

**WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIRACLES IN RELATION TO
THE TEACHING OF JESUS? ARE THERE ANY PRINCIPLES THAT CAN
GUIDE OUR ATTITUDE TO MIRACLES TODAY?**

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1 Introduction

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus' ministry on earth was the miracles he performed, be they miraculous healings, casting out of demons, control over nature or raising of individuals from the dead. We will argue that the miracles had an essential role to play in relation to his message that the Kingdom of God was at hand, as foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The miracles also bore witness to his divinity as well as his humanity. Today, many find the miracles a stumbling block in relation to the Christian faith. We shall suggest arguments to show that their objections are misplaced.

2 Miracles and the Kingdom of God

A key aspect of the miracles is that by performing them, Jesus is underpinning his fulfilment of prophecy regarding the coming of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, he showed God's love for all of humanity, with his power working through Jesus. We may recall that the Jews were expecting God to establish his kingdom through his Messiah throughout much of the Old Testament. Following Isaiah, characteristics of the Kingdom are as set out in Jesus' sermon in Luke 4:16-17: "'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 oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'"

In a sense, this text foreshadows many of his miracles in that by miraculous healing Jesus was releasing those oppressed by disease – or more explicitly blind – who were themselves often the downtrodden of society. And by exorcising demons and defeating Satan in the Crucifixion and Resurrection he is setting free the prisoners – mankind enslaved by sin. Raising individuals from the dead saved them from the ultimate form of oppression – that by death – and underline his teaching about eternal life. Meanwhile the nature miracles are to be seen as part of the good news to the poor and the proclamation of the Lord's favour – that he is in control of our lives and not impersonal forces – and he loves to give good gifts (wine, food, fish, calm after the storm). The feeding of the 5,000 foreshadows the promise of a banquet (Luke 14:13-24) in the future kingdom. The nature miracles also indicate that Jesus has come to

release fallen creation as well as mankind from the power of sin – what Lewis (1947) calls the “miracles of the new creation”.

Overall, these “deeds” were essential to accompany Jesus’ words in developing understanding of his message of the kingdom, in the same way that the miraculous deeds of the Exodus testified to the truth of God’s promises to the Israelites (Exodus 10:2). Again, since miracles were carried out already in the Old Testament by the prophets, for example the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah in 1 Kings 22. It would hence be expected of the Messiah that he would perform similar feats. Furthermore they stress that God himself expects us to act for him in gratitude for our salvation as emphasised in James 2:26 “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead”.

3 Miracles and Jesus’ divinity

A further and linked justification for the miracles is that Jesus thereby shows his divinity, forcing people then and now to come to a view on him. See John 2:11 after the miracle of water and wine “This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” When he is preparing to revive Lazarus he states in John 11:4 “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Related are Jesus’ sayings about his own nature that can be linked directly to his miracles, as in John 6:51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” after the feeding of the 5,000 and John 9:5 “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” during the healing of the blind man.” We may add that in showing his divinity Jesus does not seek to bring fame to himself but to show his father’s concern for the weak and helpless.

4 Faith, personal commitment and the resurrection

A central message of Jesus is that if we have faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. Faith in this sense is not just trust in him but a willingness to accept the need for personal change and adoption of God’s ways. Many miracles explicitly show the importance of faith for God to act, in that in many cases faith was

demanded before a miracle could be performed. In Mark 6:5-6 in Galilee it is recorded that “He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.” But at other times Jesus in a sense uses miracles to “grow faith”, as in John 9 where the blind man comes to faith after he is cured.

In this context, Jesus’ miracles may also be seen in relation to his promises that he will work through his followers after his Ascension, if their faith is strong. We note in particular in John 14:12 “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.” This passage, its subsequent fulfilment in Acts and in miraculous acts of Christians to this day underline that miracles were not to be acts of Jesus alone. Those acting in his name – effectively under the Kingdom of Heaven - would themselves be empowered to carry on miracles. Thereby they would help to develop faith in the people surrounding them and warn of God’s coming judgement.

Finally, a most important function of the miracles Jesus performed in his lifetime was to prepare us for the ultimate miracle, which was his resurrection from the dead. Its centrality to the whole Christian faith and to salvation is stressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:17 “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins”. Arguably, if Christ had not performed miracles in his lifetime – including raising the dead – the acceptance of the resurrection would be all the harder. And then the defeat of Satan would not be proven to man

5 Attitudes to miracles today and relevant apologetics

Turning from the miracles in Jesus’ teaching to our attitude to them today, it seems to me that we need to be robust in stressing that the miracles are “authentic and integral to the Gospels” and not an “optional extra” to Christian faith. I shall develop this attitude by addressing some key contemporary objections to miracles.

Scepticism about miracles grew up during the enlightenment, when it became a fixed belief that there were laws of nature based on normal and experimentally repeatable patterns of cause and effect that could not be broken. Since miracles are in effect

suspensions of these laws, they were “impossible”. David Hume was one of the first to put forward this view. There is a philosophical as well as a scientific problem here, not just whether miracles happen but whether a miracle can be logically defined. It is clearly important to acknowledge this view, which still pervades much of our thinking. Many would claim their senses have failed rather than admit a miracle.

But I would also emphasise that more recently both science and popular culture have become much more receptive to the idea of miracles. In the case of science, we have, for example, the development of Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty that stress that the “laws of nature” are not as fixed as previously thought. One may also note astrophysical theories of the beginning of the universe that suggest that six more dimensions that the four we perceive were present – which inter alia make sense of Jesus’ omnipresence and ability to perform miracles when followers pray in his name today (Ross 2000). Meanwhile, the growth of New Age beliefs, misconceived as they are, have imported the miraculous and the spiritual world generally back into our culture via the mysticism of the East. People are accordingly more receptive to the truth as they meet it in the Bible, even when it includes miraculous events.

Another ground for scepticism may be doubt about the integrity of the authors of the Bible and the texts that have come down to us. I would note that the Bible texts have come under intense scrutiny from which they have emerged very well, as for example being written close to the event and hence unlikely to have myths appended. The events are related in a “matter of fact”, “fitting” and not “fantastic” way that other stories of great men of the time are. I would also reply here that the greatest miracle – the resurrection – is the one that is most strongly attested to, with the reference in 1 Corinthians 15:6 for example “After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.” It was also reported by non-Christians such as Josephus and attested to by the willingness of the Apostles to die for Jesus’ sake. Acceptance of the resurrection – which as noted above is a sine qua non of the Christian faith, lends powerful support to the other miracles.

I would also suggest that we should also consider the greatest miracle which is all around us – God’s creation itself. Close consideration of the design features of the

universe and of life as stressed in Ross (2001) decisively rejects the possibility that what we see arises from chance. As the Father acted, so did the son in Colossians 1:15-16 “For by him all things were created...he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

6 Conclusion

A last point is to stress that miracles are still being performed by Jesus’ followers speaking in his name. There are authenticated cases of raising from the dead in Africa and China; and of feeding the many with very little by Heidi Baker in Mozambique; one can watch miracles occur around TV evangelist Benny Hinn and many authenticated miracles have occurred in the Airport church in Toronto. Speaking personally, I have met a woman who was dying of cancer when the tumours abruptly disappeared after prayer, to the bafflement of doctors; I have been part of a session of praying round a house which ended in a form of exorcism of a very active spirit (that pushed me against the wall)- after which the children of the house stopped habitual nightmares. And the change in lives – including my own, as a consequence of becoming a Christian is also a miracle that forms a testimony to the other miracles in the Bible.

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