

THE TESTIMONY OF MIRACLES

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INTRODUCTION

There are at least two widely held views of the miracles of Christ: that they are designed to teach moral lessons and that they are signs. The former view, that miracles are moral lessons, is refuted by the very words used of miracles in the Scriptures.

So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”¹

The word used for sign here means a sign in the literal sense, an object that points to, or validates, something else.

A strictly literal translation of σημεῖον as ‘sign’ might mean nothing more than a road sign or a sign on a building, and therefore in some languages σημεῖον in a context such as Jn 2:23 may be rendered as ‘a miracle with great meaning.’²

As such, miracles aid in communication both by authentication and by causing people to stop and look, much as the burning bush caused Moses to go out of his way to discover what was going on in Exodus 3:2.

On occasion God communicates through a spectacle (e.g. 1 Kings 19:11 & 12). But the spectacle is not an end in itself, it is merely the means to the end of effective communication that God employs in order to be understood. Likewise with miracles. John points to this fact by constantly labeling Jesus’ miracles “signs.” They are intended to point beyond themselves, to communicate something, so that God’s message can be understood.³

If miracles are signs, *what are they a sign of?* There are three views: they are signs of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, signs authenticating His teaching, or signs authenticating the identity of Christ Himself. This paper takes the final view, that the miracles of Jesus fit into a pattern showing, in an unmistakable way, that Jesus is God incarnate.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains. (2nd Edition)* (Electronic), New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

³ Charles H. Kraft, “Workman Lecture Series: God’s Model for Communication,” *Ashland Theological Journal* 12 (1979): 6.

Miracles as Signs of the Inauguration of the Kingdom

In the New Testament, a second purpose of miracles is to bear witness to the fact that the kingdom of God has come and has begun to expand its beneficial results into people's lives, for the results of Jesus' miracles show the characteristics of God's kingdom: Jesus said, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28).⁴

In the view of both progressive dispensationalism and amillennialism, Jesus is currently sitting on the Throne of David today (Isaiah 9:7), ruling over the Kingdom of God. The primary difference between the two views is whether the Kingdom is fully operational (amillennialism⁵) or whether it is being progressively brought to pass (progressive dispensationalism, see *Progressive Dispensationalism: What Really Is It?*⁶).

In either case, it would be reasonable to expect the signs of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God on the Earth to match the signs prophesied in the Scriptures. While there are many specific sets of signs to examine in this regard, the signs given in Daniel 2 can be used to illustrate the disconnect between the prophesied signs and the miracles Jesus actually performed.

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.⁷

According to Daniel's vision, the Kingdom of God will be established violently. A stone "not made with human hands," will "break to pieces" the statue representing the four earthly kingdoms throughout the ages. Yet none of the miracles of Jesus were of a violent nature. In fact,

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, p 359, p 360, p 361 (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994).

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. , 1st Crossway ed., p 11 (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001).

⁶ Mal Couch, "Progressive Dispensationalism: What Really Is It?," *Conservative Theological Journal* 3, no. 9 (1999): 258.

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

it is just this expectation of violence that Jesus refused to fulfill in the Rabbinical messianic expectations. Virtually all the miracles of Jesus were miracles of healing or forgiveness. With the one exception of the withering of the fig tree (Matt 21:18), no miracle of Jesus involved violence of the sort indicated by Daniel's vision.

Jesus, Himself, also described the days in which the Kingdom of God would be established on the Earth in Luke 21.

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.⁸

Again there is no parallel between the signs given by Jesus and the miracles Jesus actually performed while on the Earth.

Miracles as Signs Authenticating the Message of Jesus

There is a good deal of confusion between the last two categories discussed in this paper, for if a miracle authenticates a person, the logical conclusion is that the miracle also authenticates the message of the messenger. While the two are tied together, there is a fine line of distinction that needs to be maintained between the two. That the miracles of Jesus authenticate His message, the Gospel, is a common view. This is the first reason for the miracles given in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.

One purpose of miracles is certainly to authenticate the message of the gospel. This was evident in Jesus' own ministry, as people like Nicodemus acknowledged: "We know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these *signs* that you do, unless God is with him" (John 3:2). It also was evident as the gospel was proclaimed by those who heard Jesus, for as they preached, "God also bore witness by *signs and wonders and various miracles* and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will" (Heb. 2:4).⁹

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

⁹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, p 359, p 360, p 361 (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994).

The following statement in Zuck's *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* is in a similar vein: "In addition, Jesus' work and message were authenticated through miracles."¹⁰

There are again two lines of reasoning available to rebuff this view of the Miracles of Christ. The first is that throughout the Scriptures miracles performed by a prophet are always given to authenticate the messenger, never the message itself. This line of reasoning is followed in this section. The second is the miracles performed by Jesus is specifically mentioned as a sign authenticating His identity, rather than His message. This line of reasoning will be followed as part of the following section, rather than here.

The first example of this narrative is drawn from the Exodus narrative.

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."¹¹

The Scriptures explicitly state why Moses would be able to perform these signs: to authenticate that the Lord had appeared to him. There is little doubt these signs did not authenticate the message, but rather the messenger. The second instance, also drawn from the Exodus narrative, is found at the end of the narrative, rather than the beginning. In Joshua 3:7 God provides His reason for the miracles Joshua will perform.

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you."¹²

¹⁰ Roy B. Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, electronic ed. , p 122 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

¹² Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*.

The Scriptural Record of the Miracles as Signs

The previous sections used negative evidence. There is no instance of a miracle being given to inaugurate a new kingdom, nor is there any miracle given by a prophet or teacher to authenticate a message. This section examines the opposite side of the same evidence looking positive evidence to answer the question: what do the Scriptures say these miracles were actually given for?

Throughout the Scriptures, the reason for miracles, when given, relates to authenticating a messenger, rather than a message. In this view, miracles may be seen more as badges than a road sign. The miracle indicates the person wielding the badge has actually been sent by God to deliver a message.

Strong's *Systematic Theology* represents this view of the miracles throughout the Scriptures.

Miracles generally certify to the truth of doctrine, not directly, but indirectly; otherwise a new miracle must needs accompany each new doctrine taught. Miracles primarily and directly certify to the divine commission and authority of a religious teacher, and therefore warrant acceptance of his doctrines and obedience to his commands as the doctrines and commands of God, whether these be communicated at intervals or all together, orally or in written documents.¹³

The first example of this type of authentication is in 1 Samuel 10:6, at the anointing of Saul as King over Israel.

Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man.¹⁴

The second example of this type of authentication is found in Acts 2:22.

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know...¹⁵

¹³ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p 129 (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems,, 2004).

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

Here Peter is preaching to the men of Israel about Jesus, the Christ, and he clearly states the miracles of Jesus attested to His person, as a badge, rather than to His message of salvation. They should believe the message of salvation because God attested that He had sent the messenger through the miracles Jesus wrought.

The Attestation of the Miracles of Jesus

That the miracles of Jesus attested to His person is clear from this reasoning, but didn't all the miracles of the prophets throughout the ages share this same reason? If God truly appeared in the form of a human on the face of the Earth, should He perform the same *quality* of miracles as other prophets performed? In fact, the argument that the miracles of Jesus were no different than other prophets in the Scriptures is used as an argument *against* the divine nature of Jesus. One Muslim scholar representing this view says:

"No miracle attributed to Jesus signifies that he was God-Incarnate. There is no major miracle attributed to Jesus, which does not have some parallel in the Bible."¹⁵

This argument cedes the miracles of Jesus, but treats them as no different than the miracles of any other "holy man" throughout the ages. The implication is that if all "holy men" could do such miracles, then clearly the status of Jesus was no more than a "typical holy man—as if miracles were fairly common after all among holy men."

The counter assertion is the miracles of Jesus were *not* of the same quality as the other miracles recorded in the Scriptures. To take this counter assertion to its strongest point, that the miracles of Jesus clearly authenticated Him as not only a prophet, but as God Himself.

But how could the miracles of Jesus attest to His divine nature? If the miracles of Jesus were credentials of His divinity, they meet the same requirements as any other credential would

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jamal Badawi, Prophet Jesus (PBUH) Never Claimed Divinity, <http://www.sultan.org/articles/pjncd.html> (accessed February 21, 2010).

meet. Credentials rest on two points: the credential must uniquely represent the person, and the credential must be impossible or difficult to forge or repudiate.¹⁷

The credentials issued by governments use one of two ways to prove they uniquely represent the person, some form of biometric data, such as a photograph or fingerprint, or a Personal Identification Number (PIN) known only to the issuer and the holder. These methods may be combined, of course. The credentials issued by governments rely on special printing methods and difficult to mimic characteristics to thwart forging or repudiation (not always successfully).

What about the miracles of Jesus would provide these same to underlying points?

Miracles of Nature: Unique Representation Through Authority

Paul Enns, in *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, divides the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John into seven specific areas of authority.

When John wrote his gospel he selected seven pre-resurrection miracles that demonstrated Christ's authority in different realms. Christ performed many more miracles but those seven were representative in reflecting Christ's authority over every realm of mankind.¹⁸

The seven areas Enns calls out are quality, space, time, quantity, nature, misfortune, and death. While this is a broad array of authority, it is possible to find miracles falling within each of these seven areas in the Tanakh, performed by other prophets. C.S. Lewis, in an essay in God in the Dock, alerts his reader to another set of properties within the miracles of Jesus, the parallels between the miracles of Jesus and the miracles of God in nature.

There is an activity of God displayed throughout creation, a wholesale activity let us say that men refuse to recognize. The miracles done by God incarnate, living as a man in Palestine, perform the same things as this wholesale activity, but at a different speed and on a smaller scale. One of their chief purposes is that men, having seen a thing done by

¹⁷ Wikipedia, under "Credentials," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Credential> (accessed March 13, 2010).

¹⁸ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p 231, p 232 (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997).

personal power on the small scale, may recognize, when they see the same thing done on the large scale, that the power behind it is also personal—is indeed the very same person who lived among us two thousand years ago.¹⁹

Finally, there are passages in the Tanakh where God states He has direct authority over nature, such as Psalm 107:29-30.

He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.²⁰

Combining these three concepts results in authenticating uniqueness. Not only were the miracles of Jesus unique in their scope and power, they were also unique in their accordance with nature as men know it. The reader of the Gospels does not find tables of food appearing in the wilderness, replete with the finest silverware and other table settings. Instead, Jesus makes water into wine at a wedding in Cana (John 2:3-11).

The fact that He performed the miracle indicated that it accorded with the purpose of God in sending Him into the world. Its nature revealed Him as the Creator and disclosed His power over the chemical processes of nature. By one word of command He accomplished the transformation that a vine requires several months to produce.²¹

At least two other miracles show the control Jesus has over nature in accordance with nature (rather than in opposition to it). The first of these two is the feeding of the 5000 in Matthew 14:16-21.

But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.²²

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, “Miracles,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “Topics from the Gospel of John: Part II: The Meaning of the Signs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 526 (1975): 147.

²² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

God created the world so fish would mate with other fish, producing more fish (Genesis 1:20-21). Here Jesus identifies Himself as the God who repeats this process, year after year, by doing the same thing as the baskets are passed around, and fish is taken from them. The bread provides a double identification, though not through nature, but rather through the *Mannah* God provided for Israel, miraculously, in their wanderings in the Desert of Sin (Exodus 16:4-7, 14-25).

The second miracle that shows Jesus as the God of Nature is the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 8:23-27.

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"²³

Again, this miracle provides a double authentication of who Jesus is, for not only is Jesus doing something that God has done in the sight of all men from time immemorial, this is something God specifically lays claim to in Psalm 107:29-30 (see above).

What of the prophets in the Tanakh? While there are plenty of miracles within the work of the Old Testament prophets, there are none that fall within the same class as the miracles of Jesus, showing a complete command of nature in accordance with nature itself.

The closest miracle to the wedding at Cana is found in 1 Kings 17, where Elijah is fed by the widow from a jar of flour and a jug of oil that never emptied throughout the time of a drought, "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah."²⁴ While this is similar to the multiplication of the bread at the Feeding of the 5000, it lacks the multiplication of the fish. Oil is not produced from

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

oil within nature, nor is flour produced from flour, so the tie with natural processes is missing in this case.

The miracle of the Tanakh closest to the stilling of the storm is found in 1 Kings 18:41ff, where Elijah calls up a storm to end the drought, as God has promised. Here, however, Elijah does not directly command the weather, as Jesus does, but rather he prays to God to bring the storm, "And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees."²⁵

The miracles of Jesus testify that He is the God who made, and controls, nature.

Messianic Miracles: Resistance to Forgery

Jesus was certainly testified to by His fulfillment of prophecy. Some estimates claim the chance of Jesus randomly fulfilling the various prophecies about His coming and life to be astronomical (see, for instance, *Is Christianity the One True Religion*²⁶ and Mills²⁷). The Miracles of Jesus, seen within the context of contemporary rabbinical teaching, provide clear evidence of His credentials in a way that cannot be replicated or forged. Specifically, one class of the miracles of Jesus may be called *Messianic Miracles*, because they clearly fulfill the teaching of the contemporary rabbis on the acts the Messiah would perform, taken from specific passages and patterns in the Tanakh.

The first of these three miracles is the healing of a Jewish leper. According to Fruchtenbaum:

Although the priesthood had all these detailed instructions as to how they were to respond in the case of a healed leper, they never had the opportunity to put these instructions into

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Is Christianity the One True Religion?*, <http://www.carm.org/christianity/christian-doctrine/christianity-one-true-religion> (accessed March 14, 2010).

²⁷ M.S. Mills, *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record* (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1999).

effect, because from the time the Mosaic Law was given, no Jew was ever healed of leprosy. As a result, it was taught by the rabbis that only the Messiah would be able to heal a Jewish leper.²⁸

Jesus performs this specific miracle in Luke 5:12-16.

While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.1 And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus2 stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them."²⁹

The key words to note here are at the end of the passage, "for a proof to them." It is clear, from this text, that Jesus expected them to understand something from this healing that would prove He was the Messiah. The second of these miracles is the casting out of a mute demon. Again, according to Fruchtenbaum:

However, there was one kind of demon against which Judaism's methodology was powerless, and that was the kind of demon who caused the controlled person to be dumb or mute. And, because he could not speak, there was no way of establishing communication with this kind of a demon; no way of finding out this demon's name. So, within the framework of Judaism, it was impossible to cast out a dumb demon.³⁰

In Matthew 12:22-23, Jesus performs just such a miracle.

Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"³¹

The question of the crowd following this miracle specifically points to the meaning of the miracle itself. They asked the rabbis, who were still present (see the following verse) if Jesus could be the Messiah. This specific miracle marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus, for the

²⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Miracles* (n.p.: Ariel Ministries, 2005).

²⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

³⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Miracles.*

³¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

rabbi's answer that Jesus cast out demons by the power of "the prince of demons," was the judgment of the rabbinical investigation into Jesus, a complete rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

The third, and final, Messianic miracle is that of healing a man born blind. The stage is set for this miracle in John 9:1-3.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."³²

The question from His disciples is based on rabbinical teaching that a person born with a physical defect, such as blindness, was either being visited for some specific sin of their parents (see Exodus 34:6-7) or had sinned against their mother in her womb.³³ Jesus answers by stating the man was born in this condition *to show the glory of God*. The man, on being healed, is presented to the Pharisees, who begin to question him about how he came to be healed. A particular exchange between the formerly blind man and the Pharisees is worth considering. After verifying with the man's parents that he was actually born blind, they call the man again in John 9:24-34.

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They

³² Ibid.

³³ Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Miracles*.

answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.³⁴

Never since the world has begun has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind! The implications of the man's words, within the context, could not be more clear, nor could the answer of the Pharisees, that they should not listen to a man born in "utter sin."

If the contemporary rabbinical teaching is seen as a sort of "code," like the PIN used with a identification system, which would prove the person of the Messiah, then Jesus clearly fulfilled the requirements of this code. Since the fulfillment of rabbinical teaching could not be refuted, the miracles offer resistance to forgery or repudiation. Much like fulfilled prophecy, they serve as Jesus' credentials.

Conclusion

While the prophecies satisfied by Jesus and the words of Jesus both independently attest that Jesus is God incarnate, the miracles of Jesus provide a third line of evidence attesting to His deity, as well. The miracles of Jesus irrefutably show He is the God who created come to Earth in flesh, taking on humanity to stand as our Kinsman-Redeemer.

³⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

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