

# Jesus' Miracles in Tradition and Christology

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In Response To

“*Jesus' Miracles and Christian Belief*” by James Taylor

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Thanks, Jim, for guiding us along a precarious ridge from which many have fallen headlong into metaphysical naturalism or, on the other side, into a-historical fideism. I'm grateful for your sure-footedness and your attention to detail. There were a few places where I might have chosen an alternate route, though I suspect we would still arrive at the same peak and you might even get there first. To switch metaphors from hiking to warfare (since God is not a Republican or a Democrat), think of me as a general laying siege to a city, with the luxury of choosing precisely where to attack. I'm wise enough not to assail your fortified philosophical battlements so I shall probe, instead, the strength of your Biblical interpretation.

Jim defines a “miracle” as “an abnormal, atypical or unusual way for God to make things happen.” This strikes me as an improvement on Hume but I wonder about its fit with the grassroots understanding of Jesus' entourage—those spectators who went home and told stories, and those disciples who would later publish hefty reports about Jesus' life. For starters, Jesus was not the only one in his day with a reputation for doing strange and powerful things, as we see from the NT itself (Mt 12:27; Lk 10:17; Acts 19:13) and from elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> And though some traced Jesus' powers to God, others pointed to Satan (Mk 3:22; Mt 9:34; 12:24 and pars.). To complicate things further, a standard critique of Christianity, at least since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, maybe earlier, is that Jesus was a *magician*.<sup>2</sup> What was perfectly clear to the crowds was that Jesus could do things others could not. What was less clear was the *source* of his power and, correspondingly, the *significance* of his acts.

My *alternate route along the ridge* or, if you prefer, my *angle of attack along the wall* (depending on whether you're voting for Kerry or Bush) has been shaped by two questions.

1. The question of *tradition and transmission*: What would a historically reliable account look like in the ancient world?

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<sup>1</sup> For a convenient collection of miracle stories from the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, see D. R. Cartledge and D. L. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Fortress, 1980) 151-165. He has a nice abridgement of Philostratus' *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* as well, on pp. 205-242, which includes several miracle stories.

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on Jesus' miracles, and their relationship to ancient magic include: J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (1974); Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (1978); David Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity* (1980); H. C. Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (1983); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew Volume 2: Mentor, Message and Miracles* (1994); Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus: The Miracle Worker* (1999). For a handy summary of the issues, see Graham H. Twelftree, “The History of Miracles in the History of Jesus” in S. McKnight and G. Osborne, eds., *The Face of New Testament Studies* (Baker, 2004) 195-197.

2. The question of *meaning and significance*: What did these powerful deeds *mean* to Jesus, to his observers, and to the four evangelists who wrote them up?

As for the first question, it is common to hear that the Gospels contain non-historical material invented, or embellished, by early Christians out of devotion to their master and concern to declare his superiority over the competition—holy men and quasi-deities dotting the Greco-Roman landscape. (*Lord, Liar, Lunatic or Legend? Mad, Bad, God or Made Up?*) Against this idea, Jim claims the miracle stories in the Gospels “are clearly not mythological” for it is “an important part of their theological aims to provide a reliable historical account of the earthly career of Jesus.” How can we *know* that the *raising of Lazarus* or the *stilling of the storm* wasn’t simply made up, or substantially expanded from a less-miraculous original? Could a Gospel tapestry be woven *mostly* of historical threads but also include strands of fiction, myth, and poetic license? If one *were* to allow embellishment to stand alongside historical fact, can one still speak of the Gospels’ reliability? How might the conventions of ancient and modern historiography differ?

No one disputes the fundamentally historical agenda of Plutarch even though his biography of Alexander the Great includes legendary material. . . about flocks of ravens guiding Alexander day and night across the desert (§ 27). Likewise, Suetonius’ account of Augustus includes the part about his mother being impregnated by a serpent in Apollo’s Temple (§ 95), but this mythical indulgence does not disqualify the *entire* biography. Perhaps we need to construct an historiographical continuum rather than assume a history / mythology antithesis. At one end of such a continuum we might plot fantastic tales and playful romances. At the other, tedious courtroom chronicles and verbatim transcripts. Between these extremes we’d find a range of ancient literary genres, *many of which* could qualify as responsible attempts “to provide a reliable historical account” of past events.<sup>3</sup>

Jim is right to dismiss the silly notion that ancient narrators were inherently unreflective. Too many accounts survive of ancient historians self-consciously sifting historical evidence for a sweeping charge of pre-critical naiveté to stick.<sup>4</sup> Jim is also right

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981) 24-25, seems to commend some sort of continuum when he proposes the subtle distinction between “historicized fiction” and “fictionalized history.” Alter’s assessment of the historicity of biblical narrative is, however, considerably more negative than mine: “What the Bible offers us is an uneven continuum and a constant interweaving of factual historical detail. . . with purely legendary “history”; occasional enigmatic vestiges of mythological lore; etiological stories; archetypal fictions of the founding fathers of the nation; folktales of heroes and wonder-working men of God; verisimilar inventions of wholly fictional personages attached to the progress of national history; and fictionalized versions of known historical figures. All of these narratives are presented as history, that is, as things that really happened and that have some significant consequence for human or Israelite destiny.”

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, in his Preface to *The Jewish War* (I.12), claims to distinguish between the facts of history and the lamentations of the historian. Plutarch, recounting Alexander’s death, contrasts his narrative with the fictional embellishments of other biographers. When Philostratus recounts the story of a miracle performed by Apollonius, he wonders quietly if what he says is true (4.45; 5:13-16). And Luke lays claim to having carefully researched his sources so as to insure a trustworthy account of Jesus’ life for his readers (Luke 1:1-4). A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Westminster, 1982) 102, remarks: “There is. . . no justification for assuming that his [Jesus’] contemporaries were a great deal more credulous than ourselves.”

to claim that the four evangelists wrote with a serious historical agenda; they had seen, or knew those who had seen, God at work among them. When I read ancient accounts of *other* heroic figures I'm always struck by how un-sensational and non-mythological the evangelists were. Signs of wholesale fabrication are completely lacking.<sup>5</sup> But how did that genuinely historical agenda work itself out?

Jim wisely calls us to examine miracle accounts "on a case by case basis." Well, here's one: the story of Jesus walking on water, found in Matthew 14, Mark 6 and John 6. John's version seems the least miraculous of the three.<sup>6</sup> Mark's fuller account<sup>7</sup> explains how Jesus sent the disciples out on the water and then slipped away to pray. Mark also tells us Jesus could "see," from land and in the dark, that they were caught in the storm, so he "came to them walking on the sea," inexplicably "intending to pass them by." Jesus gets into the boat and the wind ceases, leaving the disciples "utterly astounded" because "their hearts were hardened."

Matthew's account is best known for its surprise ending in which Peter asks permission to join Jesus on the water. Peter takes a few steps and begins to sink. Jesus rescues him and chides him as "one of little faith." As in Mark, when Jesus climbs aboard the winds cease. But in contrast to Mark's hard-hearted crew, these sailors are moved to worship Jesus, saying "Truly you are the Son of God."

*Mark* shows us Jesus, the solitary, inscrutable figure who stills storms but sometimes leaves us perplexed. We see all too clearly the spiritual blindness of Jesus' followers. *Matthew's* Jesus is the faithful companion who summons us to follow and offers deliverance when we falter. But how did we get from *hardened hearts* in Mark to *worship* in Matthew? Should we try to reconstruct the original, strictly historical version? Has *Matthew* supplemented Mark's account with a "haggadic midrash on discipleship"?<sup>8</sup> Might Peter's failed experiment be a "parable about Christian faith in the face of difficulties"?<sup>9</sup> An "allegory of Jesus' presence"?<sup>10</sup>

Both accounts, in any case, are well-crafted, theologically loaded, Christologically revealing, fundamentally historical, ancient narratives, composed to *demonstrate* how God's Kingdom rule arrived in the person of Jesus. And *all three* Gospels present a Jesus who steps into the role of Israel's God, the "I am" (cf. Mt 14:27; Mk 6:50; Jn 6:20) who once more leads his people across the sea in a new exodus (cf. Ps 77:19-20 ; 107:23-33)?<sup>11</sup>

The substantial overlap, along with the striking diversity, suggests we need to give the Gospels room to maneuver. We need to celebrate their theological artistry,

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<sup>5</sup> As A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, 110, puts it, "they tell the story straight."

<sup>6</sup> Jesus' disciples have rowed 3 or 4 miles across the Sea of Galilee but we're not told how far from shore they are when they see "Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near." John tells us the disciples "wanted to take him into the boat" and that "immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going." Did Jesus climb into the boat while at sea? Was the boat's sudden arrival at the shore a miracle? John's account is mute on both points. This is *not* to say that John imagined Jesus simply walking along the shore, and that the disciples were simply closer to their destination than they realized, as some have claimed. See the clear implication of v.25: "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

<sup>7</sup> 60% longer than John's: 139 words versus John's 87.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase comes from R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Eerdmans, 1982) 300.

<sup>9</sup> W. D. Davies and D. Allison, *Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark) 513.

<sup>10</sup> R. B. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperCollins, 1996) 105-106.

<sup>11</sup> See the very helpful discussion in R. Brown, *John I-XII* (AB; Doubleday, 1966) 255-256.

delight in the Old Testament spillover and even, on occasion, let them blur the lines between history and parable. This does not mean that the Gospels are *unreliable*, unless “reliability” means lock-step conformity to a very particular, modernist, sanitized, contrived notion of what ancient historiography has to be. The sort of poetic license we see in the Gospels may be the only way the evangelists knew to tell Jesus’ story *faithfully*. Sometimes the barest facts (like the plainest photographs) distort reality, while interpretive renderings show things with crystal clarity.<sup>12</sup>

Jim is right to deny that “the Gospel writers imposed. . . a supernatural interpretation” on a merely human, natural Jesus. But I’m tempted to say the evangelists gave his *supernatural* deeds a *hypernatural* interpretation. Jesus’ *acts in history* made him stand out as God’s agent. The *story* of those acts is told so brilliantly that only the dullest reader could fail to grasp what Jesus’ closest companions often missed.

As for my second question, about *significance*, Jim is right that Jesus’ deeds are not self-interpreting. Ancient observers were free to lump Jesus in with Israel’s prophets,<sup>13</sup> or to write him off as one more wandering hellenistic holy man. Free, that is, until they listened to Jesus’ words and observed the rest of his life. Jim points us to three key episodes: Jesus’ announcement that “the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15b); Jesus’ claim that Isaiah’s promise of restoration (Isaiah 61:1-2) was fulfilled (Luke 4:16-20); and Jesus’ reply to John that his deeds confirmed he was the Coming One (Lk 7:22). To these three I shall add only Matthew 12:28 in which Jesus defends his exorcisms as signs of the Kingdom’s arrival. Jesus exorcisms were not “random acts of kindness” but full, frontal assaults on Satan’s minions. His miracles were signs of the Kingdom’s arrival, signs of Israel’s hoped-for vindication. His healings were previews of coming eschatological attractions.

But did Jesus’ miracles signify his *divinity*? Can we reason from *miracle-worker* to *divine Son*? Jim is clear that performing miracles does not make one divine. But as I trace the trajectory of Jim’s paper, miracle and divinity seem quite closely connected. Jim refers, first,

to Jesus as “*Messiah* – the one *appointed* and *anointed* by God” (p.18),  
and then to Jesus as “*Messiah* and *Son of God*”  
and then to Jesus as “*identified*” with “the Creator” and “Redeemer” (p.19)  
and finally to Jesus as “*one with* the Creator and Redeemer God.”

The link between “Messiah” and “son of God” is solid, thanks to texts like 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2. But the idea here is that Jesus is God’s *royal agent* sent with royal authority to rescue God’s people. If people saw Jesus’ power and called him the “Son of God,” their focus might be on the intimacy he enjoyed with his heavenly Father.<sup>14</sup> “Son of God” language in the New Testament can also amount to a bold assault on the claims of Rome’s emperor. Jesus, not Augustus or Nero, was the supreme ruler of the world, what

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<sup>12</sup> If the historian’s craft is a “representational art,” then perhaps *all* historical retellings involve some degree of “fictionalizing.” On both these phrases see V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 322.

<sup>13</sup> As are modern observers. N. T. Wright, in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003) 721, points to Pinchas Lapide as a contemporary Jewish scholar who, remarkably, affirms Jesus’ bodily resurrection but concludes “he was and is a great prophet to whom Israel should have paid attention at the time.”

<sup>14</sup> In Mt 26:53 Jesus claims an appeal to his “Father” could unleash 12 legions of angels. See further E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin, 1993) 160-163.

Jim calls “the vice regent of God.” And then sometimes Jesus is the “Son” who is uniquely sent by the Father, who enjoys a unique status as “the personal embodiment and revelation of the one true god.”<sup>15</sup> This comes close, doesn’t it, to the later doctrinal formulation, *God the Son*. And yet I think we need to be wary of blurring distinctions and simply equating “Messiahship” with “deity.”

Jim does not argue: *if miracle worker then divine*, but rather: *if divine then miracle worker*.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Jesus’ miracles *were* intended to confirm claims about Jesus’ deity.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the Gospels portray Jesus not so much calling on *someone else’s* authority to heal as exercising *his own*.<sup>18</sup> He did not so much *channel* God’s blessings as *embody* them.<sup>19</sup> But if Jesus’ miracles confirmed his deity, why isn’t this argument ever advanced in the NT?<sup>20</sup> And why does Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, point to Jesus’ miracles as signs of God’s attestation and approval (Acts 2:22ff.), as if to *distinguish* Jesus *from* God, rather than *identify* him *with* God?<sup>21</sup> The case for Jesus’ deity is “cumulative,” as Jim points out; it requires a solid grasp of both Testaments and our very best theological instincts. Can a wandering Galilean wonder-worker really be uniquely and inextricably united with the Creator of the universe? I suspect Jesus’ miracles offer us *a part* of the answer, but I also suspect much more of it lies beyond our grasp.

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<sup>15</sup> N. T. Wright, *Resurrection*, 731. These three senses for “son of God” are nicely summarized by Wright, *ibid.*, pp. 719-738.

<sup>16</sup> My read of p.18, last paragraph.

<sup>17</sup> On p. 19 Jim calls this “a major purpose.” I’m not sure what to make of the claim, on p. 18, that “if Jesus really is the Incarnate Son of God, then it would make a lot of sense for him to have chosen to call attention to himself during his earthly ministry in unusual and extraordinary (i.e., miraculous) ways.” In Philippians 2:6-8, a passage that comes close to calling Jesus God, we’re told that as God, Jesus chose to humble himself, to empty himself, to submit obediently to death. In this passage, at least, it seems Jesus’ divinity led him *not* to “call attention to himself.”

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*. (Eerdmans, 2003) 693.

<sup>19</sup> To borrow a useful distinction from James Dunn, *ibid.*, 695.

<sup>20</sup> I’m thinking of texts like 1 Cor 8:6; 15:20-28; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-17; 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1; John 1:1-18. John 20:30-31 counts against my point if it indicates that John’s account of Jesus “signs” was intended to provoke faith in Jesus’ identity as the divine “Son.”

<sup>21</sup> Note also that Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:12, refers to his own “signs and wonders and powers” as “the signs of an apostle.”