

Miracles: Signs of the Kingdom of God

Miracle accounts appear with great regularity in the Bible and in other religious literature of its time. In the Old Testament, there are accounts of God's bringing down plagues on the Hebrew people's enemies before the Exodus (see Exodus 7:20—12:30) and providing them with food in the wilderness (see 16:14–35). There is an account of a prophet who rewards a widow with an unending jar of oil and flour to feed her family (see 1 Kings 17:14–16), another of a man who is saved from death in a lions' den (see Daniel 6:16–23), and many more.

Likewise, the New Testament contains numerous accounts of Jesus' healing people of their diseases (see Mark 1:40–45 and parallels), casting out demons (see 1:21–28 and parallels), multiplying bread and fish to feed large crowds (see 6:30–44 and parallels), calming a stormy sea (see 4:35–41 and parallels), turning water to wine (see John 2:1–11), and even raising the dead (see Mark 5:21–24, 35–43 and parallels). There are also accounts of Peter's healing a lame person (see Acts of the Apostles 3:7) and resuscitating a respected widow of the community (see 9:36), and of Paul's casting out a fortune-telling spirit (see 16:16–18) and healing a boy who fell out of a window (see 20:6–12). Clearly miracles are important to the overall message of the Bible.

But that is not the end of the story about miracles. We have learned that in the period of the early Church, Polycarp was protected by a miraculous arch of fire that enveloped him and kept him from being burned when his persecutors tried to incinerate him (see *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 15–16). Eusebius of Caesarea tells a story about how Narcissus prayed to God when the deacons' lamps went out during the Paschal Vigil (Triduum) and how God changed water into oil so the lamps could be relit (see *Church History*, 6:9:1–3). Ambrose of Milan reports that a blind man was healed when he touched the robe that covered the bones of an early Christian martyr (see *Letters*, 22:1–2, 17). Augustine writes about a devout woman named Innocentia who had breast cancer. She was instructed in a vision to approach a woman as she came out of the baptistery immediately after being baptized and ask her to make “the sign of Christ” over her diseased breast. She did so and was healed (see *The City of God*, 22:8).

We could go on and on, marching through the centuries, describing accounts of miracles in the history of the Christian tradition. Even today the Catholic Church requires evidence of miracles in order to beatify a holy person. Take, for example, the beatification of Pope Saint John Paul II, which continued to move forward after a French nun, Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre, was said to be healed of Parkinson's disease through the Pope's intercession in 2005 and after Jory Aebly, from Cleveland, Ohio, suffered a “non-survivable” injury in a shooting in 2009 and was able to recover through the intercession of Saint John Paul II, who was canonized and declared a saint on April 27, 2014.

But miracle stories are not limited to the Christian tradition. Judaism has a rich tradition of miracles, including the amazing multiplication of the oil for the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple after the Maccabean brothers recaptured it from King Antiochus IV. This event is remembered in the Jewish feast of Hanukkah. Children play with a dreidel (a four-sided spinning top) that is imprinted with an acronym of the Hebrew words that translate as “A great miracle happened there.” Likewise, our Muslim brethren celebrate miracles, perhaps the greatest of which is the Qur'an itself insofar as it is understood to be a miraculous revelation from God and a perfect copy of God's final revelation that is preserved in Heaven (see Qur'an 85:21–22).



Making Sense of Miracles

We have already established that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a long and rich tradition of miracles. But what constitutes a miracle? In today's world, dominated as it is by an abundance of scientific theories and technological advancements, people are highly suspicious of miracles. "A miracle is something that defies the laws of nature," some would say. But skeptics would add: "Miracles simply do not happen. Either we do not yet understand the scientific theory that governs the phenomenon, or it is a figment of someone's overactive imagination."

What then are we to make of the Bible's numerous miracle stories? Shall we say that ancient peoples just did not understand enough science to explain unusual phenomena that today might have perfectly reasonable explanations? Shall we say that miracles happened "once upon a time" but that God intervenes differently in people's lives today? Or maybe talk of miracles is simply illusion—or delusion, even! But these attitudes toward miracles are not satisfying to people of faith, and it is not necessary to posit such a great divide between faith and science. Science answers the "how" question, seeking out scientific explanations that account for a surprising or expected outcome. But approaching miracles as a matter of faith is to enter another realm of inquiry, where we ask theological questions about what miracle stories say about God and God's relationship with humanity.

The word *miracle* comes from the Latin word *miraculum*, which means "an object of wonder" or "something that is amazing." The New Testament Gospels provide us with the richest and most familiar collection of miracle stories available to the Christian faith, but of course the New Testament was not written in Latin. It was written in Greek. The writers of the New Testament Gospels used three Greek words to describe miracles. One of these words is *dunamis* (plural *dunamis*), translated as "mighty deed" (see Matthew 11:20–21,23; 13:54,58; 14:2; Mark 6:2,5,14; 9:39; Luke 10:13, 19:37). It is the root of our English words *dynamic* and *dynamite*. Another Greek word used to describe miracles is *semeion* (see Luke 23:8; John 2:11,23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2,14,26; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18,37). Translated as "sign," *semeion* can mean "a token by which a person is distinguished from others" or "a wonder by which God authenticates a person sent by God." A third related term used to describe miracles in the New Testament is *teras* (pl. *terata*), translated as "wonder," as in the phrase "signs and wonders" (see Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Acts 2:19,22,43, 4:30).

If you examine these many references to miracles in the New Testament Gospels, you will note that none of them involve scientific inquiries into the "how" of miracles. Instead, they relate to a variety of theological assertions about God's involvement in human history. Sometimes miracles are presented as signs or portents of someone or something greater than the wondrous object or activity, but always the stories are told to demonstrate that God is disposed to intervene on behalf of creation. A careful analysis of New Testament miracle accounts will make this point evident.

Interpreting Miracle Accounts

Before they were included in the written Gospels, miracle accounts were passed on orally through the Apostles to the earliest Christian communities. In the first half of the last century, form critics tried to identify the structural elements of the miracle account in order to investigate the "setting in life" (*Sitz im Leben*) that gave rise to the miracle account. Although form critics were ultimately unsuccessful in reconstructing the life of the early Church between the death and Resurrection of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels, they did give us some basic vocabulary and methods for analyzing and interpreting the New Testament Gospels' miracle accounts.



A couple examples will help us to understand how a miracle account works and what it can tell us about the theology of miracles. New Testament miracle accounts are usually grouped into four categories: healings, exorcisms, nature miracles (e.g., calming the sea), and resuscitations. The structural elements, or formal characteristics, of a miracle account are as follows: (1) a description of the problem, (2) the miracle worker’s word or action, and (3) some kind of evidence that the miracle actually took place.

Our first example is the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. It is, as the title suggests, a healing miracle.

<p><i>On leaving the synagogue [Jesus] entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. (Mark 1:29–31)</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a description of the sick person’s condition 2. the healing action 3. evidence that the miracle took place
--	---

The parts of the text in bold represent biblical scholars’ best attempt at reconstructing the oral tradition behind the written Gospel. The part of the text in italic is probably the work of the author and redactor (editor) of the Gospel. Here he is simply providing a setting for the story and linking it to the preceding story, but in some cases these redactional elements can give us important clues to the theology of the miracle accounts, as we shall see in the next example.

Our second example is the account of Jesus’ healing a man with a withered hand. This is a healing miracle also.

<p>Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue. There was a man there who had a withered hand. [The Pharisees] watched him closely to see if he would cure him on the sabbath so that they might accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Come up here before us.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?” But they remained silent. Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart, he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death. (Mark 3:1–6)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a description of the sick person’s condition 2. the healing action 3. evidence that the miracle took place
---	---

Again, the parts of the text in bold represent biblical scholars’ best attempt at reconstructing the miracle account as it existed in the oral tradition before it was incorporated into the written Gospel (see Mark 3:1b,5b). The parts of the text that remain are generally thought to be redaction. In this case Mark has redacted another account—a conflict account (see Mark 3:2–5a,6)—into the account of the healing of the



man with the withered hand. For all intents and purposes, this redaction upstages the miracle account, confining it to the resolution of the conflict account.

As the conflict account unfolds, the Pharisees are watching Jesus to see if they can catch him in an infraction against Jewish Sabbath law. Jesus assumes the role of rabbi, initiating a debate about the kinds of activities that are and are not permitted on the Sabbath. It was generally understood that Sabbath regulations prohibiting work could be broken if a life was at stake (see Matthew 12:11 and Luke 14:5), but this man is not going to die from his withered hand. Certainly he can wait another day to be healed! Jesus expands and reframes the Sabbath observance question by asking whether people are permitted to do good or evil, to save a life or destroy it on the Sabbath. Jesus does good by healing the man with the withered hand (see Mark 3:5). The Pharisees do evil by plotting with the Herodians to destroy Jesus (see Mark 3:6).

Sometimes we find miracle accounts that depart from the usual form. In those cases the accounts can be even more interesting for what is left out than what is included. Consider, for example, the account of the healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter.

<p>From that place [Jesus] went off to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She replied and said to him, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps.” Then he said to her, “For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter.” When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24–30)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a description of the sick person’s condition 2. no healing word or action 3. evidence that the miracle took place
--	--

Two things stand out as significant in this miracle account. First, the account as it might have existed in the oral tradition has been enhanced with a bit of dialogue. Second, when examining the formal elements, we notice that it does not contain a healing word or action. The dialogue highlights miracles (food) as the inheritance of God’s Holy People (children). Perhaps this is an allusion to the manna, a symbol of the Covenant that God made with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. It raises a question about whether Gentiles (dogs) can also have access to God’s benevolent care as demonstrated in the miracles. The answer is yes! But who effected the miracle? Ultimately God is the source of all acts of kindness toward humanity, but in this account Jesus only confirms the miracle. It is the woman’s words—evidence of her trust in God—that effect the miracle.

Miracle Accounts as Medium for Theological Reflection

Although our analysis of miracle accounts has not been exhaustive, hopefully we have demonstrated that the authors of the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole, were not particularly concerned about the “how” of the miracles, the scientific processes that resulted in the extraordinary event; rather, they saw



miracles as God's "mighty deeds" on behalf of God's People or as signs that point to a greater or deeper reality. In other words, biblical authors used the miracle accounts to reflect theologically on the nature of God and God's relationship to the created world.

Is there a common theological theme that explains the preponderance of miracle accounts in the Gospels? People sometimes mistakenly think that miracles prove Jesus' divinity. Certainly they demonstrate that Jesus was in a special relationship with God as God's agent in the world, but they do not prove divinity. If they did, then someone could argue that Moses, Elijah, Peter, and Paul were also divine because we can find stories throughout the Bible of their miracle-working powers.

What, then, can we say about the theological significance of miracle accounts? We have already seen, on a small scale, how the authors of the synoptic Gospels redacted individual miracle accounts passed to them through oral tradition in order to make theological assertions about proper observance of the Sabbath see (Mark 3:1–6) and about God's benevolence toward all of humanity (see 7:24–30). This process of redaction extends to the way that each author organized and knit together the accounts that make up his Gospel. Therefore if we examine larger units of Gospel text where miracle accounts are abundant, perhaps we can glean some insights into the theological significance of miracles. We will look at three examples.

The first example comes from Mark's Gospel. After a brief introduction (see 1:1–8) and an account of Jesus' Baptism (see 1:9–11) and temptation in the wilderness (see 1:12–13), the narrator describes Jesus' first teaching as follows: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). There is a certain urgency to this teaching. The promised Reign of God is now being fulfilled. It calls for humanity to respond in obedience to God's will, but it also celebrates God's triumph over evil in all its forms and punishment of those who refuse to repent of their wicked ways.

Jesus' initial teaching about the manifest Reign of God is followed by a series of accounts that are arranged in a distinctive literary pattern:

- Call narrative 1 (Mark 1:16–20)
- Miracle 1: Healing of a demoniac (Mark 1:21–28)
- Miracle 2: Healing of Simon's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31)
- Summary of the power of Jesus' teaching and healing (Mark 1:32–39)
- Miracle 3: Curing a leper (Mark 1:40–45)
- Miracle 4: Healing of a paralytic; conflict account inserted (Mark 2:1–12)
- Call narrative 2 (Mark 2:13–14)
- Conflict story 1: Eating with sinners (Mark 2:15–17)
- Conflict story 2: Question of fasting (Mark 2:18–22)
- Conflict story 3: Keeping the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28)
- Conflict story 4: Keeping the Sabbath; miracle account inserted (Mark 3:1–6)



The carefully placed call narratives highlight the Apostles' mission of helping to usher in the Kingdom of God. The four miracle accounts that follow the first call narrative give us a glimpse into the nature of this manifest Reign of God: illness and disability will be eliminated. However, the four conflict accounts that follow the second call narrative are an omen of trouble to come. As the Gospel proceeds, we see fewer and fewer miracle accounts and more and more conflict accounts until the authorities eventually succeed in their plan to put Jesus to death (see Mark 3:6). Surely the Kingdom of God is at hand—the miracle accounts testify to it—but Mark wants his readers to know that the cost will be significant.

The second example comes from Matthew's Gospel. One of the dominant themes of this Gospel is the proclamation of Jesus as the new Moses who effects a renewed Exodus (see Matthew 2:13—3:11) and the giving of a more perfect Law (see 5:1—7:29). In chapters 8 and 9, the Gospel writer recounts a large number of miracles:

- Miracle account 1: Healing of the leper (Matthew 8:1–4)
- Miracle account 2: Healing the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13)
- Miracle account 3: Healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14–15)
- Summary of Jesus' healing power and a teaching on discipleship (Matthew 8:16–22)
- Miracle account 4: Calming of the storm at sea (Matthew 8:23–27)
- Miracle account 5: Healing of the Gadarene demoniacs (Matthew 8:28–34)
- Miracle account 6: Healing of a paralytic (Matthew 9:1–8)
- Call narrative (Matthew 9:9–13)
- Conflict account (Matthew 9:14–17)
- Miracle account 7: Raising of the official's daughter (Matthew 9:18–19, 23–26)
- Miracle account 8: Healing of the woman with the hemorrhage (Matthew 9:20–22)
- Miracle account 9: Healing of the two blind men (Matthew 9:23–31)
- Miracle account 10: Healing of a mute person (Matthew 9:34)

Matthew does not follow Mark exactly in the telling of these miracle accounts. In some cases he changes the chronology, drawing accounts from other parts of Mark's Gospel. In other cases he abbreviates Mark's accounts and collapses two accounts into one. However, he retains Mark's understanding of the significance of the miracles—they are a foretaste of God's coming Kingdom (see Matthew 9:35). He also includes an omen of difficult times to come, when he notes the Pharisees' complaint: "He drives out demons by the prince of demons" (Matthew 9:34).

Finally, we should not ignore the fact that Matthew includes exactly ten miracles in this section of the Gospel, perhaps alluding to the ten plagues of the Exodus (see Exodus 7:14—11:10). Although these miraculous events were plagues on the Egyptians, in the eyes of the Hebrew peoples they were evidence of God's omnipotence and benevolence. They were also the means by which the Hebrew peoples were



liberated from their slavery. Such is the coming Kingdom of God, says Matthew! The miracles testify to God's omnipotence and compassion and provide an opportunity to reflect on the liberating salvation that comes through Jesus.

The third example of miracle accounts' being used as a medium for theological reflection comes from the Gospel of John. John uses the term *semeion* rather than *dunameis* to refer to Jesus' miracles, and he includes only seven:

- Sign 1: Changing water to wine at Cana (John 2:1–12)
- Sign 2: Healing the royal official's son (John 4:46–54)
- Sign 3: Healing of a paralytic on the Sabbath (John 5:1–9)
- Sign 4: Multiplication of the loaves (John 6:1–15)
- Sign 5: Jesus' walking on the water (John 6:16–21)
- Sign 6: Healing of a man born blind (John 9:1–7)
- Sign 7: Raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–44)

Recall that a *sign* is defined as “a token by which a person is distinguished from others” or “a wonder by which God authenticates a person sent by God.” The narrator of John's Gospel concludes the first miracle account by writing, “Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and the disciples began to believe in him” (2:11). In John's Gospel, Jesus' glory is the glory of the Father. By doing the will of the Father and the work that God sent him to do, Jesus says, he will be glorified and the Father will be glorified in him (see 13:31). However, in John's Gospel, glorification is more or less synonymous with Jesus' “lifting up,” which refers to both his lifting up on the cross and his being lifted up in exaltation. Indeed, the seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus, both precipitates Jesus' arrest and foreshadows his Resurrection. There is no reason to wonder why John positioned it as the seventh sign in his Gospel.

But, of course, the greatest miracle in the Christian story is the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Borrowing loosely from Paul's words, we say that in Christ the righteousness of God has been revealed to all who trust in his name, because we have been redeemed—bought back from the forces of sin—as a free gift and not through our own merit but simply because of God's gracious forbearance (see Romans 3:21–26). As we experience union with Christ in his death, we can be confident that we will also be united with Christ in the resurrection from the dead (see 6:5). “What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?” (8:31–32).

(The scriptural quotations in this article are from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms. Copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. Used by the permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.)

