

All boards: New Testament options

New Testament miracles

Key concepts and facts on miracles

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The place of miracles

Between the four Gospels, 34 miracles are recorded and a further 15 summaries of Jesus' miraculous works are made. Despite the considerable differences between the presentation of miracles in the Fourth Gospel and the synoptic Gospels, miracles are as integral a part of Jesus' ministry in the Johannine record as they are for the synoptists.

Other key episodes, such as the transfiguration and the resurrection, involve miraculous activity and supernatural phenomena. From the beginning of Jesus' life his identity is confirmed by the miracles that accompany his ministry.

Background to New Testament miracles

The ancient world made little distinction between the works of God and the works of nature, and tales of the miraculous were almost taken for granted in both the Hellenism and Judaism of Jesus' time. Arguably, miracles may have been attributed to Jesus as a matter of course, with no consideration for historicity. Hellenistic miracle workers were popular, and Jesus fits the first-century picture of a wonder worker, whose popularity was based on charismatic authority.

There are important differences between Jesus and popular miracle workers, however:

- Jesus heals and exorcises with a word, often from a distance.
- He attributes his authority to God alone.
- He does not use incantations or spells.
- In many cases he encourages silence after a miracle.

Jesus' miracles are signs of the kingdom. They point beyond themselves. Interestingly, Géza Vermes classified Jesus as a miracle worker in the tradition of the Hasidim (Jewish holy men), although the evangelists clearly present Jesus as more than a peripatetic miracle worker.

The purpose of miracles

To demonstrate the divine authority of Jesus

The miracles in the synoptic Gospels serve to demonstrate the source of Jesus' divine power and confirm his identity. Mark 1:1–13 makes it clear that Jesus is the Son of God, but the episodes that follow confirm that identity to the reader. The characters in the narrative wonder about it, asking 'Who is this?' But the authority that Jesus demonstrates can only be attributed to God. He displays authority over areas that were traditionally the province of God alone:

- demons (1:25)
- sickness (1:31)
- the forgiveness of sin (2:5)
- nature (4:39)
- death (5:42)

In all these areas Jesus shows that he is engaged in a battle with cosmic forces which he is destined to win. The evil spirits recognise Jesus as Son of God, the one who has the power to overthrow the kingdom of Satan, and when he calms the storm Jesus rebukes the sea as if it were an evil spirit. Such authority is bestowed on believers: when the 70 go out on their own mission (Luke 10:1ff.) they too are equipped to cast out demons, and in Mark 16:17 Jesus promises that all who believe will heal the sick.

To show the kingdom of God has arrived

Miracles are signs of kingdom power. In Luke 1:20 & //s Jesus declares: 'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.' Even though the reality of the kingdom in its fullness lies in the future, through exorcisms Jesus demonstrates that it has become a reality through his authority exercised on Earth. The Fourth Gospel includes no exorcisms, possibly because the writer understands Jesus' cosmic battle with Satan as being already won — 'He has no power over me' (John 14:30). No skirmishes with demons are necessary to demonstrate a gradual takeover.

As arenas for conflict

Conflict has an important narrative purpose, revealing characters' understanding of Jesus as well as the reason for opposition. The Jewish authorities are frequently presented as failing to recognise the true source of Jesus' authority to work miracles, attributing it instead to Satan (Mark 3:22 and //s) and as blasphemy (Mark 2:7 and //s). Sabbath healings become arenas for conflict as the Pharisees set out to test Jesus (Mark 3:2 and //s).

To fulfil Old Testament promises

Isaiah 35:5 anticipates the messianic ages when the deaf will hear, the lame will leap and the blind will see. The formerly blind man defends Jesus before the Pharisees, claiming: 'Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of the blind' (John 9:32).

When John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus to establish if he is the one for whom he has prepared, Jesus claims that his miraculous works should speak for themselves: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised' (Matthew 11:4–5).

To reveal misunderstanding

Even Jesus' disciples are not able to perceive the significance of his miracles. When they get in the boat after the feeding miracles they still worry that they will not have enough bread: "'Do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?'" Then he said to them, "Do you still not understand?" (Mark 8:19–21).

There is no guarantee that Jesus' miracles will lead to a proper understanding of his divine person. Others, however, do understand. The centurion (Matthew 8:5ff.) has sufficient faith in Jesus to know that he does not need to visit his house to heal his servant, drawing the response from Jesus 'In no one in Israel have I found such faith.'

• Miracles must be seen in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark follows the account of the transfiguration with a passion prediction (9:12ff.) and again after the healing of a boy with an evil spirit (9:30ff.). The travellers on the road to Emmaus describe Jesus as a 'prophet mighty in deed and word', but it is not until Jesus explains the significance of his death that their eyes are opened to recognise him.

• Miracles have an inextricable link with faith. Those who urged Jesus to perform miracles out of curiosity or as a challenge are not presented as having true faith. For those with faith, however, miracles are sought in a spirit of humility (Mark 5:28, 7:28). Faith may be demonstrated on behalf of the sick (2:3), but fear suggests a lack of faith that grows out of hardheartedness or misunderstanding (4:40).

Johannine signs

The Fourth Evangelist adopts the designation 'sign' rather than 'miracle'. In other words, Jesus' deeds are pointers to and indicators of his divine identity rather than mighty works to wonder at.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30–31

This is often thought to be a statement of the Fourth Evangelist's purpose. If so, then signs are at the heart of his theology. They point

to the divine nature of Jesus, which is the means of salvation for man.

Only seven signs are selected, presumably from a much wider store of material available to the Fourth Evangelist. Disputed signs are the walking on the water (6:16ff.), which is followed by no teaching discourse, and the spear thrust (19:34), which may link with Cana and the feeding of the five thousand (see Grassi, J. (1992) *The Secret Identity of the Beloved Disciple*, Paulist Press), but in itself has no miraculous content. The miraculous catch of fish forms part of the post-resurrection appearances and may be modelled on Luke 5.

There are no exorcisms. Jesus' victory over Satan is won before the cross, and his authority over the spiritual world is without question.