle, long since strained from too heavy a demand. Our new fortune was, however, not without blemish. The mare, even quietly grazing out there in the plain, frightened the others, who began to scatter, quite unlike our habitually complacent herds. That presented a problem, since parties had daily to be sent out after them, lest they wander too far and become, according to the law of the desert, another's property. But, as it happened, this was the very least of our worries. At intervals of three or four days the great mare drained every well on our land. You can imagine what that meant to us, since we need water as well as milk, for ourselves and for the other cattle. By an ingenious tapping of the beast's stomach we managed to repossess a good deal, and found we had in that way created a kind of portable

oasis. Convenient indeed for travelling. But, and here is the most significant feature of this extraordinary affair, it was no longer necessary. We still needed the water, of course. What I mean is its portability. For with the birth of the mare we took heart. It seemed to us that our petition had been heard, that we must at last have reached our destination.

“**O**F THAT THERE could hardly be any doubt, and I am bound to say that morale improved. We were eager now to prove our worth, to accept the challenge, to show that we had understood. All about we discovered an abundance of this porous stone upon which we are standing, not merely in blocks but also extending well below the earth’s surface. Now, though sober and industrious, we have never applied ourselves to making a permanent home. It is change of scene and freedom of movement we have prized most, though some would call us restless and idle. Perhaps you would? Well, let us agree to differ. It is, after all, only a matter of opinion, and I for one am a little dubious about the advantages of fixed domicile. But we were overtaken by events, or at least by our own interpretation of them. Observing everywhere this plentiful and workable material, we set aside, indeed nearly forgot, our tradition and began to dig. And by that I do not mean a leisurely scraping of the soil. No, not at all. We attacked it with great enthusiasm and some ingenuity. We dug and loaded and carried for years until, well, you can see for yourself the result. We built this city, hewn and terraced directly out of the rock. Impressive, you must admit. See how thick and strong these walls are, how sturdy the foundations, indeed, part of the earth itself. And observe, if you please, the security of our streets, and the enormous gates which permit the only entry through those ramparts. Substantial, you think? Almost eternal, I should say. And that, perhaps, is our very problem. Do notice how the city is laid out in quarters according to trades and professions. And the distinctive character of the residential quarter. Yes, we have taken to domestic life with fervour. Once hardly distinguishable from one another, we are divided now into groups and factions. There, on the right, you see the

smiths’ quarter, and beyond that the merchants, then the several professions, ending just below us with the jurists. You have not forgotten, I trust, that we are standing on the parapet of the town hall? It is here that we gather for news and municipal decisions, and for the ceremonies of which we have always been so fond. It is, indeed, here that we congregate for prayer, directly above the site of our first prayer. Auspicious perhaps, but ominous as well, I sometimes think.

“Yes, we continue to pray. Gratitude? Unfortunately not. More like bewilderment. Our evolution is not yet complete, you see, and we need guidance. Why incomplete? It may seem to you that we have achieved all we set out to, but we are not all that confident. You do not understand? Perhaps I can explain.

“Until a few days ago most of us were sceptical. A good healthy scepticism, mind you. None of your pusillanimous scruples for us. We were grateful for what we had been given, and proud of what we had ourselves accomplished. But, we asked, where do we go from here? We did not really know just what to make of our recent good fortune. Why do anything at all? Well, it was not so easy as that. Perhaps you have noticed, or rather, not noticed our great mare? Quite right, for you see, she is no longer here. We must, of course, forgo the portable oasis, but the wells at least are full and we want not for water. What happened to her? As I have said, most of us were sceptical. That might suggest that there were some in the opposite camp. Indeed there were, though they too, by their very expression of certitude, have now been compelled to admit that the majority was right. Not because it was a majority. It simply turned out that way. We decided, here in this building, our town hall and place of public worship, that we should gather again for prayer. But the recalcitrants, they were quite open, even vociferous, announced that further prayer was nonsense. What was wanted, they declared, was action. And action they provided.

“**T**HEY HAD GROWN WEARY of the mare, and they had reason. For, while supplying ample water, admittedly brackish but we are used to that, she continued to frighten away our other cattle, so persistently

in fact, that we had lost several hundreds to the unfriendly tribes around us. The herds were diminishing markedly, and we depend upon them for meat and for milk, the bulk of our diet. In their wish to avert the foreseeable disaster, this arrogantly assertive body took it upon themselves to kill the beast. We begged them not to. We convoked an assembly. We even went so far as to establish a twenty-four hour watch round her enormous shaggy bulk. But certitude has a way of expressing itself, even under the most adverse conditions. One morning we found the mare dead. The calamity was broadcast, and each of us came down to this portal to confirm it for himself. There was no doubt about it. She was quite dead, pierced in a hundred places with long, specially prepared arrows. Some, you see, were no amateurs when it came to certitude. They knew what they were about. Sad as the rest of us were, we were also determined to make the best of it, to salvage at least what meat we could and whatever milk there might be.

"Her calf was by that time weaned. What became of the calf? Patience, please, I am coming to that. Now, as we turned back to our shops for containers and cutting tools, we were stopped in our tracks by a deep rumbling of the earth, very similar to what we had known at the birth of our miracle. I am sure you have guessed, but do let me continue. Rushing to where she lay, we were in time to see the last of her sink back into the soil whence she came. A just conclusion? In the throes of death as in the throes of birth. The sand rolled over her, but without sealing completely into the hard crust which covers most of our region. Perhaps you will recall my pointing out that loose sand when I began my tale, not yet hardened, I supposed, because this curious process was incomplete. Well, our miscreants were apprehended and publicly dressed down. A light sentence, you think? What else could be done? There seemed little point in sentencing them to death, or even to prison. Their deed was accomplished, and destroying them could hardly restore the mare. You see, our destiny has always been collective, never more so than now, and it is assumed that whatever becomes of us will also affect them. Should that be punishment, they too will be punished. Should it be reward, we may even become convinced that it is the direct consequence of their deed. You can guess how humiliating it would

be to have punished them for what ultimately accrues to our benefit. Do you agree?

"And so we pray. As yet nothing has happened. Why do we continue? Well, you see, there is the calf. I trust you have not forgotten the calf? No, not below us, it's the low rumbling in the distance, like thunder. That is our calf. He will soon be as large as his mother. You heard it on the way? That was in fact what brought you to us? Nothing more than curiosity, then. Of course you know that the new highway circumvents our town quite comfortably. You need not have come at all. Everyone comes for the same reason, at least everyone I have met. Perhaps you had heard of our calf before you started? Then I must apologise for his being out to pasture just now. You may cross that ridge if you wish. He ought to be just the other side, no more than a two or three mile trek. But take care with your vehicles in that loose sand. Perhaps you will not try after all? Very well. Listen. There is the horn now, summoning to prayer. No, there is no hurry. We have a quarter of an hour to assemble.

"**A**PITY THAT you will not see our calf. The golden calf? Not quite, more like the sword of Damocles. Water and pasture vanish at a frightening rate. And he is beginning to menace the other cattle. One day perhaps he will wander off, though he has so far shown an alarming tendency to stay at home. Could we kill him? Hardly, the sacrilege of his dam's slaughter is still fresh. It has indeed been proposed by some, but it is the almost unanimous opinion of our community that we have sufficient blood now on our hands. Hence we pray, though prayer has not always prevented the rash act.

"See, they are beginning now to assemble, below us, just outside the entrance. The priest is not yet there. They cannot start without him, nor even without me. The decision must be unanimous. If we elect to kill the calf, we run the risk of another crime, an escalation of the first. For have we, after all, a right to destroy what we so ardently sought? It is not merely the sign, but the promise which is now in jeopardy, the very promise upon which we were ourselves so insistent. If, on the other hand, we preserve the calf, there is the growing

problem of water and forage, as well as the other cattle. Could we seek new pasture, as before? Think, my friend, of our magnificent city. It was at this spot that our destiny was fixed, here that the covenant was given. And consider what we have accomplished. Comfort, security, a bond with our land, all this despite the terrible crime. Alas, further wandering is out of the question. And are we not praying for guidance?

“The calf is the problem. So long as he is with us, the merchants and explorers, even the tourists, will prefer the ancient silk route. They

will no longer take advantage of the new road round the city. Willingly, eagerly they will leave it in order to see our calf. After all, he can be heard from almost everywhere. Have you not said so yourself? And some there are, you have conceded, who undertake their journeys with no other purpose. But consider the effect. Think of our city and our land, and the as yet unsullied water of our springs. Could we indeed survive? There is the priest now, I must hurry down to prayer. I do hope you will excuse me. It may well be, with just a little luck, that this time there is no answer.”

### Unrecorded Speech

She says “How was you?” Kissing. “Come on in, I’m all of a muck-sweat, having a merry-go-round; you’ve caught me doing my work.”

She doesn’t clean, but circumvents the dirt.

Chairs stand on tables—“All of a tizz-wozz.”

Has that been spelt before? “A lick of paint”, she says, propping her brush in turps,

“freshens things up a bit.” She paints the door and skirting boards; washes white window-veils.

Houses, bedsitters, flats, extend herself.

She makes the best of it, but likes a move;

it’s like a change of dress, changing address.

I’ve lost count of the changes. “Home at last” is said too often to be credible.

We’ll write it on her tomb, or jar of ash, unless she sees us out.

She says “The poor old lady” of someone no older than herself.

“She’s gone a bit—you know dear—gone a bit doo-lally. Poor old thing. It takes all sorts—”

From childhood she remembers sparkling frost, and walking out in it in Christmas clothes—

a coat her mother made her—vivid mauve—“so bright against the snow.”

“And of a Friday afternoon the teacher read to us. That was the best.”

Stories have been essential food since then. *Peg’s Paper*, H. E. Bates, Hardy and all

except romances; “that don’t interest me.”

She fills her days “somehow”, since Hubby died, but she has grown since then.

“All in a lifetime, dear”, she says of death.

Her words may be dead language soon; that’s why I write them down. They will be heard

“never no more”, as she said at the birth of my husband, her only child,

proving that double negatives mean “No.”

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