

Magic, Miracle or Myth?

1. Should you care?

Jesus was not the only one in his day with a reputation for doing strange and powerful things (see Mt 12:27; Lk 10:17; Acts 19:13 and examples below). Some traced Jesus' powers to God, but others pointed to Satan (Mk 3:22; Mt 9:34; 12:24 and pars.). To complicate things, a common critique of Christianity, at least since the 2nd century, is that Jesus was a *magician*. What was clear to the crowds was that Jesus could do things others could not. In fact, all modern scholars agree that Jesus had a reputation for being a miracle worker. What was less clear to the crowds was the *source* of his power and, correspondingly, the *significance* of his acts. How would *you* distinguish between "miracle" and "magic"? Did Jesus' "miracles" defy natural "laws"? What did miracles prove or reveal about Jesus?

2. Thoughtful readers wonder . . .

- . . . how Jesus' miracles might relate to his proclamation of the coming *Kingdom of God*
- . . . how best to define the word "miracle" and how to distinguish it from "magic"
- . . . whether the Gospels include myths

3. Your Quest: To compare a miracle with a story from the Greco-Roman world; to examine parallel Gospel accounts; & to consider Jesus' actions in relation to his words.

Parallel miracles? Compare these accounts, using colored pencils, lines & notes to show parallels and differences.

Luke 7:11-17	Philostratus, <i>Life of Apollonius</i> 4.45 (3 rd c.)	Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), <i>Natural History</i> 7.37
<p>11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.</p>	<p>Here also is a miracle of Apollonius. A young girl seemed to have died in the very hour of her marriage and the bridegroom was following the bier weeping over his unfulfilled marriage. Rome mourned also, for it happened that the dead girl was from one of the best families. Apollonius, happening to be present where they were mourning, said, "Put down the bier, for I will end your weeping for this girl," and at the same time he asked what her name was. The bystanders thought that he was going to give a speech like those which people give at burials to heighten everyone's sorrow. But he didn't; instead he touched her and saying something no one could hear, awakened the girl who seemed dead. And the girl spoke and went back to her father's house, just like Alcestis who was brought back to her life by Herakles. And when the relatives of the girl offered Apollonius 150,000 silver pieces as a reward, he replied that he would return it to the child as a gift for her dowry.</p> <p>Now whether he found a spark of life in her which had escaped the notice of the doctors—for it is said her breath could be seen above her face as it rained—or whether, her life actually being completely extinguished, she grew warm again and received it back, no one knows. A grasp of this mystery has not been gained either by me or by those who chanced to be there.</p>	<p>Innumerable are the men who have excelled in the various arts; we may, however, take a cursory survey of them, by citing the names of the principal ones . . . Asclepiades of Prusa, however, acquired the greatest fame of all—he founded a new sect. . . , discovered a method of successfully treating diseases by wine, and, breaking in upon the funeral ceremony, saved the life of a man, who was actually placed on the funeral pile. He rendered himself, however, more celebrated than all, by staking his reputation as a physician against Fortune herself, and asserting that he did not wish to be so much as looked upon as a physician, if he should ever happen in any way to fall sick; and he won his wager, for he met his death at an extreme old age, by falling down stairs.</p>

Name: _____

- 3.1. What are the most significant similarities and differences between the three accounts?
- 3.2. What part(s) of which account(s) seem more credible? Why?
- 3.3. Are there signs of literary dependence (borrowing), or do the three seem independent?

Walking on Water: different endings to the same story?

Study the columns below, using colored pencils and marginal notes to highlight similarities and differences. Blue = unique to Matthew; Red = unique to Mark; Purple = words common to both Matthew and Mark.

- 3.4. Can you tell if one composition depends on (and borrows from) the other? If so, which version appears to be earlier? Why?
- 3.5. How might you explain the most striking differences? Has Matthew combined two stories (one from Mark & one about Peter)? Added an allegorical (i.e., non-historical) ending?
- 3.6. Matthew tends generally to present the disciples in a better light than Mark (compare Matt 16:5-12 and Mark 8:14-21). Does this help make sense of the differences in this episode?

Matthew 14:22-33	Mark 6:45-52
<p>22 Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.</p> <p>23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them.</p> <p>25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.</p> <p>26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear.</p> <p>27 But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."</p> <p>28 And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; 30 but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"</p> <p>32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.</p> <p>33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."</p>	<p>45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Beth-sa'ida, while he dismissed the crowd.</p> <p>46 And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.</p> <p>And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, 49 but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out; 50 for they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."</p> <p>51 And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.</p>

Words and Deeds: sides of a coin?

Read these prophetic promises of a coming era of salvation: Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:4-6; 61:1-2. Then read Lk 4:16-30; Mt 11:2-6 (cf. Lk 7:18-23); Mk 3:22-30 (cf. Mt 12:22-32; Lk 11:14-22).

- 3.7. What links does Jesus see between his miracles, the Spirit, and the arrival of God's Kingdom?
- 3.8. What links does Jesus see between his exorcisms and the defeat of Satan? Who is the "strong man" and who is the thief who breaks in to his house? What might this all mean today?