THE MIRACLES OF JESUS CHRIST AS A MODE OF TEACHING

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1. BIBLICAL MIRACLES IN GENERAL

Before giving direct consideration to the subject itself, it will not be out of place to deal with certain preliminary matters regarding Biblical miracles in general. First of all, it may perhaps be appropriate to suggest a definition of a miracle. An old definition which will serve as a working hypothesis runs as follows: "A miracle is an event in the external world that is wrought by the immediate power of God." This definition, it should be pointed out, does not imply that other events are not attributable to the power of God. On the contrary, we may believe that ordinary events depend ultimately on the power of God just as much as miracles do. There is this difference, however; in the case of ordinary events God uses means, what we call the order of nature, to bring those events to pass. But in the case of miracles, according to this definition, he does not rely upon secondary causes, but puts forth his creative power as he put it forth when first he made all things of nothing.

With regard to the miracles in the Bible as a whole, some people have a quite mistaken notion. They imagine that the Bible is simply crowded with narratives of miraculous events; that almost every page of the Bible tells of a miraculous act of God. Actually, however, this is far from being the case. In the Bible miracles are confined almost entirely to four periods of time, separated from each other by centuries. These four periods are (1) the time of the redemption of God's people from Egypt and their establishment in Canaan under Moses and Joshua. (2) The life-and-death struggle of the true worship of Jehovah with Baal-worship during the days of Elijah and Elisha. (3) The Exile, when the Lord afforded proof of his power and supremacy over the gods of the heathen, although his people were in captivity (Daniel and his companions). (4) The introduction of Christianity into the world. During these four periods God put forth his immediate power in the effecting of miracles, and — so far as we know — during most of the remaining centuries of the long intervals of Biblical history, he did not do so.

2. THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

When a skeptic asks a Christian why he believes that Jesus performed certain deeds which are called miracles, doubtless many satisfactory answers can be given. For one thing, it can be pointed out that the authors of the Gospel accounts impress an impartial reader as honest, truth-telling
men. Second, the enemies of our Lord acknowledged that he performed supernatural works. Not only is their testimony given in the New Testament (e.g. Matt. 12:22-28), but in the Jewish Talmud as well (e.g. Sanh. 43a; cf. Morris Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, 1950, pp. 27 ff.). Here in the mouths of unwilling witnesses is testimony that Jesus accomplished supernatural works. To be sure, his enemies attributed his power to the devil or to a knowledge of magic (so the Talmud), but they did not deny that he possessed power to perform wonders. Third, the contrast between the accounts of miracles in the canonical Gospel and those in the later apocryphal gospels (from the second to the fifth centuries) is instructive. The obviously legendary tales of Jesus' wonder-working activity, as related in the literature of the sub-apostolic church, are patently different from the restrained and chaste accounts of miracles in the New Testament. A reading of these later documents in the admirable edition prepared by M. R. James (*The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1924) will undoubtedly enhance one's appreciation of the truthfulness of the Biblical records. Fourth, the narratives of Jesus' experience of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1 ff.) must be interpreted as evidence that he could and did perform miracles. That he was tempted to change stones into loaves of bread shows that he possessed power to effect such a change. We are never tempted to do so because we cannot turn stones into bread. The whole narrative of the Temptation collapses if Jesus could not, and did not, work miracles. It is incredible that anyone should have told such a story about himself to persons who knew that he had never done any mighty work. It is equally incredible that anyone should invent such a story about a person who had never been known to do anything of the kind. Fifth, the most significant consideration of all is the Incarnation: if Jesus of Nazareth was in fact what the New Testament documents in all their strata indicate him to be, and what the church has always confessed him to be, namely God incarnate in human flesh, then it would be surprising if he, being God incarnate, never performed a miracle. In the light of the central miracle of our faith, the Incarnation, all other miracles fall into their proper perspective.

These preliminary comments may be sufficient as background material for a consideration now of the miracles of Jesus as a vehicle of his teaching.

3. THE FUNCTION OF JESUS' MIRACLES

The Evangelic narratives indicate that Jesus taught both by his words and by his works. As much in his mighty acts as in his gracious words did our Lord reveal the saving purpose of God. Indeed, so confident was he that men could find in his miracles the self-evident tokens of the nearness of the Kingdom of God and of his own part in its coming that, when his words were inadequate to convince his hearers, he appealed to
his works (see John 14:10f, especially verse 11, "... or else believe me for the very works' sake"). His miracles, like his speech, were full of grace because they, too, were a vehicle of the revelation of God's redemptive will and power.

To those who had eyes to see, Jesus' miracles revealed that in him God was at work ushering in the Messianic age. When, for instance, John the Baptist inquired whether Jesus was "he that should come," Jesus bade John's messengers to tell their master "those things which ye see and hear," and it is implied that they were seeing and hearing a number of things which clearly fulfilled certain prophecies of the coming Messianic age (Matthew 11:2-6). Jesus expected that people, seeing him give sight to the blind, new limbs to the lame, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead, would recognize that in him God had begun to do what he had long ago promised through his prophet (Isaiah 35:3-6; see also Isaiah 26:19; 29:18f.; 61:1). The individual miracles pointed to the supreme Messianic miracle in which the power of the living God was exercised through the agency of the Messiah in rescuing men from the grip of the powers of evil. In Jesus, God's kingdom had drawn near, and his deeds were tokens of the imminence of that Great Day of the Lord, the Day foretold by prophets of old, in which God himself would come and deliver his people. In other words, Jesus' miracles were as much a proclamation of the Good News that God loves and will save — nay, is now saving — his people as were his words in parable and preaching.

Quite in accord with this representation of the function of miracles in Jesus' ministry are his sorrowful words of condemnation. Inability to perceive the true significance of his deeds was regarded by our Lord as equivalent to rejection of his Gospel. "Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! ..." (Matthew 11:20f. and Luke 10:13). The people, Jesus complained, were able to interpret the signs of the sky and so to forecast the weather, but they lacked spiritual discernment of the import of his presence and works (Luke 12:54-57). In short, Jesus' working of miracles is part of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God; as such he expects that they will awaken, not mere amazement, but real repentance.

Let us now examine, from the point of view of the wider Messianic function, all of Jesus' miracles which are recorded in one of the Gospels — the Gospel according to John.

4. Jesus' Miracles in the Fourth Gospel

Of all our Lord's mighty works, John selects only seven or eight typical miracles from the whole ministry of Jesus. (It will be explained
later why we cannot be certain whether the Fourth Gospel records exactly seven or exactly eight miracles.) He knows indeed that Jesus performed many other miracles besides these seven or eight (John 20:30f.), but in these few he finds the deepest expression of God’s mysterious and gracious coming to mankind in the Person of his Son. John’s favorite word for Jesus’ miracles is sēmeia (“signs”). He uses the Greek word (which the King James Version unfortunately does not always render literally) seventeen times—which is more often than any of the other Evangelists’ use of the word. By designating Jesus’ miracles as “signs,” John wishes to lead his readers to look beneath the outward event to the deeper revelation of the character, will, and work of God. That is, the significance of each miracle is not exhausted by its temporal and geographical circumstances; Jesus’ miraculous work is declared to be a signpost that directs attention beyond the sēmeia themselves. In short, since they are “signs,” miracles constitute a manifestation of the truth behind the symbolism of the individual deeds.

The first miracle which, John says, Jesus performed was the turning of the water into wine at the wedding at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). In what respect does this “sign” point beyond itself to the total work of God in Christ? In the symbolism of the Scriptures, wine suggests that which “makes glad the heart of men” (Psalm 104:15). Thus, by this first miracle, Jesus indicates the nature of his whole work, namely in bringing the Gospel, or good news, he renews and “makes glad” all of life. The Christian knows that where Jesus comes today, there he brings joy and gladness. Just as at Cana long ago, when he changed plain, common water1 into excellent wine, so he transforms our dull, routine lives into joyous lives of Christian gladness. Furthermore, this preliminary miracle, worked upon the water set aside for purificatory rites of Jewish ceremonial, is symbolic of our Lord’s whole work in transmuting the highest and best of the old covenant into the pure wine of his Gospel. It indicates in deed what Jesus on another occasion expressed in words: “I came not to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17)—that is, to fill the laws of the Old Covenant full of new meaning. Besides all this, the miracle reveals that Christ is not satisfied with helping us to a small degree. His extravagant goodness and overwhelming bounty are mirrored in the creation of

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1In the Scriptures one occasionally finds the same image used to represent opposites. Thus (1) Jesus is called “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5), while also the Devil is said to go about “as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (I Pet. 5:8); and (2) “leaven” usually symbolizes evil, but in Matt. 13:33 it is recognized by most expositors to refer to the Gospel. Therefore one ought not to be surprised that in the account of the miracle at Cana “water” represents what is commonplace while elsewhere it is used to refer to the benefits which Christ promises (John 4:14 and 7:38).
about 125 gallons of wine for a country wedding—surely a great abundance far beyond the actual needs! By drawing attention to the immense quantity of wine, the Evangelist has in mind the fullness which we who believe in Jesus receive from him. In all these ways, then, it appears that John found significance in Jesus’ first miracle. In fact, he declares that in this sêmeion Jesus “manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him” (2:11).

After showing the nature of Jesus’ work, John wants us to learn in the second of Jesus’ miracles what is the condition prerequisite to sharing in his benefits. It is faith. In the healing of the nobleman’s son at Capernaum (John 4:46-54), Jesus indicated that his blessings are appropriated only by faith. Moreover, the effects of faith may extend beyond the person who exercises it. The nobleman believed (verse 50) and his son was benefited. Furthermore the greatness of his faith is shown when one considers the circumstances. Cana, where the nobleman found Jesus, was about fifteen miles from Capernaum, the nobleman’s home. Jesus healed the boy at about 1:00 P.M. (verse 52), but the nobleman did not return to his home on that same day, as he could easily have done, to check the validity of Jesus’ word. He waited until the next day, evidently confident that what Jesus had said about his son’s recovery was true. That is, his faith was so strong that he did not think it was necessary to confirm that day by sight what Jesus had declared had taken place.

John so specifically designates these miracles as being the first and second “signs” which Jesus did that we must conclude he wants his readers to observe that at the very beginning of his ministry Jesus revealed the fundamental characteristics of his Gospel. From the outset, Jesus disclosed by means of two “signs” both the transforming nature of the Gospel and the condition for its appropriation.

The other miracles in John’s Gospel also function as signs. Taken together they are symbols of the manifold working of Christ for our welfare in time and eternity. Doubtless the Evangelist was led to select those miracles which he felt best exemplified the Lord’s work in providing for the restoration, the support, the guidance, the light, and the life of men.

As Jesus healed the impotent man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15), so God in Christ has healed each Christian, supplying him with strength and removing the debilitating effects of sin.

In the fourth miracle which John records, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15), he carries the symbolism one step further. Man needs not only restoration, but also support; he has wants as well as defects. After multiplying the loaves, our Lord interpreted his act by declaring, “I am the bread of life.” That is, he is sufficient to supply the
craving of man. Further than this, Jesus implies that he is absolutely indispensable. Why did he not say, "I am the cake of life"? Doubtless because cake is not a necessity but a luxury. Man can get along without cake, but not without bread; therefore Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life." That is, Jesus declared by sign and by word that only he can and will provide for our needs.

The assurance that Christ will guide us safely through life's storms is taught by the next of Jesus' miracles which John records. The miraculous feature appears not only in Jesus' walking on the sea (John 6:16-21), but also in the circumstance that, after the disciples had received Jesus into their storm-tossed craft, immediately they reached their destination ("immediately the ship was at the land whither they went").

Like the man who gained his sight at Siloam (John 9:1-12), in one sense we all are blind from our birth. We need not only support and guidance; we need enlightenment also. With this "sign" Jesus gave a word of explanation: "I am the light of the world" (verse 5). Apart from him we walk in darkness, but in his light we see light. (Another Evangelist also realized that Christ is the light of men; Matthew discovered that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic word of Isaiah: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Isaiah 9:2, compare Matthew 4:14-16).

In the seventh miracle which John records, the raising of Lazarus (John 11:17-44), our Lord shows that he has sovereign power over man's chief foe — death. And with the "sign" he also speaks words of assurance: "I am the resurrection [not, "I promise," or "I procure," or "I bring," but "I am the resurrection"] and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (verses 25, 26).

After apparently drawing his Gospel to a close (John 20:30f.), the Fourth Evangelist adds an appendix (Chapter 21) and supplies an eighth narrative, the draught of fishes, which may or may not be intended to be miraculous. (No word signifying "miracle" is included in the account.) On the one hand, the situation may not have involved a miracle, for perhaps the risen Lord could see from where he was standing on the shore that a school of fish was swimming toward the right side of his disciples' boat and so directed them to cast the net on that side where presently they would fill their nets. On the other hand, it may be that when the author draws attention to the great number and the large size of the fish (verses 6 and 11), he wishes to imply that a miracle has occurred. In any case, whether miraculous or not, by this incident John would have us learn that only when Christ directs our labor can we
enjoy success in the Christian life. Toiling by ourselves, we accomplish nothing; but when we heed the words of the risen Lord, he crowns our vain efforts with greater rewards than we had any right to expect.

CONCLUSION

Thus, each of the seven or eight miracles in the Gospel according to John points beyond itself to what Christ is able and willing to do for his people today. Furthermore, not only as individual “signs” do they convey their wider teaching, but also when considered together they collectively reveal the wide-ranging grace of God suited to all our needs for time and for eternity. By his selection of just these miracles out of many which he knows that Jesus performed, and by the sequence in which he has arranged them, John tells, successively, (1) that the transforming power of Christ brings joy to perplexed hearts; (2) that his blessings are appropriated only by faith; and that the manifold working of Christ involves (3) his empowering of the impotent; (4) his providing for those who hunger after righteousness; (5) his sure and safe guidance for those frightened by life’s storms; (6) his illuminating the spiritually blind; and (7) his overcoming death. Finally (8) by obedience to the commands of our living Lord, we are assured of prospering in all our Christian labors.