



The Miracle Stories in the Gospels: The Continuing Challenge for Interpreters

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The miracle stories in the canonical Gospels pose special challenges for the interpreter. The immediate challenge for some is the question of historicity; for others, who are willing to suspend historical judgments, the issue is the purpose of these stories within the biblical texts. Those two questions have dominated scholarship since the rise of modern biblical studies, and they have dominated roughly in that sequence. More recently, both are being brought together in new and creative ways. The following remarks are more illustrative than exhaustive, but they may at least point to some trends.

THE HISTORICAL INQUIRY: DID ANYTHING HAPPEN?

Over the last couple of centuries and into the first half of the twentieth century, interpreters were typically interested in the question of the historicity of the miracles of Jesus. Often that interest resulted in skepticism. A prime example is the view of David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), who held that one can legitimately be

The miracle stories have been interpreted in a variety of ways over the past decades and centuries. A review of those interpretations points the way to the work of present readers, who are called to hear the theological intent of the stories and to proclaim them to the world.

“distrustful of the numerous histories of miracles in the gospels.”¹ Again and again in his massive work on the life of Jesus, Strauss finds that the miracle accounts are “inconceivable” as history.²

When we move into the first half of the twentieth century, we find that interpreters typically explain various miracles by attempts at plausible historical reconstructions. For example, both Albert Schweitzer and Vincent Taylor speculated on the historicity of the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:33–44 par Matt 14:13–21 par Luke 9:10–17 par John 6:1–14). Both concluded that the story is filled with messianic symbolism, but they also speculated on what might have happened during Jesus’ ministry. Schweitzer put it this way:

Our solution is that the whole is historical, except the closing remark that they were all filled. Jesus distributed the provisions which He and His disciples had with them among the multitude so that each received a very little.³

Taylor endorses Schweitzer’s view but supplements it: “Much the best hypothesis is that of Schweitzer, coupled with the suggestion of Wellhausen that the numbers are exaggerated.”⁴

The question of historicity was dealt with in a more qualified way by Rudolf Bultmann. In his pathbreaking form-critical study of the Gospels, Bultmann made a distinction among nature miracles, healings, and exorcisms.⁵ The nature miracles (such as the Stilling of the Storm, Feeding the Five Thousand, Walking on Water, Feeding the Four Thousand, and Cursing the Fig Tree) were considered to be either nonhistorical or misplaced resurrection stories, that is, stories that have a basis in post-resurrection experiences of the disciples of Jesus, which have been retrojected back into the pre-resurrection narrative of the Gospels.⁶ The healings and exorcisms fared better at the hands of Bultmann in terms of their historicity.⁷ According to Bultmann, Jesus was a healer and an exorcist.

The form-critical approach was accompanied by a newer understanding of miracles in the New Testament. The typical view of a miracle is that it is an occurrence that is contrary to nature. But the biblical theology movement,⁸ emphasizing

¹David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1892) 415. The first German edition was published in 1835–1836.

²Ibid., xxx, 482, 486, 533, 781. He uses the terms “inconceivability” and “inconceivable” on p. 486.

³Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1906) 376.

⁴Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1952) 321.

⁵Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 209–244.

⁶Ibid., 229–231.

⁷Ibid., 228.

⁸The biblical theology movement is usually associated with scholars from after World War II until the early 1960s who revived and sustained a theological interest in the Bible, its theological terms, and the unity between the testaments through various overall perspectives (for example, the drama of the acts of God, promise/fulfillment, salvation history, typology, and/or the history of traditions). A widely used book of that era is G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God: Contemporary Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957). For discussion, see, by way of comparison, James D. Smart, *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).

the acts of God in a grand drama of salvation, made a contribution to the understanding of miracles that most likely has not been improved upon. That understanding has been expressed by one of the early proponents of both form criticism and the biblical theology movement, Reginald H. Fuller, who wrote concerning miracles:

They are not necessarily breaches of the laws of nature, or even of what cannot be known of nature. But they are sufficiently startling, unusual and unexpected to call attention to themselves. At the same time, however, they are not sufficiently unusual that they have to be explained as acts of God in the insurance company's sense of the word, as though we only call in God when all other explanations have failed. Rather, they are occurrences which faith recognizes as acts of God. Not that faith makes them acts of God. It merely recognizes them for what they are. But faith is always a free decision. It is never coerced by overwhelming proof.⁹

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THE LITERARY INQUIRY: WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

An entirely new turn in the study of the miracles took place with the rise of redaction criticism and, in particular, in the brief but widely celebrated essay by Günther Bornkamm on the Stilling of the Storm in the Gospel of Matthew (8:23–27),¹⁰ which can be taken as illustrative of the new approach. Bornkamm sought to show how the evangelist Matthew did not simply transmit a story from his source (Mark 4:35–41) but interpreted it for the church in his time and place. Bornkamm highlighted the alterations that Matthew made in telling the story. While in the Gospel of Mark the event is called a “great storm of wind” (λαίλαψ μεγάλη άνέμου, 4:37), Matthew calls it a “great violent shaking” (σεισμός μέγας, 8:24) that occurred on the sea. The term has been translated variously as “a great tempest” (KJV), “a great storm” (RSV), “a furious storm” (NIV), or (regrettably) “a windstorm” (NRSV). By using the word σεισμός, Matthew alludes to apocalyptic horrors (Mark 13:8; Matt 24:7; 27:54; 28:2; Luke 21:11; Rev 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18), a time of distress when many will fall away (Matt 24:10). And while in Mark the disciples call upon Jesus as “teacher,” and ask whether he cares about them, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (διδάσκαλε, ού μέλει σοι ότι άπολλύμεθα, 4:38), in Matthew they call upon him as “Lord” and employ the language of worship: “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (κύριε,

⁹Reginald H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 9.

¹⁰Günther Bornkamm, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew,” in Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) 52–57.

σῶσον, ἀπολλύμεθα, 8:25). Jesus chides his disciples for their “little faith” before he stills the storm (8:26).¹¹

In this approach, the interest of the interpreter is not in the historical event (assuming that there was one) that is at the basis of the story but upon features of how the story is told. In other words, the miracle story is not about a day in the life of Jesus when he performed a marvelous feat, but about faith, discipleship, and Christ as Savior. The church, represented by the boat into which the disciples “follow” (8:23) Jesus, is ever in peril and times of testing. The storm represents the apocalyptic terrors, times of testing when many will fall away. But Christ himself is present in the ship, calling his disciples (persons of “little faith”) to bold faith in him. He invites his own to rely on him, for he will not abandon them even in times of most severe testing.

The redaction-critical approach has continued to be significant in the interpretive process. Literary-critical approaches have not eclipsed it, but depend on it and, in effect, have extended it. For literary critics the interpretive task is to follow the features of the story, seeking to hear what the evangelist is saying for those being addressed (the “implied reader”).

THE FUSION OF MULTIPLE INQUIRIES

More recently, some scholars are willing to combine both historical and literary studies to come up with fresh results. In general, studies of the Gospels have moved away from historical investigation in favor of literary approaches. Yet there are exceptions in the case of the miracle stories, and that is what makes two works on the miracles of Jesus especially interesting and important. Gerd Theissen’s work is multidimensional. He has written a study of the miracles that incorporates form criticism, redaction criticism, structural analysis, sociological analysis, and history of religions studies to probe their significance. According to him, “There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick, and cast out demons.”¹² He speaks freely about the uniqueness of Jesus as a miracle worker who combines two conceptual worlds that had not existed side by side before: “the apocalyptic expectation of universal salvation in the future and the episodic realization of salvation in the present through miracles.”¹³ The miracle stories cannot be explained as projections of human wishes or as attempts to master existence. On the contrary, the miracles are “symbolic actions in which the experienced negativity of human existence is overcome by an appeal to a revelation of the sacred.”¹⁴ The stories serve as protest against the negativities of human existence, refusing to submit to them.

Another accomplishment of importance by Theissen is his distinction be-

¹¹The term “little faith” is Matthean, used several times besides here, and only by Matthew (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20).

¹²Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 277.

¹³*Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 300.

tween exorcisms and healings. The distinction is an important one, for many a modern interpreter has the view that demonic possession is simply the New Testament's way of speaking of diseases, especially mental disorders. But a reading of the Gospels shows that the evangelists themselves made distinctions between illness and possession (Mark 1:32 par Matt 8:16 par Luke 4:40; Mark 3:10–11; 6:13; Matt 10:8; Luke 6:18–19; 7:21; 13:32). A particularly important passage in this regard is Matthew 4:24, where a distinction is made between demon possession and epilepsy.¹⁵

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According to Theissen's analysis, it is possible for demons to be the cause of illness in the Gospel stories, but what is characteristic of demon possession in the Gospel accounts, and what makes them different from illnesses are three things: (1) the person is under the power of the demon, which suppresses the person's identity; (2) there is a battle between the demon and the exorcist; and (3) the demon is destructive. These are not present in healings. In the latter, it is typical that Jesus and the power of healing that he brings are invited.¹⁶

What emerges from this that is important for modern interpreters is that one should not be quick to think of demonic possession in the Gospels as simply due to a “primitive” worldview, concluding that what the ancients thought of as possession, we moderns know as mental disorders. Hermeneutically it makes good sense that, if Jesus was God's special revelation and final envoy as we confess, we can expect that the powers of Satan were at work in his world in ways and to a degree that we may not experience in the world as we know it today.

Another work that fuses inquiries is a new book by Paul Achtemeier. For him, “the historical question remains of interest,” but his primary task is “to determine the meaning the miracles recorded of Jesus had for the earliest Christian traditions.”¹⁷ One of the main contributions made by him is to challenge and undermine the widely held view that miracle stories entered into the Gospel tradition about Jesus rather late, that they proliferated and became more important and detailed in the passing of time as the Christian movement expanded and sought to interpret Jesus within Hellenistic culture, where miracle stories abounded. He places the miracle stories of the canonical Gospels within the world of Jewish and Hellenistic stories of miracles and magic, and shows how they are similar and how they differ from them.

¹⁵The verse is particular to Matthew; the distinction does not hold at Matt 17:14–18, which is based on Mark 9:14–27.

¹⁶Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, 85–90.

¹⁷Paul J. Achtemeier, *Jesus and the Miracle Tradition* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008) xi.

According to Achtemeier, some of the miracle stories in the Gospels have elements within them that are found in Hellenistic miracle stories, such as the use of saliva in the healing process (Mark 7:33; 8:23; John 9:6). Nevertheless, miracles tend to have an “absence of the marks of a magician—incantations, use of magical materials or devices.”¹⁸ A miracle differs from magic:

A “miracle” is...some extraordinary event whose origin, even if mediately, can be attributed to a deity, and in which the religious purposes of that deity can be discerned....Unlike miracles, which are the result of divine activity, and hence inexplicable, magic represents the manipulation of various elements that have known effects on supernatural powers. Magic enables the performer to compel the deity or demon to work the performer’s will.¹⁹

In the case of Jesus, Achtemeier says, his miracles were signs of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God that he announced (Luke 11:20; Matt 12:28). Because of the relative absence of magical elements, it is unlikely that the miracle stories were created in the early church to compete with Hellenistic wonder-workers. “Formally, all but a very few of the miracle stories in the gospels have intrusive theological elements, indicating the need to adapt them to points other than the simple recitation of a miracle.”²⁰ Moreover, rather than finding that new miracle stories are created increasingly as time goes by, Achtemeier concludes that the tendency is actually the reverse. Miracle stories virtually disappear in the apocryphal gospels of the second and subsequent centuries, and few new stories are told.²¹

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Achtemeier keeps coming back repeatedly to historical questions as he treats various accounts by probing the question of their literary sources and the status of the miracle traditions behind the Gospels. He asserts that the miracle stories “probably belong to the earliest strata of traditions about Jesus” and says: “It is likely that the reputation of Jesus as miracle-worker, evident in the gospels, is rooted in the acts of Jesus himself.”²²

Contrary to what is widely assumed, studies of the miracles have not moved increasingly in the direction of discrediting their historicity with the passing of time. If one takes the long view, the tendency of major scholars of more recent

¹⁸Ibid., 215.

¹⁹Ibid., 194–195.

²⁰Ibid., 215.

²¹Ibid., 178, 217.

²²Ibid., 215.

times is to affirm the essential historicity of the miracles of Jesus (even if not all of them), to see them within their cultural contexts, and to avoid speculating about what actually happened in the ministry of Jesus to account for them. Proposed reconstructions have fallen out of favor. That is all to the good.

Meanwhile, something more is needed. The interpreter should never lose sight of the fact that the stories are mediated through the Gospels, which are kerygmatic in purpose and effect. The task of interpretation is finally a literary and theological one, seeking to listen to the messages of the evangelists as they tell the stories that they have received and have rendered in their own distinctive ways. ⊕

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