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**DISSERTATION:
The Function of Miracle-Working in the Early Church**

**CHAPTER PRESENTED:
The Miracles of Jesus and the Disciples in the Gospels**

Don Bromley

Note to Reader: The topic of my dissertation will be: “The Function of Miracle-Working in the Early Church.” I see my project essentially as an historical study of the worldviews, mindsets, aims, intentions and motivations of the early church vis-à-vis miracle-working. By “early church” I mean the first few centuries, and certainly before Constantine. The paper below represents an initial analysis of the function of miracle-working in the canonical Gospels.

This chapter will eventually be preceded by one in which I’ll discuss what I mean by “miracle,” and how our conceptions agree or differ from what the original audience/readers would have understood by their analogous concepts: “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα) and “miracle” (δυνάμεις), to name two. I may also need to work in a chapter or section on miracle-working in the Old Testament.

In addition to expanding the final section of this chapter, which deals with the disciples as miracle-workers in the Gospels, I would follow the chapter below by a few others, including: 1) The development of miracle-working in Acts, 2) Paul, the “marks” of an apostle, and spiritual gifts, 3) Miracle-working in the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Apocryphal Acts. I imagine I’ll also need to explore how Gnosticism and magic influenced the early understanding and practice of miracle-working. I am also interested in the implications of this study for our current understanding and practice of miraculous healing in the church (as in the charismatic or Pentecostal denominations). Because healing in our modern context always raises the question, “What about those who don’t get well?”, I hope to include a section on how the early church reconciled suffering with miracle-working.

Thanks for taking the time to read this.

-Don Bromley

THE MIRACLES OF JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES IN THE GOSPELS

In the Gospels, the miracles are both *manifestations of the Kingdom of God and signs* that Jesus is the Messiah-King. But at their most basic level they are acts of mercy and compassion, in which God is seen to be working, and through which God is encountered.¹ Along with preaching and teaching, miracle-working constituted the earthly ministry of Jesus.²

The Presence of the Kingdom of God

In the Synoptics, the miracles (*δυνάμεις*) of Jesus, particularly the miracles of healing and exorcism, demonstrate the presence or nearness of the kingdom of God/Heaven.³ The connection between the kingdom message and the miracles can be seen in the close association of teaching about the kingdom with healings and exorcisms.⁴ In commissioning disciples, Jesus' instructions are to preach (the gospel of the kingdom),⁵ exorcise demons, and heal the sick.⁶ Most importantly, Jesus links the exorcism of demons to the immediate presence of the kingdom: "If I drive out demons by the Spirit [finger]⁷ of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."⁸ The miracles not only demonstrate the nearness of the kingdom, they are themselves the *presence* of the eschatological kingdom.⁹

Jesus describes the exorcism of demons as a conflict with the kingdom of Satan.¹⁰ To drive out Satan by Satan's power would be an intra-kingdom conflict, which would be

¹ Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 343.

² I would disagree with Twelftree, who suggests that "Jesus considered performing miracles the main focus of his ministry..." If that is so, the author of Matthew and the apostle Paul missed this fact. *Ibid.*, 275.

³ "Jesus both announced the present coming of the kingdom of God and anticipated its future apocalyptic manifestation." John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 641.

⁴ Matt 9:35; Luke 9:2, 11; 10:9

⁵ See Matt 10:7; Luke 9:2; cf. Acts 8:12; 20:25; 28:31

⁶ Matt 10:1-10; Mark 3:13-19; 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; 10:8-20

⁷ Exod 8:19: "The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'"

⁸ Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20

⁹ Twelftree, 237, 347.

¹⁰ John's Gospel does not contain exorcisms. Twelftree suggests this is because John wishes to focus rather on Jesus as the Messiah/King, rather than on the kingdom conflict as seen in exorcisms. Rather, the conflict

impossible. Rather, through the power of God, Jesus has “robbed” Satan of his possessions—the demon-possessed. Therefore, we have a conflict between kingdoms: the kingdom of Satan, in which people are afflicted by demons, and the kingdom of God, which drives them out.

Various sicknesses are attributed to Satanic or demonic affliction,¹¹ including muteness, blindness & muteness, deafness & muteness, paralysis, and convulsions¹². Indeed, in the New Testament there does not seem to be a clear distinction between sickness and demon-affliction, as the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law suggests.¹³ It would therefore be reasonable to infer that Jesus considered both physical healing and exorcism as manifestations of the presence of the kingdom of God, which drives out the kingdom of Satan.

Signs

The miracles are also *signs* in the sense that they suggest or indicate something beyond themselves. In John, where δυνάμεις is not used, we have rather “signs” (σημεῖον). These include but are not limited to the turning of water into wine, healing the official’s son, healing the sick, the feeding of the five thousand, healing the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus.¹⁴ Of course, the greatest sign, which these all point to, is the great sign—the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁵ What do these signs signify? In the Synoptics, the miracles most often lead the crowds to be “amazed” (ἐθαύμασαν)

between Jesus and Satan is demonstrated in the cross, by which Satan is “driven out” (John 12:31). *Ibid.*, 223.

¹¹ The translation of δαμονίζομαι as “demon-possessed” may suggest more than the authors understood. In most instances, there is no suggestion that the individual with the demon is “possessed” by or under the control of the demon. I believe that “demon-afflicted” is a better translation in most cases.

¹² muteness: Matt 9:32-33; Luke 11:14; blindness & muteness: Matt 12:22; deafness & muteness: Mark 9:17; paralysis: Luke 13:16; convulsions: Mark 9:18; Luke 9:39

¹³ compare Matt 8:14-15 and Mark 1:30-31 to Luke 4:38-39. Nolland notes, “It is perhaps better, then, to treat fever and illness as a Satanic oppression (Acts 10:38 and possibly Luke 13:16) comparable to demon possession but not to be identified with it: sickness itself is the demonic force.” John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35A (Dallas: Word Books, 1989). There is also a connection between sin and sickness, as the story of the paralytic in Matthew 9, Mark 2, and Luke 5 demonstrates. It is also suggested in Jesus’ words to the blind man he had healed, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14).

¹⁴ John 2:11; 4:54; 6:2, 14, 26; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18

¹⁵ Twelftree, 340.

and filled with “awe” (φόβος), and to praise God for what Jesus has done.¹⁶ In Luke, people see his works as signs that he is a prophet.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Synoptic miracles do not primarily serve to point toward anything else—they are not chiefly “signs” in the sense of being evidence for something else. They are the manifestation of the kingdom. In John, however, the miracles primarily focus attention on the person of Jesus—the result being that people “believed in” (ἐπίστευσαν) him, which is language unique to John among the Gospels.

The chief function of miracles in the Fourth Gospel, both for the characters in the Gospel and the readers of it, is to lead to a saving belief in Jesus.¹⁸ In the Synoptics, when faith is mentioned it is always something that is manifest *before* the miracle takes place. In John we have the complete opposite situation: in every instance where faith or belief is mentioned in the context of a miracle, it is the *result of* the miracle.¹⁹ In John’s stories, those who witness the miracles acclaim Jesus as prophet,²⁰ Messiah,²¹ and Son of God.²² Jesus does not dissuade such belief, and indeed Jesus himself suggests that miracles can and ought to lead to such belief in him.²³ The miracles indicate that Jesus is from God and empowered by God.²⁴ *We can therefore conclude that the signs in John serve primarily to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, and further that he is the Son of God.*²⁵

While the miracles are signs, we have several cautions about miraculous signs as a basis of belief in all four Gospels. Jesus’ opponents, a “wicked and adulterous

¹⁶ Matt 9:8; 15:31; Mark 2:12; Luke 5:26; 7:16; 18:43; 19:37;

¹⁷ Luke 7:16; 24:19

¹⁸ In contrast to this, the Synoptics may have had a more non-evangelistic motive: encouragement of the believing community. Rather than to “convince outsiders of the identity of Jesus or the truth of his message,” Twelftree argues that in Mark, “His use of miracle stories will be a piece with his purpose, primarily to encourage his readers in their faith, evangelism and life together.” Twelftree, 58.

¹⁹ In the one possible exception, the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44), Jesus says “Did I not tell you that *if you believed*, you would see the glory of God?” (40). However, the text suggests that Martha’s belief was eschatological (24), and Messianic (27), and not necessarily related to the imminent resurrection of her brother. It is also clear from Jesus’ words in verses 15 and 42, that he expects the result of this miracle to be belief, and verse 45 confirms that this is indeed the result.

²⁰ John 4:19; 6:14; 9:17; cf. Deut. 18:15: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”

²¹ John 4:29; 7:31; 20:31

²² John 1:49; 20:31

²³ John 10:25, 37-38; 14:11

²⁴ John 3:2; 9:33

²⁵ While faith is not explicitly a result of miracles in Matthew,

generation,” demand a miraculous “sign from heaven” from him, but he refuses.²⁶ These “signs from heaven” (σημείον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) are not the healings which everyone can see, but spectacular miracles reminiscent of those performed by Moses in Egypt.²⁷ These are miracles of judgment and destruction visible for all—literally in the “heavens”: flies, gnats, hail, locusts, and darkness. Perhaps these are the kinds of miracles John the Baptist expects from the Messiah?²⁸ Instead Jesus’ miracles are those of healing and compassion. Also, the miracles are not unequivocal heavenly signs—they have some ambiguity and provoke a wide variety of responses.²⁹ In this sense they are somewhat like parables: some understand them (they “have eyes to see”) while others do not.³⁰

Spectacular miracles often result in a kind of false faith, or false Messianic expectations, which Jesus is wary of.³¹ Therefore we find some of the most spectacular miracles (e.g. walking on water, the transfiguration) done in the presence of disciples only. Jesus states that the ability to perform miracles is not on par with possession of eternal life,³² and belief without miracles is more blessed than that with.³³ This may also explain why in the Synoptics we have Jesus’ instructions, especially to those who have received miraculous healings, not to tell anyone about it.³⁴ Miracles may lead to belief in a mighty, conquering Messiah, which Jesus was not to be. This reaction is in fact what happens after the feeding of the five thousand in John: “After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (John 6:14-15).

²⁶ Matt 12:38-39; 16:1-4; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16, 29; John 2:18; 6:30

²⁷ “miraculous signs” (Heb. מִּסְתֵּימוֹת) as in Ex 4:8, 17, 28; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1-2; 14:11, 22; Deut 26:8; 29:3; 34:11; Neh 9:10; Psa 78:43; 105:27; Jer 32:20

²⁸ John the Baptist clearly expected the coming one to bring judgment (Matt 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18). Yet Jesus does not include the judgment sayings from the Messianic texts from Isaiah he refers to. For example, he seems to refer to the healing of the lame, blind, and deaf in Isaiah 35:5-6, but leaves out “he will come with vengeance” in verse 4. This is similar to when Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 but leaves out “and the day of vengeance of our God” (61:2).

²⁹ Compare this to Satan’s challenge to Jesus, “Throw yourself down” from the temple (Matt 4:6 // Luke 4:9). Clearly this was a temptation to perform a miraculous sign for all to see.

³⁰ Twelftree, 335.

³¹ John 2:23-25; 6:1-15

³² Luke 10:20

³³ John 20:29; Twelftree suggests that it is as if John is saying “belief ought to be able to be based not simply on *both* the words and the works (miracles) of Jesus but on the words alone, even though miracle-based faith can be sufficient.” Twelftree, 341-2.

³⁴ Matt 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; 17:9; Mark 1:34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30; 9:9; Luke 4:41; 5:14; 8:56

We therefore have something of an ambiguous attitude toward miracles as a basis for faith in the Gospels, especially John. While the miracles lead some to a correct and saving belief in Jesus, they can also lead to misunderstandings about his mission and purpose. The power of the miracles stands in contrast to the lack-of-power at the cross.³⁵

Faith and Belief

The Synoptics clearly portray faith (πίστις) and believing (πιστεύω) as important in healing.³⁶ It is difficult to determine exactly what this faith consists of. We may infer from the various texts that it includes faith in Jesus' ability as a healer,³⁷ his authority,³⁸ his compassion,³⁹ and his status as one sent from God.⁴⁰ It can certainly also be in all of these, some combination of these, and in some cases another sort of faith/belief altogether.⁴¹

As mentioned above, it cannot be overemphasized how important faith was for miracle-working in the Synoptics, such that Jesus even declares, "Your faith has healed you."⁴² This faith is on the part of the person seeking a healing, whether for themselves or for another. Jesus is described on one occasion as not being able to work miracles because of a lack of faith/belief in a town.⁴³ Likewise, Jesus instructs his disciples that miracle-working (such as exorcism or moving a mountain) is dependent on faith, even

³⁵ Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, ed. John Kenneth Riches, trans. Francis McDonagh, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 295.

³⁶ This is distinctive among ancient literature, where faith is not required of the supplicant. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study*, 265.

³⁷ Matt 9:2, 22; 28-29; Mark 2:5; 5:34, 36; 9:23-24; Luke 5:20; 8:48, 50

³⁸ Matt 8:10, 13; Luke 7:9, 50;

³⁹ Matt 15:28; Mark 10:52; Luke 18:42

⁴⁰ Luke 17:19

⁴¹ Twelftree argues that Luke shows that the object of faith "is not in the miraculous powers of Jesus but in God," by having the crowds praise God for the healing. While this is true in some instances, there are many stories where the faith may be only in Jesus' *ability* to heal, as mentioned above.

⁴² Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 8:48; 18:42

⁴³ Mark 6:5; Richardson argues that this is not because Jesus is *unable*, but because he does not consider it fitting to perform a miracle without faith, and is therefore *unwilling*. Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1941), 63.

faith as small as a mustard-seed.⁴⁴ On another occasion, Jesus attributes the disciples lack of success at exorcism as being due to a lack of belief.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Jesus often healed those who did not or could not have or express faith in him (they were not present, were incapacitated, or were dead), and we have many instances of healing stories with no mention of faith at all. *Nevertheless, we can see a trend from the Synoptics to the Fourth Gospel in which saving faith, rather than being a preexisting ingredient in miracles, becomes the appropriate and expected result of a miracle.* I will explore this trend below, and suggest that it continues and develops in the life of the early church.

Is it possible to reconcile these two disparate approaches to faith and miracles? I believe so. While the kingdom's presence brings blessings (healing, exorcism) to all who come in contact with it, not all who come in contact with it through healing have truly "entered" the eschatological kingdom.⁴⁶ The Synoptics have emphasized that faith in Jesus as healer has brought about physical healing, although "eternal life" is not mentioned in the context of faith or belief.⁴⁷ The Fourth Gospel emphasizes that faith/belief in Jesus brings eternal life, and that miracles can lead to saving faith. The understanding that faith results in physical healing is consistent with both approaches, but John's emphasis seems to be on eternal life rather than physical healing. Indeed, this is consistent with John's expressed purpose in writing his Gospel: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

Healings are an expression of the kingdom's presence and also an invitation to *enter* the kingdom and eternal life through belief and faith in Jesus. The healing miracles are in this sense "signs" which point toward the ultimate healing—eternal life—which is in Jesus. Entry into the kingdom of God comes through faith/belief in Jesus as healer, King/Messiah, and Lord, and the discipleship that entails (which includes repentance,

⁴⁴ Matt 17:20-21; Mark 11:23;

⁴⁵ Matt 17:17, 20; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41

⁴⁶ In Luke 17:11-19, all ten lepers are healed, but only one receives Jesus' words "your faith has made you well"—the Samaritan who praised God by thanking Jesus. Similarly, in the healing by the pool in John 5, the healed man does not even know who Jesus is.

⁴⁷ Of course, the Synoptics also suggest the theme of eternal life through Jesus (Matt 19:16, 29; 25:46; Mark 10:30; Luke 10:25; 18:18, 30). However, the condition for such eternal life in the Synoptics is discipleship and obedience rather than belief.

compassion and humility).⁴⁸ This kingdom transformation inaugurates “eternal life” (in the language of John)⁴⁹ as well as physical healing in some instances (“your faith has healed you”).⁵⁰

Empowered by the Spirit of God

We mentioned earlier that the miracles are evidence that Jesus was empowered by God. More specifically, Jesus is conceived in the Synoptic Gospels as being empowered by the *Spirit* of God.⁵¹ We have no record of Jesus performing miracles before the descent of the Spirit at his baptism (excepting apocryphal accounts).⁵² In fulfilling the Messianic prophecies, Jesus takes the role of one with the Spirit of God upon him.⁵³ John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit.⁵⁴ In Luke, Jesus’ healing ministry is described as being “in the power of the Spirit,”⁵⁵ and we may infer that other references to healing power also refer to the power of the Spirit.⁵⁶ Most significantly, Jesus himself explicitly declares his that he exorcises demons by the finger or Spirit of God; “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God...”⁵⁷ The book of Acts continues this understanding of miracle-working as empowered by the Spirit,⁵⁸ as does Paul.⁵⁹

In the Synoptics, Jesus is described as being led and empowered by the Spirit. After the baptism of Jesus by John, Mark has, “The Spirit sent [ἐκβάλλει] him...”, Matthew and Luke have softened this to “led [ἀνήχθη or ἤγετο] by the Spirit,” while John does not include this at all. It is the Spirit who empowers Jesus to heal and exorcise in the Synoptics.⁶⁰ In John, however, Jesus has power *in himself*, and he is not described

⁴⁸ Matt 4:17; 5:3, 19-20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:14, 23-24; 25:34; Mark 1:15; 10:14-15, 24-25; Luke 6:20; 18:16-17, 24-25

⁴⁹ John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40; 12:50; 17:3

⁵⁰ Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 8:48; 18:42

⁵¹ Not so in the Fourth Gospel. Twelftree suggests this is due to the close identity between the Father and Son in John. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study*, 236.

⁵² Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32

⁵³ Matt 12:18; Luke 4:18; referring to Isaiah 61:1

⁵⁴ Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33

⁵⁵ Luke 4:14

⁵⁶ Mark 5:30; Luke 4:36; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; 9:1

⁵⁷ Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20

⁵⁸ Acts 2:4, 17-18; 6:5-8;

⁵⁹ Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 12; 14; Gal 3:5; 1 Th. 1:5; cf. Heb 2:4; 2 Pet 1:21

⁶⁰ In Matthew and Mark, the connection between the Spirit and healing is less clear but can be inferred.

as being “filled” with the Spirit. Rather, Jesus sends⁶¹ the Spirit and imparts the Spirit to his disciples through his breath.⁶² An observable trend between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus becomes less an *instrument of* and more the *master of* the Holy Spirit. It is chiefly in John that we are able to most clearly Jesus acting *as God himself*.⁶³ In the terminology of Werner Kahl, *Jesus becomes less the mediator of the Holy Spirit’s numinous power (MNP) and more the bearer of this numinous power (BNP) in himself*.⁶⁴

While Acts and the letters of Paul continue in the understanding that miracles are empowered by the Spirit, as do the early church fathers,⁶⁵ John’s approach of viewing Jesus as the sole source of miracle-working power will be amplified in the Apocryphal Acts. There the connection between the Spirit and miracle-working is essentially nonexistent, and Jesus is fully the omnipotent God.⁶⁶

Jesus, the Healing Messiah

Matthew clearly sees Jesus’ miracles of healing and exorcism as fulfilling the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:4: “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases’” (8:17).⁶⁷ Likewise, Luke has Jesus pronouncing his fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the

⁶¹ John 15:26

⁶² John 20:22

⁶³ Twelftree suggest that Matthew also portrays Jesus “as God himself.” While this may be true in some respect, it is certainly not nearly as developed as in John. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study*, 337.

⁶⁴ Werner Kahl, *New Testament Miracle Stories in Their Religious-Historical Setting: A Religionsgeschichtliche Comparison from a Structural Perspective*, Forschungen Zur Religion Und Literatur Des Alten Und Neuen Testaments, vol. 163 H. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

⁶⁵ “For one receives the spirit of understanding, another of counsel, another of strength, another of healing, another of foreknowledge, another of teaching, and another of the fear of God” (Martyr, *Dialogue*, 39). “And there are still preserved among Christians traces of that Holy Spirit which appeared in the form of a dove. They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events, according to the will of the Logos” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.46). However, in Ireneus we find no mention of the Spirit in connection with miracle-working, but rather the usage of “the name of Jesus.”

⁶⁶ There are no suggestions in the Apocryphal Acts that apostles or disciples are either empowered by the Spirit, or that the Spirit is a source of miracle-working power. Instead, miracles are done by the power and authority of Jesus’ name.

⁶⁷ Matthew is here citing the LXX translation.

oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁶⁸ Besides the reference to "recovery of sight for the blind," the exorcism of demons is variously described as releasing those imprisoned or oppressed,⁶⁹ as is physical healing.⁷⁰ That Jesus is referring to his healings when he claims, "This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21) is also confirmed by his suggestion that they will now ask him to "Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum" (4:23). This surely refers to the prior miracles performed there: the exorcism in Mark 1:21-28, the healing of the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1-12, or possibly the healing of the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13.

When John the Baptist, imprisoned, sends disciples to inquire of Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come" (the Messiah), Jesus replies, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (11:4-6). Jesus clearly understands his work of miraculous healing as part of the fulfillment of his Messianic destiny.⁷¹ And, as previously mentioned, the miracles are interpreted by some witnesses as indications that Jesus is the Messiah.⁷²

It is worth mentioning here, as it will have implications later, that Jesus, by his own words, clearly understood his role as Messiah to include rejection, suffering, and death.⁷³ The biblical authors likewise understood this, and interpreted his persecution and death as fulfillment of prophecy.⁷⁴ In a great many of the miracle narratives, the miracles are immediately preceded or followed by conflict with opponents (usually over Sabbath regulations) or Jesus' predictions of his own suffering and death.⁷⁵ Sometimes the miracles lead directly to conspiracies against his life.⁷⁶ The point here is that in addition to being the healing Messiah, Jesus saw himself as the *suffering* Messiah, the Suffering

⁶⁸ Luke 4:18-19, referring to Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6

⁶⁹ In Luke 13:16, Jesus heals a woman crippled "by a spirit," and asks, "should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free [λυθῆναι] on the Sabbath day from what bound [δεδουλωμένη] her?"

⁷⁰ Mark 5:29, 34; Luke 13:12

⁷¹ Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study*, 346-7.

⁷² John 4:29; 7:31; 20:31

⁷³ Matt 16:21; 17:12; 26:54, 56; Mark 8:31; 9:12; 10:45; 14:49; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 18:31; 21:22; 22:37; 24:25-27, 44-47; John 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 18:32; 19:28

⁷⁴ Matt 27:9; John 19:24, 36; Acts 1:16; 3:18; 13:27-29

⁷⁵ Examples:

⁷⁶ Matt 12:14; Mark 3:6; Luke 6:7,11; John 7:32; 11:45-53

Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Any suggestion that Jesus need not take this path is met with a sharp rebuke: that is the way of man, not the way of God.⁷⁷

Why Did Jesus Perform Miracles?

To this point we have demonstrated that miracles are signs that Jesus is the Messiah, and also expressions of the coming Kingdom of Heaven. The healing miracles fulfill certain Messianic prophecies. Through faith or belief in Jesus, which can result from witnessing miracles, believers can receive healing in this lifetime, and eternal life in the next. Clearly this last point helps us to understand why the miracles make up such an important part of the Gospels. As the author of John writes, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). As clear as this is, the evidentiary purpose of the miracles and signs does not fully answer the question, “Why did Jesus perform miracles?”

Acts of Compassion and Mercy

In examining many of the miracle stories in the Synoptic Gospels, it seems that the evidentiary value is either absent or secondary, and that *compassion* is the primary motivation.⁷⁸ This is not to say that the Gospel *authors* did not have evangelistic intent, which they clearly did. Rather, from the stories themselves it seems clear that Jesus’ intent in performing miracles is primarily compassion. The evidence for this consists of direct evidence from the healing stories in the Synoptics, as well as many instances in which no motivation other than compassion can be discerned.

On two occasions, Jesus compares his healings with the merciful care someone would give a child or farm animal. When healing the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17), Jesus argues that if it is right to give an ox or donkey something to drink on the Sabbath, so it is right to give this “daughter of Abraham” her freedom from suffering. Again, in the

⁷⁷ Matt 16:23; Mark 8:33

⁷⁸ The motivation of compassion is not evident in John. Twelftree suggests this is due to John’s high Christology, in which Jesus is always the initiator, not the responder. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study*, 341.

healing of the man with a swelling (14:1-6), Jesus uses this *from the lesser to the greater* kind of argument. He compares his healing to caring for or helping an animal or child: “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” The implied answer is of course “yes,” and the motivation we can infer from this is compassion, or care for one’s own.

We have seen that in fulfilling the Messianic prophecies, Jesus has come as God’s agent to bring mercy and help to his people. Therefore the people praise God for Jesus’ healings, and understand that “God has come to help [ἐπεσκέψατο] his people” (Luke 7:16). Also, those in need of healing appeal to Jesus’ “mercy” (ἐλέησόν),⁷⁹ or ask him to help or to “have pity” (σπλαγχνισθεῖς)⁸⁰. Jesus describes his own healings as acts of God’s mercy.⁸¹ Finally, we have numerous instances where Jesus is clearly motivated by “compassion” (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη) to work miracles.⁸²

Of course, the greatest evidence lies with those cases in which Jesus’ inner motivation is expressed outright: “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη] on them and healed their sick” (Matt 14:14). In feeding the four thousand, Jesus calls his disciples to him and says, “I have compassion [σπλαγχνίζομαι] for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way” (Matt 15:32 // Mark 8:2). Similarly, leading to the feeding the five thousand, Mark records, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη] on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Jesus, teaching and healing, saw the crowd and “had compassion [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη] on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). Therefore, *out of compassion* Jesus desires more workers to do the work of the harvest—preaching and healing.⁸³ Jesus, approached by the two blind men outside of Jericho “had compassion [σπλαγχνισθεῖς] on them and touched their

⁷⁹ Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39

⁸⁰ Matt 8:5; 15:25; Mark 9:22; Luke 4:38; 7:16;

⁸¹ Mark 5:19

⁸² Contrast this to Richardson, who argues, “. . .the motive of compassion is not prominent and certainly is not primary either in the Synoptists or in St. John.” Richardson, 31. While I agree with Richardson that the Gospel authors are not in “the psychology of Jesus,” I would not that they are completely disinterested in his motives.

⁸³ See Luke 10

eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him” (Matt 20:34). Most striking is when Jesus sees the widow who had lost her son; “His heart went out [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη] to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry’” (Luke 7:13).

Apart from this direct evidence, we should also examine instances in which compassion seems the only or most likely motivation. In healing the Caananite woman’s daughter (Matt 15:21-28 // Mark 7:24-30), it appears that Jesus does not consider it to be part of his present mission: “First let the children eat all they want” // “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” However, the woman makes an appeal for a merciful exception: “But even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In Matthew, Jesus remarks “Woman, you have great faith!” (15:28). That the woman’s faith is in Jesus’ compassion and mercy makes the most sense of this particular situation—clearly her faith is not simply in Jesus’ ability to heal or to the nature of Jesus’ person (whether Messiah or Son of David). Her statement suggests faith in Jesus’ *compassion*. Jesus acquiesces and heals her daughter: “For such a reply...the demon has left your daughter.” Again, Jesus’ reply makes sense if he understands that the woman is making an appeal to his mercy.

The God of Compassion

It would not be an overstatement to see compassion and mercy as the meta-narrative of God’s relationship with Israel, in which Jesus locates his ministry. God calls Abram in order that “all peoples on earth will be blessed [וְיִבְרַכְוּ] through you” (Gen 12:3). God calls Moses to free his people because,

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and *I am concerned about their suffering*. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians...And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.” (Exod 3:7-10)

God remembers his covenant because he is merciful and compassionate (רַחוּם) In compassion he sent judges and kings to save Israel from her enemies.⁸⁴ After they are scattered, God will, in his compassion, gather his people back.⁸⁵ And finally, as the

⁸⁴ Judg 2:18; Neh 9:27-28, 31

⁸⁵ Deut 30:3; 32:36; 2 Chr 30:9

ultimate act of mercy and compassion, God sends a servant to his people who will take up their pain, bear their suffering, sins and iniquities, and thereby justify many, making intercession for the transgressors and bringing them healing and peace.⁸⁶

It is therefore understood by the Jews of Jesus' time that the Messiah comes to help God's people. Jesus' very birth is interpreted as a demonstration that God is merciful to his people.⁸⁷ Jesus' message is that God is loving and merciful,⁸⁸ and he demands love and mercy from us.⁸⁹ Jesus' disciples will be known by their love.⁹⁰ It is in this context that miracle-working must be understood: as a demonstration and sign of God's love and mercy for us, and as an expression of love and mercy for others.

The point we are making is that Jesus did not do miracles simply to demonstrate his power, authority, or divine status. *The miracles of Jesus are not signs of his Messiahship and divine authority which happen to be acts of compassion. The miracles are signs of his Messiahship and divine authority precisely because they are acts of compassion.* This will have important implications in how we understand the purpose of miracle-working for Jesus' disciples and the early church.

The Disciples as Miracle-Workers in the Gospels

While Jesus' role as King-Messiah and inaugurator of the kingdom's coming is unique, the work of the kingdom—preaching, healing and exorcism—is explicitly passed on to the his disciples.⁹¹

“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness... As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” (Matt 10:1, 5)

“He appointed twelve — designating them apostles — that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.” (Mark 3:14-15)

⁸⁶ Isaiah 52:13-53:12 It is not surprising therefore that in the healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9:1-13; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26), Jesus speaks of forgiveness and healing as so closely related; they are both the works of the Messiah.

⁸⁷ Luke 1:50, 54, 72, 78

⁸⁸ Luke 15:20; John 3:16

⁸⁹ Matt 5:44; 9:13; 12:7; 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 6:27, 35-36; 10:27, 36-37

⁹⁰ John 13:35; 15:12, 17

⁹¹ Matt 10:1-10; Mark 3:13-19; 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; 10:8-20

Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits...They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” (Mark 6:7, 12-13)

“When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick...So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.” (Luke 9:1-2, 6)

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go...’Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you.’...The seventy-two returned with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’” (Luke 10:1,9,17)

The work of the kingdom (the work of the harvest)⁹² is teaching (everything Jesus taught),⁹³ preaching the gospel (the kingdom has come/is coming), casting out demons and healing disease. Not only is this the commission for the Twelve, the new Israel, but in the commissioning of the Seventy-Two it is to be understood more broadly, as a commission to the entire world.⁹⁴

While John does not contain these commissions, it instead contains Jesus’ promise that, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). We can infer that what Jesus “[has] been doing” and “these” things are the miracles referred to in the previous verse.

A Few Differences

There are three interesting differences between the miracle-working of Jesus and that of his disciples in the Gospels. First, the disciples are on one occasion unsuccessful at exorcism. Secondly, we encounter the suggestion that prayer might be used in miracle-working. Finally, we find the use of Jesus’ name in healings, exorcisms, and miracles.

⁹² Matt 9:35-38; Luke 10:2

⁹³ Matt 28:19-20

⁹⁴ Luke 10:1-24; Possibly a reference to the seventy-two nations in Genesis 10-11 (LXX), or the seventy-two princes and kings in the world (3 Enoch 17.8; 18.2-3; 30.2).

In Matthew 17 and Mark 9 the disciples are unsuccessful at driving a demon out of a boy. This is remarkable in that there are no instances of Jesus attempting a healing or exorcism and being unsuccessful.⁹⁵ In Matthew's account, Jesus attributes their failure to a lack of faith: "Because you have so little faith" (v. 20). In Mark's account, however, it is unclear whether the failure is caused by a lack of belief or incorrect technique. We still have Jesus' lament, "O unbelieving generation...how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me" (v. 19). However, when the disciples ask why they were unable to drive the demon out, Jesus replies, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (v. 29).⁹⁶

On a few occasions, Jesus suggests that prayer be used in the context of miracle-working. In Matthew 21 and Mark 11, after miraculously withering the fig tree, the disciples are amazed and ask how it happened. Jesus replies in Matthew, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive *whatever you ask for in prayer*" (21:21-22). Likewise in Mark, Jesus suggests that faith is required for such miracles, and, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (11:24).

In the one instance mentioned above where the Fourth Gospel suggests miracle-working by the disciples: "[He] will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these..." (14:12), Jesus follows by saying, "And I will do *whatever you ask in my name*, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may *ask me for anything in my name*, and I will do it" (14:13-14). If we interpret asking in Jesus' name as prayer, as I think is reasonable, then we again have the suggestion that miracles may be accomplished through prayer. This is of course worth noting because we have no record of Jesus using prayer to work miracles, or praying in the context of miracle-working.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ There is of course the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26), where the healing is in two stages, as apparently the first "attempt" is not completely successful. Nevertheless, Jesus is ultimately successful in healing the man completely.

⁹⁶ some manuscripts have "prayer and fasting"

⁹⁷ There are occasions where Jesus "looks up to heaven," in the lead-up to a miracle: the multiplication of loaves & fishes, and the healing of the deaf-mute in Mark 7. Jesus also prays before he raises Lazarus in John 11. In the first and the last, the prayer is one of thanks, not for a miracle. In the case of the deaf-mute, it is unclear why Jesus looks up to heaven, but we have no indication of a prayer. Rather, Jesus commands "Ephphatha!" ("Be opened!"), which is clearly not a prayer. Twelftree suggests that Jesus does not pray because his self-understanding was that of someone "doing the work of God." Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle*

Lastly we come to the fact that the disciples apparently perform miracles “in Jesus’ name.” In returning to Jesus, the Seventy-Two proclaim, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name” (Luke 10:17). Apart from the immediate disciples, there are also others who apparently drive out demons “in Jesus’ name,” which Jesus does not condemn.⁹⁸ Similarly, Jesus asserts that false disciples will claim to have prophesied, driven out demons, and performed miracles in Jesus’ name.⁹⁹ In the longer ending of Mark, it is clear: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: *In my name* they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18). Clearly, performing miracles “in Jesus’ name” means performing them with the authority of and on behalf of Jesus. The implication from this and the previous examples is that the disciples understand that their miracle-working is done in Jesus’ name and by Jesus’ authority. This understanding continues in Acts, where we can assume the disciples not only continue to work miracles in Jesus’ name¹⁰⁰ but they also actually say “In Jesus’ name” as part of the process.¹⁰¹

The question we then come to is, in whose name did Jesus perform miracles, and by whose authority? In one passage, Jesus refers to “the miracles I do in my Father’s name” (John 10:25). Does this also suggest that Jesus’ miracles are also done by his Father’s authority? In other passages the suggestion is that God has endowed Jesus with God-like authority¹⁰² to forgive sins,¹⁰³ to judge,¹⁰⁴ to teach,¹⁰⁵ and to perform miracles.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, while Jesus performs the miracles on behalf of God, in contrast to the disciples he exercises *his own* authority.

Worker: A Historical & Theological Study, 347. Also see Nolland, who notes “These healings are not a matter of piety and answered prayer (Acts 3:12). Their significance is eschatological (Luke 11:20) and Christological (Luke 7:18-23; Acts 3:6; 9:34).” Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 210.

⁹⁸ Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49

⁹⁹ Matt 7:22

¹⁰⁰ Acts 3:16; 4:10, 30

¹⁰¹ Acts 3:6; 16:18 cf. Acts 19:13

¹⁰² Matt 28:18; John 17:2

¹⁰³ Matt 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24

¹⁰⁴ Matt 21:23-27; Mark 11:28-33; John 2:18; 5:27

¹⁰⁵ Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32

¹⁰⁶ Matt 9:8; Mark 1:27; Luke 4:36; 20:2

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For our discussion on Thursday, November 3, 2005
-Don Bromley

Chief arguments from my recent chapter:

1. **In examining the Synoptics, and especially Mark, compassion appears to be the chief motivation of Jesus' miracle-working. The evidentiary value of miracles, and their function as signs of Jesus' identity, appear to be later developments. (Putting this another way, it is only in looking back at the whole of Jesus' ministry in Mark that one can see Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In the other Gospels, each miracle seems to suggest this fact—and in John they are explicitly called "signs.")**
 - a) Compassion can be seen to be the meta-narrative of God's relationship with Israel.
 - b) Jesus compares healing to rescuing an animal.
 - c) Jesus is frequently described as acting out of compassion (*splagchnizomai*).

2. **(New) The connection between miracle-working and fulfillment of prophecy does not exist in Mark. It is suggested in Q, is developed primarily by Matthew, and is present to some extent in Luke and John. This suggests that 1) fulfillment of prophecy was not the chief way in which the crowds interpreted the historical Jesus' miracles, and 2) Jesus did not often speak of his miracle-working as fulfilling prophecy. Instead, the historical Jesus was a teacher (of the kingdom) and a powerful miracle-worker whose chief (if not only) motivation for healing was compassion. In Mark and Q, it is only after the Passion and Resurrection that we understand Jesus as Messiah.**

this is not an idea I developed in my recent chapter, so here are a few supporting arguments:

 - a) In Mark, there is no connection between Jesus' healings and fulfillment of prophecy.
 - b) In Q we have the response to John the Baptist (Matt 11:1-6//Luke 7:18-23) which links Jesus' miraculous ministry with fulfillment of prophecy.
 - c) In Matthew, the exorcisms and healings are interpreted as fulfilling prophecy.¹⁰⁷
 - d) Luke doesn't have the explicit fulfillment passages of Matthew, but those who see Jesus raise a dead boy exclaim that he is "a great prophet [who] has come to help his people."¹⁰⁸
 - e) In John, like Luke, the miracles lead people to believe that Jesus is the great prophet: "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14).

3. **There isn't much to suggest Jesus intended an evidentiary purpose to his miracles in Mark. This idea is developed in Matthew and Luke, and comes to fruition in John. Therefore, we might conclude that the "historical Jesus" did not emphasize the evidentiary value of miracles.**

¹⁰⁷ Matt 11:2-6; 12:15-21

¹⁰⁸ Luke 7:16

This is only briefly covered in my last paper, so I'm including some supporting statements here:

- a) The development of “faith”: In Mark, faith in Jesus *as a healer* is crucial, and is often present prior to the working of a miracle. In Matthew and Luke, this faith is expanded—it is no longer simply in Jesus as healer, but includes faith in Jesus’ authority, compassion, and his being sent from God. In John, faith and belief are in Jesus as Messiah/Son of God are the expected *result* of miracles.
- b) In Mark
 1. the Christological significance of the miracles is muted. The demons proclaim that Jesus is “the Son of God” or “Son of the Most High God” or “the Holy One of God”—but people do not.
 2. The chief reaction of people to Jesus’ miracles and healings is to be amazed and astonished, but not to believe in him or have faith in him.
 3. Only in the stilling of the storm do we have some suggestion that Jesus is more than a miracle-worker: “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:35-41).
- c) In Q, some ambiguity about signs & wonders leading to repentance/belief:
 1. Miracles should lead to repentance (Matt 11:20-24//Luke 10:13-15) “Woe to you, Korazin!...”
 2. We have the opponents of Jesus demanding a sign, but none will be given. Matthew and Luke add that Jesus will be the sign of Jonah.
- d) In Matthew
 1. People (in addition to demons) witnessing Jesus’ miracles proclaim that he is the “Son of God,”¹⁰⁹ and people give praise *to God* for Jesus’ healings.
 2. Unlike Mark, those petitioning Jesus for miracles frequently address him as “Lord” (*kurios*).¹¹⁰
- e) In Luke
 1. As in Matthew, people are more than simply amazed at Jesus’ miracles—they praise God for them.¹¹¹
- f) In John
 1. The chief response to the miracles (“signs” in John) is belief and faith in Jesus. Now, the miracles serve primarily to demonstrate who Jesus is.
 2. Jesus suggests significant Christological significance in his miracles through his “I am” sayings, which correspond to many of his miracles:
 - a. the multiplication of loaves—“I am the bread of life.”
 - b. healing the man born blind—“I am the light of the world”
 - c. raising Lazarus—“I am the resurrection and the life.”
 3. As in Luke, but to a much greater degree, Jesus suggests that miracles can and ought to form a basis for faith:
 - a. “The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me” (10:25).

¹⁰⁹ Matt 14:33; 16:16

¹¹⁰ Matt 8:2, 6, 8; 9:28; 15:22, 25, 27; 17:15; 20:31, 33

¹¹¹ Luke 5:25; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43; 19:37

- b. “Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (10:38)
 - c. “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves” (14:12).
 - d. “If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father” (15:24).
- g) Miracles and discipleship:
- 1. There is no evidence in Mark that people became believers in or disciples of Jesus as a result of the miracles.¹¹²
 - 2. In Luke, Simon, James and John follow Jesus after witnessing the large catch of fish (5:1-11).
 - 3. In John, the disciples put their faith in Jesus after witnessing the turning of water into wine (2:1-12).
- 4. In the terminology of Werner Kahl, Jesus becomes less the mediator of the Holy Spirit’s numinous power (MNP) and more the bearer of this numinous power (BNP) in himself.**
- a) In the Synoptics:
 - 1. Jesus is described as being empowered by the *Spirit* of God. Not so in John.
 - 2. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the Spirit sends/leads Jesus.
 - 3. Matthew and Luke have Jesus quoting Isaiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...”
 - 4. Luke has Jesus operating “In the power of the Spirit”
 - 5. Matthew and Luke have Jesus exorcising by the power/Spirit of God.
 - b) In John:
 - 1. Jesus is never described as being filled with the Spirit.
 - 2. Jesus will send the Spirit to the disciples
 - 3. Jesus imparts the Spirit through his breath
- 5. The work of the kingdom—preaching, healing and exorcism—is explicitly passed on to the his disciples. Nevertheless, we see some key differences between Jesus’ miracle-working and that of the disciples:**
- a) The disciples are sometimes unsuccessful (e.g. the case of the boy with a demon)
 - b) The disciples are to pray for miracles, whereas Jesus never does.
 - c) The disciples perform miracles “In the name of Jesus”, whereas Jesus does them by his own authority.

¹¹² There is one instance, the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20), where the healed man wishes to go with Jesus.

IDEAS NOT PICKED UP IN MY LAST CHAPTER

6. In Acts, we can see evidence that the disciples understood miracle-working as an act of compassion:

- a) In the healing of the lame beggar (3:1-16; 4:5-22), the motivation seems none other than simple compassion:
 1. Healing compared to giving money to a beggar: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.
 2. Peter later describes the healing as “an act of kindness [*euergesia*] shown to a cripple.”
- b) Peter describes Jesus’ ministry as “doing good [*euergeton*] and healing” (10:38). Is this a hendiadys? If not healings and exorcisms, what does “doing good” refer to?

7. In Acts, we also have evidence that the evidentiary and evangelistic value of miracle-working is understood:

- a) Healing miracles are included as “signs and wonders” (*semeion kai terata*).
- b) Philip’s miracles: “When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said” (8:6).
- c) “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders” (14:3).
- d) At the Council at Jerusalem: There is a connection between “the miraculous signs and wonders” (v. 12) which Barnabas and Paul recount, and the conversion of the Gentiles (v. 19).

8. Paul’s letters suggest that some Christians understood miracle-working primarily as an act of power, or as divine confirmation. Paul seems to suggest that rather, miracle-working (like other gifts) is to be done with love, for the purpose of building up the church. Paul suggests that yes, the miracles do have evidentiary value, but that is being overplayed—he would rather rejoice in his sufferings that his powers.

- a) Miracle-working as gifts (*charismata*) for the benefit of the church:
 1. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12)
 2. “But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” (1 Cor 14)
 3. “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.”
- b) Miracle-working as a sign, “marks” (*semeia*) of an apostle, and evangelistic:
 1. “Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers... So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”” (1 Cor 14)
 2. [missionary success] “...by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit.” (Rom 15:17-22)

3. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:4-5).
 4. “...because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Th. 1:5).
- c) Paul’s ambivalence about miracle-working power:
1. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12)
 2. “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing. The things that mark an apostle — signs, wonders and miracles — were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”
 3. “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing.” (2 Th.)

9. In the church fathers, the miraculous gifts are *primarily* acts of compassion, but also have important evangelistic value:

- a) Ignatius describing Jesus’ signs and wonders: “He also lived a holy life, and healed every kind of sickness and disease among the people, and wrought signs and wonders for the benefit of men” (To the Magnesians, XI).
- b) Justin Martyr affirms the idea of miracles as both gifts for the body and signs of Jesus’ identity:
 1. Gifts: “For one receives the spirit of understanding, another of counsel, another of strength, another of healing, another of foreknowledge, another of teaching, and another of the fear of God.” (Dialogue with Trypho, XXXIX)
 2. Signs: “By the works and by the attendant miracles” we know that Jesus is the new law and covenant.” (Dialogue with Trypho, XI)
 3. Signs: Jesus’ miraculous deeds “compelled the men who lived at that time to recognize Him.”
- c) Origen primarily affirms the evidentiary value of miracle-working, but also speaks of them as gifts of the Spirit:
 1. Evidentiary: “For they could not without the help of miracles and wonders have prevailed on those who heard their new doctrines and new teachings to abandon their national usages, and to accept their instructions at the danger to themselves even of death.” (Against Celsus, 1.46)
 2. Evidentiary: Those who heard them “would not have renounced the old-established usages of their fathers, and been induced to adopt notions so different from those in which they had been brought up, unless they had been moved by some extraordinary power, and by the force of miraculous events.” (Against Celsus, 8.47)

3. Gifts of the Spirit: “And there are still preserved among Christians traces of that Holy Spirit which appeared in the form of a dove. They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events, according to the will of the Logos.” (Against Celsus 8.46)
- d) Irenaeus affirms miracles chiefly as *acts of compassion*, which have evangelistic benefit:
1. “But in the Church, sympathy, and compassion, and steadfastness, and truth, for the aid and encouragement of mankind, are not only displayed without fee or reward, but we ourselves lay out for the benefit of others our own means; and inasmuch as those who are cured very frequently do not possess the things which they require, they receive them from us.” (Against Heresies, 2.XXXI.2)
 2. “Wherefore, also, those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years. And what shall I more say? It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the Church, [scattered] throughout the whole world, has received from God, in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and which she exerts day by day for the benefit of the Gentiles, neither practicing deception upon any, nor taking any reward (Comp. Acts 8:9, 18) from them [on account of such miraculous interpositions]. For as she has received freely (Matt. 10:8) from God, freely also does she minister [to others].” (Against Heresies, 2.XXXII.4)
 3. “Calling upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, she has been accustomed to work miracles for the advantage of mankind, and not to lead them into error. If, therefore, the name of our Lord Jesus Christ even now confers benefits [upon men], and cures thoroughly and effectively all who anywhere believe on Him...” (Against Heresies, 2.XXXII.5)

Monday, November 7, 2005

Dear Dr. Nolland,

Here are some notes and observations for our meeting today at 4:30pm.

Miracles in the Old Testament

Examining the function of miracles in the OT proves quite helpful. The various purposes are:

1. To demonstrate the LORD (Yahweh) is God.
 - a. That the Egyptians will acknowledge the LORD: (“And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD...” Exod 7:5)
 - b. That Pharaoh would acknowledge the LORD: (“By this you will know that I am the LORD” Exod 7:17)
 - c. That the Israelites would acknowledge the LORD: (“...so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.” Exod 10:1-2)
 - d. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire — he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.” (1 Ki 18:24)
2. To affirm the person and testimony of a prophet:
 - a. “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’” (Exod 4)
 - b. “And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” (Exod 14:31)
 - c. [after Elijah raises the dead son]: Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.” (1 Ki 17:24)
3. Judgment:
 - a. The Flood
 - b. Destruction of Sodom
 - c. Lot’s wife
 - d. On the Egyptians: “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.” (Exod 6:6)
 - e. Miriam’s leprosy (Num 12)
4. Compassion / Provision / Rescue
 - a. Dividing the Red Sea
 - b. Manna & Quails
 - c. Moses provides water (Ex 14, 15, 17)

- d. Elijah raises the widow's son (1 Ki 17). While the motive here is compassion, the woman's reply suggest that the miracle affirms Elijah's status as a prophet from God (see above).
 - e. Elijah increases the widow of Zarephath's meal and oil (1 Ki 17, referenced in Luke 4:26) Interesting that Jesus compares his miracles to this! Compassion for the widow and her son (they were going to starve), as well as self preservation, seems the only motivation for this miracle
 - f. Elisha raises the Shunammite's son (2 Ki 4)
 - g. Elisha feeds 100 men (2 Ki 4)
 - h. Elisha retrieves a borrowed axe head (2 Ki 6)
5. Evidentiary:
- a. "Gideon replied, 'If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign ('ot) that it is really you talking to me...'" (Judg 6:17)
6. Non-miraculous: A Symbol or Symbolic Event
- a. "And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you — they will both die on the same day." (1 Sam 2:34)

It's interesting that the two individuals who appear with Jesus at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah, are two of the preeminent miracle-workers in the Old Testament!

When we find the language of signs ('ot) and wonders (*mofet*) referring to miracles in the OT, it is almost always referring to the miracles performed by Moses (or God through Moses) upon the Egyptians, or to a lesser extent the rescue through the Red Sea. It does not refer to the miracles of provision, such as the water, manna or quail. Also, the healing miracles of Elijah and Elisha are not referred to as signs or wonders.

It seems quite reasonable, then, to believe that when Jesus' opponents demand signs and wonders, they have Moses' miracles in mind. There is nothing to suggest that healings and exorcisms would have been considered "signs and wonders," at least not from an OT perspective. It may not have been until much after Jesus' death that these two concepts were related, as we see it in John and Acts.

The Purpose of Jesus' Miracle-Working Beyond Compassion Looking for an Alternative to "Evidence"

In my previous paper I suggested that the miracle-working of Jesus was primarily motivated by compassion. I also suggested an "evidentiary" purpose for the miracles, which I argued was a later development. I chose the word "evidentiary" because I was trying to communicate the way in which miracles give "evidence" for something beyond themselves, are signs. However, "evidence" is not a good descriptor, as it suggests a forensic usage—e.g. evidence in a court of law. It doesn't seem that miracles are intended in the NT as something that someone should "weigh" against other evidence in coming to a decision about something.

An interesting usage of the word "sign" (*semeion*), which John uses for Jesus' miracles, occurs in Luke: "This child is destined to cause the falling [*ptosis*] and rising [*anastasis*] of many in Israel, and to be a *sign* that will be spoken against [denied, refuted--*antilego*], so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed [*apokalupthosin*]" (2:34). While this prophecy refers to Jesus' life as a whole, it certainly applies to his miracle-working, which has the tendency to reveal the hearts of those who witness it.

If we can take Luke 2:34 as a paradigm for Jesus' life and ministry, including his miracles (which I would argue), it suggests that the miracles do not so much convince or convert, but rather they provoke a response to God **by revealing God in Jesus**. Jesus is portrayed as acting for or on behalf of God, so that however people respond to him, they are responding likewise to God. They can either recognize the miracles as the work of God, or they can deny them as such, ascribing them to evil.

That the miracles primarily serve to reveal God acting in Jesus is confirmed by the response Jesus expects from those who witness his miracles: belief (that the Father is in him, and he in the Father), repentance, and thanksgiving.

The miracles reveal God (the Father) working in Jesus. This is suggested in Mark (2:12), and in Matthew and Luke we have the crowds often responding to Jesus' miracles with praise *to God*.

- The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. *And they praised the God of Israel.* (Matt 15:31)
- They were all filled with awe and *praised God*. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "*God has come to help his people.*" (Luke 7:16)
- Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, *praising God*. When all the people saw it, they also *praised God*. (Luke 18:43)

More significantly, in John it is clear from Jesus' own words. In three cases, Jesus clearly suggests that the miracles demonstrate **that he is in the Father and the Father is in him**. In other words, the miracles reveal the Father in Jesus:

- "Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles (*ergon*), that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (10:38)

- “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles (*ergon*) themselves” (14:11).

In the third case, the opponents who have seen the miracles hate not just Jesus, but both Jesus and the Father. The implication here is that the miracles reveal the Father also, so that one who hates Jesus is also hating the Father:

- “He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles (*ergon*), and yet they have hated both me and my Father” (15:24).

What is the sin Jesus is referring to? As the context suggests, the sin is hating Jesus, not unbelief in the miracles *per se*. While the opponents have witnessed Jesus’ miracles, they do not acknowledge that they are the work of the Father. Rather, they ascribe it to demons (Matt 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; John 7:20; 8:52; 10:20). According to Jesus, that is the unforgivable sin: to see the work of God and not acknowledge it as such (Matt 12:31).

According to these passages, we can conclude that the miracles demonstrate or reveal that God (the Father) is in (working through) Jesus. This also makes sense of the other two responses that Jesus expects from those who witness his miracles: repentance and thanksgiving.

“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented (*metanoeo*) long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt 11:21//Luke 10:13). Why should miracles lead to repentance? Because miracles reveal the immanent presence of God—which has a tendency to reveal the inner heart:

Peter witnesses a miraculous catch of fish: “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8)

Isaiah, seeing the Lord seated on his throne (not a miracle *per se*, but an epiphany): “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:5)

Elsewhere, when a sign is demanded of Jesus, he suggests that his opponents will only be given “the sign of the prophet Jonah”:

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. (Luke 11:29-30 // Mark 16:4 // Matthew 12:39-41)

Jonah was called to preach judgment on the Ninevites, so that they might repent. The only “sign” Jesus will give to these opponents is the sign of Jonah—a proclamation of judgment and a call to repentance. Jesus suggests that Tyre and Sidon would have

repented “in sackcloth and ashes” at Jesus’ miracles. Interestingly, the king of Nineveh “covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust” in repentance (Jonah 3:5-6). Can we conclude that Jesus is suggesting in Matthew 12 that his preaching and miracle-working is the new sign of Jonah?

Of course, we find other connections between repentance and miracles in the Synoptics. Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven/God is near.” (Matt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). We have already examined the connection between miracles and the kingdom of God. Can we then conclude that this too is a suggestion that repentance is the appropriate response to the kingdom of God—which is manifest in miracles?

It seems clear then that Jesus is refusing the request to perform signs and wonders like Moses did in Egypt. Rather, Jesus is calling his opponents (and everyone else) to repentance! If his opponents have seen his miracles and ascribed them to demons, what purpose would further signs and wonders in the heavens serve?

This is further suggested by the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. There, the rich man requests Abraham that he be sent to his brothers, because, “If someone from the dead goes to them, they will *repent*.” Abraham replies (and here we can hear Jesus’ voice): “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

It would seem reasonable to conclude that if Jesus is calling his opponents to repentance, he also does not believe that miracles, signs and wonders will lead them to repent—for they haven’t listened to Moses and the Prophets (which testify about Jesus; John 5:39-40).

Finally, we have direct evidence that Jesus expected thanksgiving to God as response to healing: [after healing the 10 lepers] Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise *to God* except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:17-19)

Miracle-Working in Q

In my previous paper I argued for a chronological development of the miracle tradition as such: Mark→Matthew & Luke→John

Assuming this chronological scheme, I made a few conclusions:

1. Compassion as a motivation is emphasized in Mark, retained in Matthew & Luke, but minimized in John. It therefore diminishes over time.
2. The “evidentiary” function of miracles does not exist in Mark, but is developed in Matthew & Luke, and comes to fruition in John. In other words, the response of belief to miracles develops over time.
3. The prophecy fulfillment aspect of the miracles does not exist in Mark, is introduced in Matthew & Luke, and takes a different emphasis in John.
4. In Mark the focus is on the kingdom’s presence. In John it is on Jesus’ identity. The kingdom of God as a paradigm for the miracles diminishes over time. Instead, Jesus’ divinity becomes the new paradigm.
5. Over time, Jesus becomes less the man empowered by the Spirit and more the omnipotent Son of God.

I’d like to now examine the Q tradition (material common to Matthew and Luke, but not Mark) to see how it aligns with these conclusions. I’ll assume that Q is both later than Mark and earlier than either Matthew or Luke. Looking at it chronologically: Mark→Q→Matthew & Luke→John. Therefore, we should still represent the earlier theological outlook of Mark, but may be further developed in the direction of Matthew and Luke.

I’d also like to examine the redactional tendencies of both Matthew and Luke vis-à-vis the miracle stories and sayings, as we can ascribe these a later date than material borrowed directly from Mark or Q. This, more than anything else, may give a good perspective on theological developments over time.

It seems evident that the recognition of Jesus as one who fulfills prophecy is present in Q. Most clearly this is demonstrated by the existence of Jesus’ response to John the Baptist in Matthew 11 // Luke 7: “Are you the one who was to come”? Similarly, we have Jesus’ claim that many prophets and righteous men (kings) wanted “to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it” (Matt 13:17//Luke 10:24). Likewise, we have in Q the key saying linking miracles to repentance: “Woe to you, Korazin!...” (Matt 11:21//Luke 10:13). **From this it is safe to conclude that the miracles were more than simply acts of a mighty wonder-worker. Rather, the earliest traditions, represented in Q, suggests both the fulfillment of prophecy and a revelatory/evidentiary purpose to the miracles.**

We also find a strong connection between healing/exorcism and the kingdom of God in Q. This is chiefly demonstrated in the Beelzebul controversy, in which the kingdom’s presence is directly linked to exorcism (Matt 12:28//Luke 11:20). We also find this in the commissions to preach the kingdom, exorcise, and heal (Matt 10:7-8//Luke 10:8-9).

If we examine the ways in which Matthew has added to or changed material from Mark, we come to these conclusions:

1. Whereas Mark in the miracle narratives portrays Jesus primarily as an exorcist, Matthew balances exorcisms with healings. This is done either by deleting exorcisms, changing exorcisms to healings, or adding healings to exorcisms (Matt 9:35 // Mark 6:6; Matt 10:1 // Mark 6:7).
2. Matthew adds many examples of prophecy fulfillment in Jesus. (Matt 8:16-17 // Mark 1:32-34)
3. Matthew adds language of the “kingdom” and “kingdom of heaven” where it doesn’t appear in Mark, in connection with healing and exorcism (Matt 4:23-24 // Mark 1:39; Matt 9:35 // Mark 6:6;
4. Matthew removes one compassion reference which exist in Mark (Matt 8:1-4 // Mark 1:40-45). On the other hand, he adds two references which do not exist in Mark (Matt 12:9-14 // Mark 3:1-6; Matt 20:29-34 // Mark 10:46-52)

Examining Luke’s use of Mark, we can conclude:

1. Luke adds “kingdom” and “kingdom of God” language, often in connection with healing and exorcism (Luke 8:1 // Mark 6:6; Luke 9:1-2 // Mark 6:7; Luke 9:10-11 // Mark 6:30-34)
2. Luke deemphasizes exorcisms in relation to healings. This is done either by deleting exorcisms, changing exorcisms to healings, or adding healings to exorcisms (Luke 4:44 // Mark 1:39; Luke 9:1-2 // Mark 6:6; Luke 9:3-6 // Mark 6:8-13)
3. Although we have two instances in which the compassion motivation is removed by Luke (Luke 5:12-16 // Mark 1:40-45; Luke 9:10-11 // Mark 6:30-34), we also have some evidence that Luke understood Jesus’ motive as compassion as much as or more so than Mark. Take for instance the story of the Widow of Nain, which we have only in Luke. Here, more than anywhere else, Jesus is described as moved by compassion: “When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her [*esplagchnisthe ep’ aute*] and he said, ‘Don’t cry’” (7:13).

This evidence challenges my previous conclusions in two ways. First, it is apparent that far from moving away from a kingdom paradigm, Matthew and Luke, although later than Mark and Q, have emphasized it even more so. Secondly, it does not appear that compassion has at all diminished as a motivation for Jesus in Matthew and Luke, although they are later.