

The Two Earliest Gospels make us wonder if Jesus' Miracles were really Miracles

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE MIRACLE DATA IN MARK AND MATTHEW

A miracle is what is not naturally possible. It is a supernatural occurrence. It is paranormal.

The gospels are seemingly full of accounts of Jesus having performed miracles.

If we can reduce the number of explicit miracles Jesus allegedly worked we automatically reduce the evidence for the supernatural and the case for believing that he is God or his Son and has any right to govern our lives. The purpose of this work is to prove that to believe that Jesus has this exalted position is as bizarre as believing that anybody who appeared after death must be the Son of God or the Daughter of God. Jesus, assuming that he existed, undoubtedly did believe in miracles. But all I am saying is that there is no reason to hold that his miracles were visibly supernatural and that Jesus for most of his miracles believed that their supernatural element could not be plainly seen. For example, Jesus may have regarded a healing by seemingly natural means as the supernatural work of God. The supernatural was working invisibly.

Even the Catholic theologian Hans Kung admits in his *On Being a Christian* that the gopellers were not interested in the exact events surrounding Jesus' miracles but in making him look impressive (page 231). He says that when Jesus said that those who have not seen the miracle of his risen body but still believe he meant believe in him not in miracles thus denying that miracles including resurrections were signs (page 237). This is taken among liberals as evidence that John's gospel was a deliberate fairy story in order to teach spiritual truths.

The purpose of this study is to prove that the miracles of Jesus are not that impressive. If Jesus did all those miracles he was a fraud for miracles are not signs from Heaven and result only in delusion. If Jesus didn't do the miracles and they were more normal than we have been taught to think then he wasn't a very convincing Son of God. Let us put together the reconsideration of the miracles of Jesus that sees them as more natural events than miracles are seen to be.

IMAGINED MARKAN MIRACLES

Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. It goes without saying that its purpose was to make converts to Christianity. The next gospel, Matthew, depends on it heavily so that if you show there is a problem with Mark's stories then the problem will be taken over by Matthew.

It shies away from attributing miracles to Jesus. It gives only a few. This is important. If Mark had heard of Jesus' more amazing wonders he would have woven them into his story.

When Mark declared that the Baptist saw the Spirit coming down on Jesus like a dove he may have meant that he saw evidence that the Spirit was with Jesus not that he had a vision. The voice from Heaven is not said to have been an audible voice. The spirit could have come like a dove in the quiet gentle way that a dove has, not in the form of a dove. The Baptist saw the sky split – probably a division in the clouds that made him feel that it was a sign that the Spirit was coming down.

Angel means messenger so were the angels who looked after Jesus in the desert (Mark 1:13) just like human beings? Remember, the resurrection accounts imply that a living person can be an angel for some of them say that men were at the tomb of Jesus and others say that angels were there. They would not contradict one another on such an important matter as bearing witness to the resurrection.

Incredibly, Mark says that Jesus told people not to tell he cured them. What was the point of doing miraculous cures if people were not allowed to tell? Mark says that the more Jesus forbade them the keener they were to tell. And they did tell (Mark 7). They betrayed Jesus for they must have given the impression they would honour his request and not tell. So when they were so dodgy maybe they lied about being cured in the first place? Jesus must have wanted them to deny it after they had spoken. This looks like Jesus knew they were mad. He knew that he did not cure them and they embarrassed him. He wanted them to lie. And then in the next chapter, Jesus decides to do what some consider to be the miracle of multiplying food for thousands and when the Jews ask him for a sign he refuses and does not tell them that the food was a sign. Is he denying that his miracle really was a miracle? If it wasn't then it was a trick.

The demon cast out in Capernaum may just have been a mental disorder for Mark doesn't say what he means by unclean spirit. Spirit means breath in Greek, the original language of the Gospel. An unclean breath could be madness.

It is likely that Mark felt that “unclean spirits” were really mental disorders when he wrote that Jesus had to shut the spirits up when they called him the Son of God (3:12). Real demons would not have told all and sundry that Jesus was God’s Son to advertise his gospel – unless he was a charlatan and was really one of their own.

Where does Mark say that the almost instant healing of Peter’s mother-in-law was a miracle?

It is not said that Jesus cured all who were brought to him and we know that every popular healer will have some seeming successes (1:32-34). All were brought to him but many were cured.

While Mark says that the leprosy instantly left the man Jesus cured he does not say the same of the symptoms. The man probably didn’t have real leprosy at all for the word covered many skin ailments in those days. Perhaps the man never got any worse which made Mark presume that he was cured as would the man gradually clearing of the symptoms. There could have been a lot of explanations for that.

Mark doesn’t say that the cure of a paralytic (2) was a miracle. When he didn’t say he wouldn’t mind anybody thinking that the paralysis was all in the “paralytic’s” mind.

In Mark 3, we read that Jesus perfectly restored the shrivelled hand of a man. But in what way was it perfectly restored? Was he able to use it again or did it develop flesh it never had a moment before? Mark does not tell us what to think or what to make of the event. He does not write, “And this cure would have been impossible by natural means”. None of the New Testament writers had the gumption to use this statement.

Mark 8:22-26 is alleged to say that Jesus healed a blind man of Bethsaida in two steps. It is not actually said that Jesus made the man able to see people but as if they were walking trees though it is said that he laid hands on his eyes. The man might have had one blind eye and another bad one entitling people to call him blind. Jesus laid hands on his eyes a second time and the man could see right. The and is important. It does not say that the healing happened instantly.

Jesus tells the Jews that he could really expel demons. He is not saying that the casting out of evil spirits we read about in the Gospel are the expulsion of evil personal beings. He might not be talking about clearly miraculous exorcisms at all. Maybe he just meant those demons that do not actually possess or harm a person but which dwell in him or her or to be a bad influence? He is not necessarily claiming to be the kind of dramatic exorcist we read about in the novel, *The Exorcist*.

Mark does not inform us that when Jesus calmed the storm it happened in a second (4). He doesn’t let us know if he agrees with the apostles that Jesus had power over the wind and the sea. He is only reporting. The storm looked worse than it really was when Jesus slept through it. It was probably bound to settle anyway. The story proves that the witnesses exaggerated the storm when Jesus slept through it and that gives us an important insight into the kind of people they were. They were not suitable witnesses to the risen Jesus.

Mark does not say that the swine drowned themselves the second Jesus put demons into them or that this was supernatural (5).

Mark asserts that Jesus denied that he raised Jairus’ child from the dead for she was asleep (5).

Mark does not say that the demon departed from the pagan lady’s daughter because of Jesus or some power above nature (7). He does not say that any obvious transgression of natural law took place. He puts the story in just in case Jesus was responsible.

Nor does he tell us that the healing of the deaf man with the speech impediment was a miracle. Jesus stuck his fingers in his ears probably to scrape out wax. When the man could hear right again he started to talk properly too. The man might have been stupid and though this was a miracle. A lot of people were amazed but Mark is careful to imply that he thought they should be. Some people find it hard to speak correctly when they can’t hear themselves.

Mark does not declare the transfiguration to have been a miracle or a dream (9). He lets you take your pick if you want to.

Mark says that Jesus did not know everything so he would not have felt bound to agree with Jesus that a spirit had really been cast out of the boy who was probably and epileptic (9). The boy had been depressed and was getting more attacks. Jesus put him into a better frame of mind to stop them. Mark does not say that the laws of nature were suspended.

Mark says that the instant healing of the blindness of Bartimaeus happened but not that there was no natural explanation (Mark 10:46-52). He does not say Jesus was responsible and confesses that Jesus must have said that it was the man’s faith that did it. Jesus could be saying that Bartimaeus believed himself to be blind due to some nervous disorder and that he cured it through psychological insight and reassuring him.

Unlike, Matthew who related that Jesus made a fig tree wither instantly, Mark says that it took longer than that so a natural case is allowed for (11).

Does Mark say that the resurrection of Christ was a miracle? He says that Jesus knew that he would be crucified and killed long before it happened. He does not claim that he considers this to be a miracle because Jesus needed no God to tell him that this would happen the way he was carrying on. He says that Jesus promised to rise again. Mark's Gospel ends without a resurrection account. It finishes with the story of the empty tomb. 16:9-20 seems to have been written by someone other than the author of the Gospel. The shorter ending which simply says that Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the good news is probably not from Mark either. The Gospel therefore fails to prove that Jesus rose from the dead. Neither the gospel or the endings say what they mean by Jesus rising and appearing to the disciples. They do not say why the body disappeared from the tomb. In the longer ending the Magdalene's vision of Jesus might have been a dream. The two walkers who saw Jesus might have imagined it. Jesus was revealed to the Eleven which could mean that they felt his presence but did not see anything and got the impression that they were to preach him to the nations and do healing. The ending permits this interpretation but wants us to regard these things as inspired by God.

Mark says there were men at the tomb of Jesus after he rose. Whether or not he regarded them as supernatural angels we do not know. But it is not likely that he did think they were not just men when he didn't say so. Remember, when there is a natural interpretation you must take it when you can.

Jesus simply goes up to Heaven at the end of this gospel. No witnesses to him ascending like a rocket are mentioned. Jesus could have walked away from the disciples saying that he was going to Heaven. Mark does not ask us to accept that he did fly away.

Even the story of the cure of the woman with the haemorrhage does not reveal a miracle though healing power is supposed to have left Jesus and went into her body (5). Love can heal and the power that left Jesus was love or apparent love.

Mark would have considered the actions of Jesus to be evidence that he was from God even if hardly any of them involved obvious paranormal forces. In the same way, Christians take seeming responses to prayer as evidence for God though they might just be coincidences.

Theologians that accounts like Mark's are vivid as if they are authentic. But they are not vivid for they are too incomplete and skeletal to be anything like vivid. And why would Mark or any gosseller be vivid when they were not there but were rewriting their notes of interviews with the storytellers if they had any? Novels are even more vivid.

NON-MIRACLES IN MATTHEW

The gossellers may be surprised that how their books have been twisted by Christians to make them testify to Jesus doing more miracles than he really did.

Here, let us look at Matthew's gospel.

Joseph's seeing an angel in his dreams who told him that Mary was pregnant by God and to go to Egypt may have heard things he already heard of or suspected. They were just dreams – and messages from his subconscious mind. Matthew rewards them as inspired dreams and would understand people believing that they were just that. How do we know that he didn't have a dream as well that told him the opposite?

The magi were led to Israel by a star when they were looking for the newborn Messiah. A star would be so high up that it would be a terrible marker and could take them anywhere. They had probably searched a lot of countries. They said the star led them to Bethlehem but it was after they were told in Jerusalem that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem that they went there. Naturally, they thought that this was what the star was trying to tell them. They imagined that it marked the house Jesus was in.

The Baptist saw the Holy Spirit hover over Jesus like a dove (Matthew 3:16). You cannot see a Spirit so Matthew means that John felt, or spiritually "seen" in other words, that the Holy Spirit had descended upon Jesus like a dove not in the form of a dove though there might have been a real dove which was taken to be a sign of the Spirit's presence. The voice may have been an inspiration in John's heart telling him that Jesus was God's Son. Matthew never said that it was audible or that the crowd heard it.

Matthew never said that the Devil who was with Jesus in the desert was a supernatural being. The Devil was probably just a bad man who pretended to have vast magical powers (4:9) or perhaps he was a bad man through whom the Devil was believed to be speaking. He and Jesus visited the Temple. He took Jesus up a mountain and Jesus saw all the kingdoms of

the world in his imagination for the author probably knew that no mountain however high could be a vantage point for seeing them all.

Jesus boasted that he could raise the dead to life and had done it (Matthew 11:5). There is nothing wonderful about this when Matthew does not say if this was certainly miraculous. Any popular healer will have worked with people who only seemed to be dead and then recovered.

Matthew never said that Jesus walked on water right up to the boat which was several hundred yards out from shore (14). The boat was only this far away when Jesus was up the mountain. Jesus did walk through or on the water to get them to come for him. Jesus was walking on water but not on top of it like some weightless being. Peter sank for he panicked and went unto a deep spot. He was told by Jesus he hadn't much faith for he thought God was going to let him down. The wind died down when Jesus got into the boat making the disciples believe that he was the Son of God for he seemed to them to control the weather. Matthew doesn't say if they were right. If Peter had seen miracles before as the traditional interpretation of the gospels would have you believe, he had to have some faith in Jesus and Jesus promised that when God willed to move mountains he would do it if faith was strong enough so here we have Peter sinking meaning he had no faith which would imply he knew Jesus' miracles were not miracles in the full sense but had normal explanations or that Jesus broke his promise that God would never let a believer down when he has faith and wants that believer to walk on water or whatever.

The pagan lady's daughter that Jesus cured probably was bothered by depression and it lifted when she started to believe in Jesus. This was the demon (15) that was put out of her.

The transfiguration, Jesus shining in the middle of the two long dead prophets (17), might have been an exercise in creative visualisation by the apostles. Matthew neither calls it a miracle or a surprise. The voice from the cloud that told them that Jesus was God's Son might have been an inner voice, like a hunch. The voice from the cloud means the inspiration that seemed to come from the cloud. Matthew does not rule out this understanding. If there was a bright cloud the men could have thought they saw ghosts in it. The cloud came near when they heard the voice but it could have been there before. The approaching cloud could have made Jesus' robes look bleached.

Matthew says that the possessed boy was instantly cured by Jesus (17). The boy seems to have been an epileptic which does not afflict one all the time anyway. Matthew is just saying that the symptoms stopped but if they stopped permanently that we will never know.

Matthew does not say how Jesus made the fig tree wither up so fast (21) so why read a miracle into it?

Matthew does not necessarily see a miracle in the tearing of the temple veil when Jesus died for he mentions an earthquake.

He claims that the saints were raised from the dead before Jesus was. He says they stayed in their tombs and appeared to some people later. He does not say there is any evidence for this or what he meant by appearing. Did the visionaries see them in dreams? Perhaps Matthew was sure they appeared to people though nobody said they had seen them. This account is not meant to be taken as evidence for miracles.

Matthew does not attest to as many miracles as the Church would like to think.

There are hardly any miracles in Matthew. The healings are sketchy and avoid telling us the exact circumstances.

FINALLY

Mark and Matthew read like folk tales more than real accounts of miracles. Normally when somebody writes about miracles and wonders ambiguously it is a conscious attempt to empower the legend making process. Stories gather accretions and exaggerations over time.

