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THE FAITH THAT
REBELS

*A Re-examination of the
Miracles of Jesus*

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FOREWORD

I was extremely glad when I learned that it was proposed to issue a new edition of this very notable book, and I gladly responded to the invitation to write a foreword which would introduce it to a new generation of readers. This is one of the books that have influenced me greatly and permanently in the never-ending endeavour to think out our Christian faith. At the time when it first appeared, I had, like many others, been looking forward with some eagerness to its publication, for we knew that Cairns had for a long time been saying to his students at Aberdeen something new and enlivening on the subject of faith and miracles, and a savour of it was sometimes borne to us on a wind from the north. I read the book at once, and even if its argument did not carry me with it all the way, I have ever since then regarded it as a book which made me see something that I had not seen before and which must be important for my understanding of Christianity. Probably many others of my generation could say the same. The reviewer of the first edition in the *Guardian* wrote: "At last we have a book on miracles which really moves the problem out of the stalemate into which it had fallen. . . . This is a book of first-rate apologetic

importance and value which may mark a definite step forward in the treatment of this ancient issue." I believe that it did.

A great deal has happened in the theological world since the nineteen-twenties, and the landscape has been transformed more than in most periods of that length. I have sometimes wondered whether, amid a wealth of new insights from new angles, the particular insight which Cairns's book helped to create in the understanding of the Gospels is in some quarters being lost or forgotten. Theology today in its approach to the miracle-stories in the Gospels is apt to be primarily interested in asking: What significance had these stories in the preaching of the early Church out of which the Gospels grew? To what "forms" do they belong in the tradition that was taking shape? What light do they throw upon the nature and content of the apostolic *kerygma*? And what will a truly "biblical" theology (as distinguished from a merely historical interest) have to say about them? These are indeed important questions. And Cairns was not blind to them. His theology was biblical through and through, and the reading of his books makes one exclaim: "How that man knows and understands the Bible, both Old and New Testaments!" Moreover, he is greatly concerned to show that "mighty works" are part of the very *content* of the message of the early Church. But he is even more concerned with the questions (which to him are inseparable from the foregoing, and are not unanswerable): How

did our Lord Himself regard His "mighty works"? What did He hold and teach about the possibility of such things happening? Did they really happen? And if they did, was this something entirely exceptional, confined to the lives of our Lord and His apostles, and perhaps a few great saints throughout the ages, as "miracle-workers" whose exploits were intended to confirm the Christian message? Or is this an integral and permanent part of the message itself, a part often lost from the Church in the past, but now being rediscovered and realized in the faith-healing movements of our time?

To Cairns these questions were vital. In his student days he had passed through a period of agonizing doubt about Christianity, and it was partly through eager study of the Gospels in the light of modern criticism, and especially of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, that he found his way back to faith. Thus to him the miracles were the mighty works of the Kingdom of God, wrought by the power of God made available through human faith, of which Jesus himself was "the pioneer and perfection." Moreover, this whole subject was in Cairns's mind closely connected with his own experience, when, after only a few years of married life, his young wife contracted an illness which finally carried her away. He was thus driven to face the problem of the meaning and conquest of suffering and death, so prominent in the New Testament. At the same time, though he was not a scientist, he was deeply interested in the developments of

modern science, moving away so remarkably from the materialist-mechanistic world-view which had been so widespread and so intimidating. And he had also a profound interest in the modern missionary movement of Christianity, which to him was part of the triumph of the Kingdom of God. All these strains of interest came together in his thinking, and led him to interpret Christian faith as "the faith that rebels" against all evils, material as well as spiritual, and that lays hold of the power of God which is able to give us the victory.

The student of theology may profitably trace this stream of thought from its sources and tributaries to its later reaches in the theology of our time. Thirty or forty years ago Cairns sometimes seemed to himself to be pursuing a somewhat lonely course in theology. But there were certain allies, known and unknown. There was a kinship, and a mutual influence, between Cairns's work and that of his friend Dr. A. G. Hogg, of Madras Christian College, author of *Christ's Message of the Kingdom and Redemption from this World*. An affinity has also been noticed with Bishop Gustav Aulén's interpretation of the original Christian message as a message about God's victorious battle in Christ against the elemental powers of evil, though there was no direct influence in this case. Still more striking is the parallel between Cairns's thought in *The Faith that Rebels* and a certain strain in the quite independent thought of Professor Karl Heim of Tübingen. Any student who is interested in

such matters would find it highly profitable to read, alongside this volume, the chapter on miracles in Heim's recently translated work, *The Transformation of the Scientific World-View*.¹ He may also find an important tributary if he notes that Cairns, Hogg and Heim all acknowledge a debt to the work of a German theologian of a generation ago, Arthur Titius. And all of this is part of the broad and growing stream of thought which in our time is endeavouring to transcend the too narrowly "spiritual" conception of salvation, and to recover the New Testament conception of a total salvation of "spirit, soul and body," and indeed of cosmic redemption. In that whole story, which has now unrolled itself much further, and which still has many unanswered questions, Cairns's book, even if we find in it many things that we should wish to query, has an important place of its own.

Moreover, apart from the theological student's interest in research into movements of thought, this is the kind of book that it is good for us to read. It has a rugged beauty and eloquence, and it has a tonic quality which makes for faith because it is so "full of faith" itself. I hope this new edition may give it a fresh lease of life and make it familiar to a new generation.

March 1954

DONALD BAILLIE

¹ SCM Press London, Harper New York, 1953. Cf. also a much earlier essay on "Supernatural Healing" in Heim's *The New Divine Order*, SCM Press, 1930.

INTRODUCTION

THE discussion of the problem of the miracles of Jesus seems at present to have reached a kind of stalemate. For a long time past they have been regarded by the Christian Church as essentially evidential portents which were external signs, and had little or no meaning in themselves for the Christian view of God and the world. They belonged to the sphere of apologetics rather than that of theology. They have been looked at from this point of view alone alike by those who accepted and those who rejected them.

The former have defended them as bulwarks of the faith, rather than as part of the faith itself; and those who have abandoned them have done so merely because they were the point at which the scientific and religious views of the world seemed to come into sharpest collision. In order to ease the strain therefore, believing that these miracles were to-day of little direct religious value, they have abandoned them. The intellectual duel has been well maintained by the older school. For those who believe in a living personal God and in human freedom there is really very little of an intellectual case against the miracles of Jesus. But on the other hand the old argument from miracles has no longer the same central position in the Christian apologetics as it used to have. The centre of the

argument for Theism and for Christianity to-day has moved into a new region from that of external proofs, and these are, even by their supporters, now regarded as being only of contributory value. Most modern religious thinkers base the case for Theism solidly on moral values and imperatives, and for Christianity upon the spiritual personality of Jesus. So for a long time past little that is really new has been said on either side, and almost nothing by younger writers. The most interesting recent book on the subject is curiously symptomatic of the general state of the question. In the earlier part of this volume¹ Dr Tennant in a few incisive chapters demolishes the philosophical argument against miracles, but in the concluding part expresses the opinion that, vitally important in earlier days as miracles were as evidence to the first believers, they are of little value for our generation.

On the other hand Modernism has contributed little that is new or important to the negative case. The only important new material that has been adduced by this school has been the knowledge of sub-conscious phenomena which has been gained during the last fifty years. The endeavour has been made to show that the narratives of our Lord's healing miracles can be best explained as mythical exaggerations of the phenomena of psychotherapeutics, and that the Resurrection has a new light thrown upon it by what we know of phantasms of the living and the dead. I hope to show later

¹ *Miracle and its Philosophical Presuppositions* (London University Lectures, 1924).

that this new knowledge which we have is capable of quite another interpretation.

I cannot think that this stalemate is likely to endure. It seems to me that much deeper interests are involved in the whole question than are at present finding expression, and that the courses of thought are tending in such a direction as will open the whole subject afresh from new points of view.

This volume is an essay towards this end. I have been unable to find solid intellectual standing-ground in either the Traditional or the Modernist position. The former ignores the fact that Jesus Christ is uniformly represented in the Gospels as having a view of His own signs materially different from the view which the Traditional theory defends; the weak point of the latter is, first, that it also ignores the full force of this teaching, and that it tacitly admits certain *a priori* conceptions, which, if consistently carried through, would disintegrate those elements of Christianity which it retains.

Finally, the unconscious suppression of our Lord's own view by both alike seems to me to have serious consequences for the fundamental Christian ideas of God and the world, and also of the range and scope of ideal prayer.

I am well aware that the view which is set forth here has its own difficulties, and its half-solved and unsolved problems. The book is an exploratory essay rather than a dogmatic solution. I shall be content if I am successful in raising and stating the problem, and in inciting others to

carry the solution further than I have been able to do.

The plan of the argument is as follows. I have endeavoured to set forth in some detail the two existing theories of the miracles of Jesus, which I have called the Traditional and Modernist views respectively, to explain them historically, and to indicate in detail their defects. I have then endeavoured to set forth the Old Testament and Jewish groundwork of thought which is universally presupposed in the Synoptic Gospels, without which we cannot possibly understand the significance which these signs had for those in whose presence they were wrought. I have then endeavoured to set forth in detail the uniform view of these signs which was taken by Christ and His contemporaries.

I have then discussed whether this view is wholeheartedly believable by modern men, and finally have in brief outline set forth what seems to me to be the necessary reaction of this view on the doctrines of God, of the world, and man, and its bearing on the solution of the problem of the tragic element in human experience.

I may add, as a personal explanation, that the book owes its origin to the fact that many years ago study of the Synoptic Gospels led me to see that there was more in the teaching of Jesus on the power of faith and the range of prayer than were finding expression in our current Christian thought and practice.

Fuller study, both of the Bible and of theology, has only confirmed and extended this view, and

the pressure of the problem of the world due to the war has caused me to pursue the inquiry as to the changes in our outlook, both as regards thought and action, which would result from our taking this teaching of Jesus and carrying it logically through. The core of the whole book, therefore, is the exegetical section. We have here a clear issue. Does the interpretation which I have endeavoured to set forth give the natural meaning of His words? Did He ever say anything in contradiction of that meaning? Can His words fairly mean anything else? I do not see that they can. I believe, further, that recent developments, both in philosophy and psychology, have almost unawares been effecting great changes in the whole climate of thought, which have rendered both the Traditional and the Modernist views of these "signs" of Jesus obsolete, and that the course of religious thought is sooner or later bound to bring up the whole question again in a new form. The subject therefore demands re-examination by Christian thought from every available point of view. Even a mistaken or defective theory, if rooted in serious thought, must in the end advance the ultimate solution. The main motive of this volume has been the desire to give the words of Jesus about faith their full meaning, and to seek to throw the light of that meaning on the central problem of theism and the mystery of human life.

To
H. W. C.

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