

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

'THE problem of human sin is no longer regarded by the more practical type of humanity as something aloof and objective. Evil has descended upon us like an avalanche in its most horrible form; and those who might once have regarded "evil" as an almost academic term now realize that it is something deep-seated in the human mind and heart—that can victimize whole nations and threaten civilization with destruction.'

These words appear on the publishers' 'jacket' to the most recent volume, as we suppose, of 'The Christian Challenge Series' (Centenary Press; 3s. 6d. net). The volume is entitled *The Mastery of Evil*, and the author is Canon Roger LLOYD of Winchester.

The words we have quoted are largely true. None the less it should be remembered that since the beginning the Christian religion has presented an attitude to evil which is by no means merely 'objective' or 'academic.' No doubt the problem of evil early won the attention of Christian theologians; and Christian theology offers a classical solution not only of the problem of universal-sin but also of the problem of sin's origin. But already in the New Testament pages evil is regarded from a practical rather than theoretical standpoint. It is not so much a problem to be solved as a challenge to be met. In the Christian life the 'world' is to be 'overcome.'

Canon LLOYD appreciates this point; and indeed *The Mastery of Evil* is a happy title for a work which sounds so truly the note of the Christian religion. It is the modern counterpart of what the

New Testament might have called 'the overcoming of the world.' It is a reminder that all down the centuries the Christian life, when truly lived, has been a challenge, a battle-cry, nay a victory.

In this vigorous little book Canon LLOYD is nothing if not topical, and Nihilism—for which he affirms that Hitler and Stalin stand—is handled with knowledge and insight. He insists that the Nihilistic denial of Truth leads to the undoing of the work of Christ both for society and for man.

The most distinctive chapters of the work are ruled by the conception of tragedy. In the first of them—they are three in number—he points out that, in their perplexity with life, many are driven back upon tragedy as an interpreting principle. As they can find no cosmic meaning in life, they look hopefully for an ethical meaning.

But, while tragedy interprets the purpose of life as the purging of the evil (but at what an enormous cost!), its God is destiny and its religion fatalism. Hamlet was not really free 'to be or not to be.'

In the second of the three chapters under review the tragic drama of to-day is represented as the conflict between democracy and totalitarianism, and for the last named—as for tragedy—the only religion is fatalism. And here also fatalism, under the guise of historical destiny, is as much an explosive as an anodyne.

But if history has any meaning at all, destiny is the perfected civilization, and is not properly thought of—in the totalitarian fashion—as affecting

the smaller groups of mankind, such as classes or nations. 'It is nonsense to take history and build upon it a case which produces a destiny for Germany, Italy, Japan, or Russia, and which can only propose for other nations and classes within the same group the task of a slavish subservience to them.'

Further, from the Christian point of view destiny is real, but it is bound up with the action of God. Only in the gospel of Jesus Christ can the moralist stand on firm ground. For 'his problem is so to face the facts of evil as to wring from them a reasoned hope and a sure faith in the victory of good and in the power of man to escape from his prison of circumstance.'

Which brings us to the last of our three chapters, in which the conception of tragedy is set in the light of the Christian gospel. The gospel story is itself a tragedy, but the difference between it and Shakespearian tragedy is that the evil is not visibly, although it is spiritually, destroyed within the action of the drama. Moreover, the story of Jesus Christ is a tragedy with fate left out, and God inserted in its place; which makes tragedy tolerable. Accepting the tragic interpretation of life, the gospel rejects the 'brooding fatalism' of tragedy.

For the elaboration of these and other points we must refer the reader to Canon LLOYD'S thoughtful and timely pages.

An acute, scholarly, and practical book on the Gospel miracles has been written by the Rev. Alan RICHARDSON, B.D., the study secretary of the Student Christian Movement, and examining chaplain to the Bishops of Newcastle and Sheffield—*The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (S.C.M.; 6s. net). The claim of the jacket that the writer makes here 'a fresh approach' to the question of the miracles may not be entirely valid, but at any rate his book is both individual and suggestive, and makes a particular appeal to the working clergyman.

The main idea in the book is that the significance of the Gospel miracles lies in their *meaning*. They

contain the theology of the Early Church and were the means of the instruction of converts in the truth of it. The miracle-stories 'formed a characteristic part of the pedagogic technique of the earliest Christian missionaries.' They have a definite place in the total theological scheme of the New Testament. Mr. RICHARDSON contends that the problem of the miraculous cannot be solved, as the Ritschlian movement tried to solve it, by a purely historical inquiry, because they cannot be detached from their theological background and purpose. The time has come, the writer believes, to make a fresh effort to view the miracle-stories in relation to the purpose of the New Testament writings as a whole, and of the Gospels in particular.

They are not 'wonder' stories. They were not told for their evidential value (which, indeed, is a purely modern idea). Neither were they told to illustrate the compassion of Jesus. The Evangelists are not interested in the motives of Jesus, about which they maintain a consistent and reverent silence. They lived in an age unaffected by the humanistic approach and the modern humanitarian attitude. In that age humanitarian emotion was counted as a weakness rather than as a virtue.

Nor can the Gospel miracles be regarded as examples of faith-healing. The modern use of the word 'faith' in the psychological sense has little in common with the faith of which the Gospel-writers speak; that is, a saving, personal, believing relationship with Christ. The modern mind which professes to find belief in the healing work of Jesus easier on account of the successes of modern psychotherapy is still a long way removed from the New Testament faith in Christ the Saviour.

It must be grasped clearly that the object of the miracle-stories is to awaken faith in the Person of Christ as the Word of God. His miracles were signs to those who had eyes to see. The prerequisite for understanding was that one's eyes should be opened to the central mystery of the gospel. There they could be perceived as the revelation of the

power of God. The interest of the stories centres in their theological rather than in their historical character. They are neither the 'reminiscences' of eye-witnesses, nor 'tales' told by an order of story-tellers, as Form Critics suggest. Their motive is neither biographical nor literary; they are the materials used by Christian preachers in their presentation of the gospel.

The *raison d'être*, therefore, of the miracle-stories was *teaching*, and teaching about Jesus. Mr. RICHARDSON deals with this point at great length and with many examples. Jesus confronted men and women with the challenge which was involved in His acts of power. It was not merely that He compelled men to acknowledge that He had the power to make lame men walk. He asked them by the same token to believe that He had authority to forgive sins. He not merely opened the eyes of blind men, but claimed by that sign the power to make men see the truth of God. He not merely healed the lepers, the diseased, and the impotent, but demonstrated thereby His ability to break the power of sin and to enable men to fulfil the works of the Law. He not merely fed hungry men in the desert, but claimed by that sign to be the dispenser of the spiritual food by which souls are nourished in their pilgrimage. And, finally, He not merely raised a child or a man from the dead, but claimed by doing so to be the resurrection and the life.

It is only after a prolonged exposition of this main theme that Mr. RICHARDSON faces the question: Did the miracles really happen? In modern times this has been thought to be a question of historical evidence and metaphysical possibility. The writer takes a different view. To begin with, he points out that history, in the sense of historical writing, is not merely a chronicle of events. It is a matter of selection and interpretation of facts. And that is what we have in the Gospels. The Evangelists are not chroniclers. They have not attempted to catalogue all that Jesus said and did. They are content to give us those facts which seem to them to be essential to the understanding of who Jesus is.

They are historians who have selected their facts and given to these their interpretation, with the result that, if we do not accept their interpretation, we become sceptical about the very possibility of knowledge of the facts themselves. Fact and interpretation are indissoluble. The history which the Evangelists write is their gospel. If we accept their gospel, we accept the history which they record. If we reject that gospel, we shall inevitably reject the view that Jesus performed miracles, or we shall seek to explain them away by means of the hypothesis of faith-healing or other modern theories equally removed from the standpoint of the Biblical theology.

Christ is to the New Testament writers the manifestation of the power of God in the world, and His mighty deeds are the signs of the effectual working of that power. It is possible for us to fail to see this in Christ; then we shall be content with an explanation of the miracle-stories in terms of modern psychology or folk-mythology. The miracle-stories, as an essential part of the preaching of Apostolic Christianity, confront us with the question whether the power of God was or was not revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. They compel us to say Yes or No.

That is why any discussion of the Gospel miracles must begin, as this book begins, with a consideration of the Biblical theology, with the faith which illuminates their character and purpose. And thus the answer to the question: Did the miracles happen? is always a *personal* answer. It is not the judgment of a historian *qua* scientific investigator. It is the 'yes' of faith to the challenge which confronts us in the New Testament presentation of Christ—the only Christ we can know. When we say 'yes' to the question about Christ we are assenting to the Apostolic claim that in Him the power of God was made manifest for our salvation.

But the writer retains one proviso. The 'yes' he asks does not mean that each recorded miracle-story is to be accepted 'by faith' on its face value: Our critical and historical faculties have their rights, and we must exercise them in respect of

the detail of each particular miracle-story. Our knowledge of Christ's individual acts of power has been mediated to us by a long process of the passing of the tradition from mouth to mouth before it came to be written down. In this process we can trace the motives guiding the tradition in this or that direction, but we are sure that we are in close touch with the living faith of the men who first loved to tell the story. And we can be sure, in spite of uncertainty about details, that the power of God was manifest to those who witnessed the act of the Lord. Thus we can affirm both the value and the limits of the historical criticism of the Gospels.

But, whatever that value and these limits may be, the first necessity is to penetrate the incognito of Jesus and to see behind the Jesus of Galilee the Christ of the New Testament faith. Then the miracle-stories speak to us of the gracious dealings of Christ with our sick and hungry and tormented souls, and the ancient power of Christ which they reveal is found by faith to be available still to those who but touch the hem of His garment.

An excellent little handbook has been published with the apt title of *The Ten Commandments in the 20th Century*, by Mr. JOHN DREWETT (S.P.C.K.; 1s. 6d. net). The Commandments are treated in a fresh and interesting way, being grouped under the headings of Worship, Family Relationships, Property, the Sanctity of Human Life, and Truth and Falsehood. The writer's view is that 'the Ten Commandments are again likely to become relevant to our situation because the whole world movement to-day is away from individualism towards community. The choice before us is a community based on force and external human authority—i.e. a secular totalitarian state such as exists in Germany and Russia—or a community based on respect for personality and held together by the authority of divine law.'

In a suggestive introductory chapter Mr. DREWETT deals with the question, 'Are the Commandments obsolete?' and offers three reasons why they seem

to have fallen into disrepute in this twentieth century. The first reason is that in our time 'the emphasis has shifted from a negative attitude to human behaviour to a positive,' whereas the Commandments are almost exclusively negative. The second reason is 'the breakdown in the belief in an objective moral law. . . . This means that law becomes a matter of convenience and has no universal reality.' There is also a third reason which arises from the feeling prevalent among Christians of to-day that 'the teaching of Jesus goes so far beyond the law of Moses that the Law is no longer binding upon Christians. . . . The law of love, they say, is positive and is a creative force. If we really love our neighbour, we shall automatically keep all the Commandments.'

These reasons certainly have weight, and although they are here treated very briefly and are barely touched upon, they suggest matter of the greatest moral import. There would seem to be in our time an urgent duty to revive the concept of moral law and to strengthen respect for it.

It is true that the universal validity of the moral law is widely called in question, and any idea that its authority is rooted in the will of God is far removed from the popular mind. This breakdown of the belief in an objective moral law is surprising in view of the very great emphasis placed upon natural law. It might have been supposed that the modern mind, trained to regard the world as an orderly whole, would have insisted that law must reign in the moral realm as well as in the natural.

This would doubtless have been so if man were a purely rational being, but in fact, as all experience shows, he is oftener influenced by his passions and desires than by his reason. And one of his strongest passions is a passion for dominance or a 'will to power.' He is ardently ambitious to rule rather than to serve, to command rather than to obey. As soon as he awoke to consciousness of his powers he heard the tempter's voice saying, 'Ye shall be as gods,' and straightway he revolted against God to set up a kingdom of his own. Ever since then man has been, and still is, in a state of revolt.

Any psychology which ignores the fact that man is in revolt is vitiated from the start. And this criticism applies to a good deal of the psychology and educational theories of to-day. Certain educational systems clearly proceed on the assumption that the child mind is quite healthy and needs only nourishment, that its qualities are all innately good and only require to be encouraged to develop. But in point of fact, the problem is not one of simple and straightforward growth. If there is a worm at the root of the young plant, or if it is attacked by some disease, then remedial action is called for, and the wise husbandman will take drastic measures to ward off these dangers. Free self-expression and the development of personality are essential elements in education, but the personality may develop in a crooked direction and the self may find expression in ways that are harmful to itself and to the social order. Then the Law must utter its commandments with authority in order to define the limits of the permissible, and to restrain the would-be transgressor with its stern 'Thou shalt not.'

It is the prohibitive element in the Law which is specially distasteful to the modern mind, as indeed it has been to the human mind since the very first. And in our time ideals of freedom, equality, and self-government have made men peculiarly resentful of all forms of restraint. The ambition of the natural man is to be captain of his soul, master of his fate, and he will have no one, man or God, to rule over him. Any prohibition, divine or human, acts upon him as a challenge to assert his independence. The youth of to-day is disposed to revolt from the precepts and customs of the past. 'Why should I follow in the footsteps of the fathers, think as they thought, live as they lived? Why should I accept their word for it? Why not prove all things in my own experience? Why, in particular, should the Ten Commandments be a law binding upon me, seeing they were given to a pastoral people in ancient times when the complications of modern life were as yet undreamed of?'

This mood may be carried to a most foolish and harmful extreme. To think things out for oneself

and put them to the proof of experience is an excellent discipline and the condition of all progress, but after all the moral law as expressed in its commands and prohibitions represents, to say the least of it, the accumulated experience of the ages. Surely it will be conceded that the human race has learned some wisdom by the thing it has suffered. Even from prehistoric ages men were painfully learning that fire burns and water drowns, that certain plants were poisonous and others wholesome. And one can imagine the anxious cave-mother warning her children to eat this and not to taste that. As the experience of the race grew and widened through the ages this practical wisdom accumulated, until now there is a vast body of knowledge laid up for our instruction. Certain things have been proved beyond all reasonable doubt, matters connected with personal and family life, with sex and property and general human well-being. The laws embodying these experiences we disregard at our peril.

It is our Christian belief that the moral law does not merely embody the accumulated experience of the human race but has its ultimate root in the will of God. It ought therefore never to be disparaged and set in opposition to Christian love. Love is the fulfilling of the law, not its abrogation. It is quite true that if we perfectly love our neighbour we shall do for him all that the law requires and more, but who among us has reached this degree of perfection, so that we can dispense with all moral rules? 'The Commandments are not meant to be a statement of the Christian ethic, nor are they the total duty expected of a Christian. We can keep them all and yet lack what is necessary for salvation. But they are a minimum obligation upon us. It is possible to distinguish between the rules of a game and the spirit of a game. You may keep all the rules and yet have a very unhappy game, because, as we say, the spirit was lacking. The Commandments are rules of life, but the Gospel supplies the spirit. We may have the right spirit, but if we don't keep the rules we shall not be able to play the game at all. Love goes beyond justice but it can never tolerate injustice, and Christian love, because it thinks justice a hard thing, often degenerates into a shallow sentimentality.'