

# God's Reign in Miracles

---

Written by Dr Gerard Hall, Head, School of Theology, McAuley Campus, ACU National, 30th October, 2002

Accessed May 2017 from [https://resource.acu.edu.au/gehall/Hall\\_Miracles.htm](https://resource.acu.edu.au/gehall/Hall_Miracles.htm)

## *Science and Miracles*

We have said that Jesus' teaching on the reign of God was related to Israel's hopes of fulfilment and to answering the problem of evil. Yet, if Jesus merely challenged people with strange stories and confronting sayings, he would be easily dismissed as just another religious nutter. Jesus not only spoke about the kingdom, he reinforced his message through what came to be described as wondrous deeds and miraculous events. To modern ears, influenced by scientific understandings of causality and the laws of nature, Jesus' miracle stories are met with understandable scepticism. And yet, contemporary secular culture greets stories of the paranormal with an increased degree of interest. Science itself with its array of new explanations of cosmic processes (relativity, quantum, chaos and parallel universe theories, to name four) seems more rather than less open to the dimension of mystery at the heart of our universe. The old rationalist rejection of the miraculous is no longer on such sure ground.



Still, the contemporary mindset remains more than a little bemused at the miraculous events attributed to Jesus. Again, we are forced to ask two questions: one historical, the other modern. How did the Jewish people of Jesus' day understand his miracles? And, did they actually happen? In answer to the second question, there is much we cannot know. What we can say with certainty is that many people believed Jesus was indeed a worker of miracles. Yet, even here, biblical scholars disagree with regard to which reported miracles were considered historical during Jesus' earthly life and to what degree they have been redacted by post-Resurrection belief in Jesus as Christ, Lord and Saviour. To answer the modern question of "what actually happened?" we need first to answer the historical question of how first century Jewish people understood miracles in their own time, place and culture.

## *Miracles in Judaism*

Miracles, in fact, do not play a major role in the tradition of Israel. Exceptions to this are miraculous signs and events associated with Moses at the time of the Exodus, with the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Book of Kings, and with accounts in the Book of Daniel. There are very few stories of healings and resuscitations. Certainly, there is nothing in the Hebrew Scriptures to compare with the miracle performances attributed to Jesus in the Gospels.

A few scholars argue that Jesus fits more neatly into the tradition of the magician or sorcerer. However, this parallel does not work well. Magicians did not see themselves as proclaiming a religious mission. Their goals were narrower. They worked secretly, using magical formulae and claiming to be adept at manipulating spirits. As well, the magician claimed to possess divine powers and did not refrain from overpowering the will of the person on whom the magic was being induced. In contrast, Jesus' miracles usually occur in public places; there is no magical formula; they are performed in the name of God rather than Jesus himself; they do not require the submission of the person's will but faith in the healing power of God. Nor, as we shall see, did Jesus claim to possess divine powers.

Nonetheless, for the Jewish mind, the question of the possibility of miracles was not in question. After all, Yahweh was the lord of creation and king of history: they reasoned that God could do whatever God liked. Cosmic and historical processes were not interpreted according to laws of nature: things happened either through God's power or the power of Satan. Not that human influence was discounted. Sickness, for example, was associated with the power of demons or with the evil committed by oneself or one's forebears. Such interpretations resulted in a high degree of social stigma and rejection experienced by those who suffered any form of physical disability or mental illness. Interestingly, the question of Jesus' ability to heal people and perform other wondrous signs was never in question. What was questioned was whether Jesus' miracles were due to God or the devil. The religious elites of Jesus' day were more inclined to the second opinion.

### *Historicity of Miracles*

Consequently, we approach the question of the historicity of the miracles with a very different set of concerns. The modern question, as we have called it, focuses on accuracy of detail and natural causes. If something is verified as true, we want to know how it is explained. An unfortunate element of most modern approaches to the question has been the simple--indeed simplistic--division between the natural and the supernatural. Christian theology throughout the twentieth century has gone a long way towards discarding such an unhealthy dichotomy. Theologians Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner provide foundations for appreciating a more dynamic and complex interrelation between grace and nature, God and the world. Still,

the popular imagination remains tied to explaining causation in terms of God or science. According to this scenario, God is or can be the explanation only for those things science cannot explain. However, what if God works in and through natural and cosmic processes?

The miracles attributed to Jesus are inexplicable, and will be logically dismissed of credibility, without this more refined worldview. In other words, the very notion of miracle needs redefinition. Rather than focus on causes, the newer definition is concerned with the religious significance attributed to remarkable events or deeds. Take for example the healing stories of Jesus. If such events occurred, they demonstrated out-of-the-ordinary powers. A religious explanation will state that God's power is evident in the healings. If it can be further demonstrated that some natural cause is at work in the



process this does not, in itself, dismiss the remarkable nature and religious relevance of the cures. However, that is a response of religious faith that goes beyond scientific hypotheses and empirical data. Non-believers will find this explanation unconvincing. Yet, for religious believers, all the scientific explanations of the origins of the universe at the Big Bang only serve to increase rather than diminish their faith in the miracle of God's creation.

It may seem that this has not taken us very far with regard to establishing the historicity of particular miracle-stories of Jesus. We know that Jesus is acclaimed as one who heals the blind, lame, lepers and the deaf; he casts out demons, raises the dead to life, calms the seas, walks on water and changes water into wine. We also know that the Gospel accounts do not pretend to historical accuracy: they reflect the faith of the early Church in Jesus who has power over death itself. This is to say that some serious editing has transformed original events into magnified versions of those events. By the time the Gospels are being written, few if any eyewitnesses are present to authenticate historical detail. Can we go further than this in our task of verifying the miracle-stories?

Many scholars suggest we can. They divide miracles into various categories: healings and exorcisms; raising from the dead; nature miracles. Generally, it is accepted there is high historical probability that Jesus did indeed heal and exorcise people. Among reasons for this judgment is the fact that the healings and exorcisms are from the earliest strata of the Jesus tradition. Second, they are unique, numerous and central to all Gospel portraits of Jesus. Third, opponents of Jesus do not deny his healing powers--they simply attribute those powers to other causes including, in one case, "the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons"

(Mk.3:22). Fourth, the ministry of Jesus' proclamation of God's reign is fully coherent with his role as healer and exorcist: the nearness of God's kingdom brings liberation from all kinds of oppression including sickness of body, mind and spirit.

Scholars are more reluctant to attribute historical probability to nature miracles which parallel stories from other traditions. They suggest these stories are most likely applied to Jesus as a way of indicating his special divine status. Stories of Jesus raising people from the dead also receive an unenthusiastic reception on historical grounds--although a scholar as significant as John Meier does leave the way open for the possible historicity of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus (Mk.5:21-43). This miracle-story, as written, is relatively unadorned by the kind of theological overlay that expresses early Christian faith. The position on the historicity of miracles taken here does not pretend to do more than outline the major features of contemporary scholarship in the field. It affirms that Jesus was in some sense a miracle-worker even though the question of the historicity of particular miracle-events remains unresolved. Our final task is to examine the significance of Jesus the miracle-worker within the framework of his public life and ministry.

### *Miracles and Reign of God*

People have sometimes used the miracles as proofs of Jesus' divine status. As understandable as this may be, we can be fairly certain nothing was further from the mind of Jesus himself. In the context of everything we know about Jesus' public life and ministry, there is nothing to suggest he ever performs miracles to bring attention to himself. In fact, the Gospels show Jesus refusing this kind of self-referential miracle (Mk.8:11-12). The referent of Jesus' actions is always God-*Abba*-Father whose coming reign Jesus proclaims through word and deed. When events are proclaimed miraculous they are, from Jesus' own perspective, nothing more and nothing less than indications that God's healing, saving and redeeming power is not merely a reality of past and future, but something available to people in the here-and-now.

This is where the parables and miracles complement each other. We have seen that parables are subversive stories shattering the self-enclosed worlds of the rich and powerful. God's kingdom arrives here to shock the accepted view of what is good and virtuous. Beyond those shattered worlds, Jesus' actions in curing people of disease point to another dimension of the reign of God that heals, liberates and saves. Luke's Jesus begins his public ministry by reciting the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, give sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free" (4:18-19). In Jesus' time, and perhaps in our own, this message of God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed had been lost. The whole of Jesus' ministry challenges people to a new vision

of a liberating, loving God who sides with the marginalised. His healings and exorcisms are metaphors or signs of the reality of such a God.



Miracles in Jesus' ministry are, then, best understood as dynamic signs of the nearness of God's kingdom. They are not merely actions of a compassionate social worker responding to people in need. There is, for example, no suggestion that Jesus tries to heal everyone who suffers physical disability and mental illness. In this sense we can say that Jesus' ministry is an expression of a religious mission. It is God-centred. God is the answer to people's hopes for fulfilment; God is the answer to the overcoming of evil. What the miracles show in Jesus' ministry is that the God-answer is not a matter of philosophical debate; it is a reality that can be already experienced by those who believe in the reign of God. Although God's victory over suffering and evil is far from complete, the miracles are signs of the coming victory. They also challenge those who place their faith in political power, religious laws or the Temple itself as the final answer to human happiness. For this reason, Jesus' miracles also turn out to be politically subversive acts.

In the story of Jesus healing the man with a paralysed hand, there is direct confrontation with the religious elite. The issue at stake is the right of Jesus to heal on the Sabbath. A legalistic interpretation of Jewish law treated the Sabbath as ultimate. Although respecting the Law and the Sabbath, Jesus does not hesitate to relegate both to a lower level than the experience of God's reign and healing power. Matthew tells us that after Jesus healed the man, "the Pharisees left and made plans to kill Jesus" (12:14). The determination of Jewish leaders to kill Jesus reaches a climax after the Temple incident where Jesus does two things: he drives out the petty capitalists for misusing God's house; and he heals the blind and crippled who, against Jewish law, come to visit him in the Temple (Mtt.21:12-17). Jesus' healing miracles are, then, correctly interpreted as subversive acts threatening religious and political interests. They show that the powerful and wealthy had too much to lose if this message of God's liberating love for the poor and oppressed got out of hand.

In this sense, Jesus' miracles are not only signs of the kingdom; they also dramatise political aspects of his mission. Such an interpretation is misunderstood if it turns Jesus into a modern-day social revolutionary. Certainly, miracles empower certain people (mainly social outcasts) and subvert the power of others (mainly the establishment). However, what Jesus makes clear throughout his mission is that all power and authority belong to God; and that God alone is the answer to human fulfilment and the problem of evil. Jesus' teaching on the reign of God begins with the call to repent and believe. Whenever he reaches out to people with healing power, the question of faith in God's power to break into human lives and human history is paramount. At the conclusion of miracle-stories, Jesus often states: "Your faith has made you whole" (Mk.5:25-34). Elsewhere, it is maintained Jesus could not work many signs because people lacked faith (Mk.6:5). On other occasions, Jesus' miracle-actions are associated with the forgiveness of sins (Lk.5:17-26) or with the call to prayer and thanksgiving (Mk.5:19-20).

Miracles are central to Jesus' ministry on behalf of the kingdom. Their purpose is not to divinise Jesus, but to reveal the power of God at work in unexpected ways. They call people to conversion of heart, vision and action so that they too become signs of God's dynamic reign in the form of fully inclusive, healing, liberating community. As recorded in the Gospels, miracles show how the mystery of God's plan demands faith, forgiveness, prayer and thanksgiving. The miracles also reveal that God's reign touches every aspect of life including bodily healing, spiritual wholeness and overturning human prejudice and unjust social systems. Finally, beyond questions of historicity, miracle-stories of Jesus raising the dead and nature-miracles point to the early Church's belief that Jesus reveals a God who is also sovereign over death and the whole creation.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to realise the New Quest for the historical Jesus is ongoing and will never achieve total consensus. Notwithstanding differences of interpretation, the emerging pattern accepted by all recognized scholars today is that Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher and prophet who understood himself and was understood by others with respect to the parameters of first century Judaism. Within that context, he probably shared the contemporary belief in the immanent arrival of the end-times. However, Jesus' public ministry reveals something more important, namely, that the coming reign of God is "good news" for those who can receive it. He spoke about this in his teachings and parables and symbolised its reality through his healings, exorcisms and other wondrous deeds.

Biblical scholarship can only take us so far. Nothing like a full-scale biography of Jesus is possible and much ambiguity remains. Nonetheless, for those who wish to understand his message, the parables and miracle-stories take us to the heart of the Gospel.

They subvert our ordinary way of seeing the world and invite us to be vulnerable so that the miracle of God's reign will be experienced even now among us.



## References

- Borg, Marcus J. *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994.
- Crossan, J. Dominic. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Funk, Robert W. and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Gowler, David B. *What are they saying about the Parables?* New York: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Jeremias, Joachim. *New Testament Theology*. Vol. 1. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.
- Loewe, William P. *The College Student's Introduction to Christology*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Luttenberger, Gerard H. *An Introduction to Christology*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998.
- Meier, John P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vols. 1 & 2. New York: Doubleday, 1991 & 1994.
- Perrin, Norman. *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.
- Powell, Mark. *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. New York: Seabury Press, 1979.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of the Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. Reprint. New York: Macmillan, 1968 [Original 1906].
- Wright, N. T. *Who Was Jesus?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992.

