

THE RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY OF JESUS' MIRACLES TODAY

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Abstract: Even Jesus' disciples, who were with him during his public ministry and experienced his words and deeds, only realized his true Person after his resurrection. Nonetheless, their experience with him was a catalyst for their eventual acknowledgement of him. Jesus Christ is the true and explicit centre of our Christian faith. Our faith is our response to the revealing God; who reveals in history through the person of Jesus, through his words and deeds, especially through his miracles which form mainstream activity of the historical Jesus. This essay entitled, "The Relevance of the Study of Jesus' Miracles Today" is an attempt point out the how the miracles done by Jesus Christ understood today.

Key Words: Miracle, Jesus' Divinity, Miracle and the World

1. Introduction

"And you, who do you say I am?" (Mt 16:15). The foundation of Christology is to answer this question which Jesus asked his disciples. Over the past centuries, scholars have tried to answer this question. They used various methods and sources. Some scholars tried to understand him only as a historical person without paying heed to his divinity; a few others considered only his divinity leaving aside his humanity. Therefore, an approach which respects both his divinity as well as his humanity is needed today. Only a historical-theological method could understand the person of Jesus paying heed to his divinity and humanity. He is both God and man. Even today, Jesus is an enigma, just as he was to his contemporaries. The attempt to classify Jesus into a category is insufficient. He eludes all our categories. The failure of all our attempts to limit him to mere human categories indicates his transcendence. Even Jesus' disciples, who were with him during his public ministry and experienced his words and deeds, only realized his true Person after his resurrection. Nonetheless, their experience with him was a catalyst for their eventual acknowledgement of him. Jesus Christ is the true and explicit centre of our Christian faith. Our faith is our response to the revealing God; who reveals in history through the person of Jesus, through his words and deeds, especially through his miracles which form mainstream activity of the historical Jesus.

2. Why is the study of Jesus' miracles important?

The Second Vatican Council asserts that the revelation of God took place through the words and deeds of Jesus (DV 4). If God is revealed in the history through the person of

Jesus, through his words and deeds, the study of the historicity of his words and deeds, especially his miracles, which form a major part of his deeds, is relevant. This study helps us to argue against the accusations which hold that the miracle stories in the Gospels are legends or a reproduction of Hellenistic and rabbinical miracle stories and the portrait of Jesus as a miracle-worker influenced by the Hellenistic figure of the divine man (*theiosaner*). More problematic is the classification of the miracles in the Gospels as magic, and of Jesus a magician. Scholars make such conclusions on the basis of the similarities found between the elements in the Gospel miracle stories and magical rites and formulae. Scholars like Morton Smith and John Crossan picture Jesus as a magician¹. Therefore, a study on Jesus' miracles and their historicity is relevant today to refute the accusations and to assert the true facts about Jesus.

For a Christian, Jesus is equally relevant both as an historical person and as the object of his faith. They are not two entities, rather two dimensions or aspects of one and the same reality. The miracles of Jesus became an enigma to historians and theologians alike with the dawning of the Renaissance and Rationalism. As natural science and technology developed, Jesus' miracles and their historicity were questioned. Influenced by the enlightenment, a number of scholars made their reconstructions of the historical Jesus following the trend of playing down or

¹According to Morton Smith the first and surest fact about Jesus is that he was a miracle-worker. However, he regarded him as a magician. Cfr. M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 107-201. Smith has titled his volume as *Jesus the Magician*. Cfr. J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 137-167.



totally eliminating the miracle-working activity of Jesus; because they accused Jesus' miracle-working activity to the invention of the early Church.

Today when philosophers and scientists are so sceptical about the possibility of miracles, when some exegetes say that the miracle stories must be demythologised, when some historians of religion conclude that the Gospel miracles are no more historical than the Hellenistic wonder tales of the New Testament period, and when many of the faithful feel embarrassed by the miracles, it is important that thorough scholarly research should discover the true value and meaning of the miracle narratives².

The words of Adolf Schlatter that "search for a miracle-free Jesus tradition is fruitless"³ indicate both the importance to be given to the miracles and the recent renewed interest and vigour among scholars for the study of Jesus' miracles. Recently, scholars started to study his miracles critically and consider them as an irrefutable fact about his life⁴. They opine that Jesus might have spent a major part of his time in the performance of miracles. Jesus' miracles are considered as an "interpretive key"⁵ to account for both his relation to the Judaism of his time and his distinctiveness from it⁶. The miracle narratives, which portray Jesus' conflict with the authorities as a direct result of his performance of miracles, help us to explain the reason for his arrest. It helps also to answer the presence of a large crowd around Jesus, his proclamation of the kingdom of God and his rejection by Jewish authority and final execution⁷. It is also a key to explaining the miracle-working of his disciples. The study of Jesus' miracles is

relevant since his miracles are "prototypical miracles" and all other miracles get meaning in relation to his miracles⁸.

The study of Jesus' miracles is important, because it dominated Jesus' activity before Easter. Jesus was remembered in some traditions primarily as a miracle-worker and his name was used by other miracle-workers in their healings. Peter refers to his miracle-working activity in his summary of Jesus' account at Jerusalem (Acts 4:9; 10:38). The large quantity of space occupied by miracle accounts in the Gospels points to the fact that miracle-working constituted a major activity of the pre-Easter Jesus⁹. There is some interrelation between Jesus' miracles, the kingdom of God and his self-understanding. His miracles were not mere signs of the coming of God's reign; rather they realized the kingdom in the lives of those who were healed.

The historical Jesus does not give a full portrayal of the real Jesus. What scholars reconstruct using the proper methods and criteria is only a partial picture of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The real Jesus remains a mystery and his mystery is "the mystery of what 'God' means"¹⁰. God reveals his mystery in the history through revelation and properly through his words and deeds. Studying his miracles is an attempt to understand and comprehend the mystery of God revealed in human history through the words and deeds of Jesus and of which his miracles form a major part. In a way, it is an attempt to understand the person of Jesus through his miracles, though this attempt provides partial results. If Jesus revealed in his humanity the presence of God-among-us, his revelation is historical and is a real event. The miracles of Jesus disclose his divine status as the Son of God only to those who are disposed to believe him as the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, for those who have no faith to see in him the Second Person of the Trinity, he remains a magician or one of the miracle-workers of his time. His life as a Jew indicates that his humanity is not an appearance, but real.

² M. MAHER, "Recent writings on the Miracles", *Nbf* 52, 172.

³ A. SCHLATTER, *The History of the Christ*, 174.

⁴ According to Morton Smith the first and surest fact about Jesus is that he was a miracle-worker. Cfr. M. SMITH, *Jesus the Magician*, 107-201.

⁵ G. TWELFTREE, "The Message of Jesus I: Miracles, Continuing Controversies", III, 2520.

⁶ Cfr. G.H. TWELFTREE, "The Miracles of Jesus: Marginal or Mainstream?", *JSHJ* 1, 105.

⁷ Cfr. M.A. POWELL, "Things that Matter", *WW* 29, 122. In this article Mark Alan Powell evaluates the recent trends of scholars in the historical Jesus research (121-128).

⁸ R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*, 4.

⁹ Cfr. G. TWELFTREE, "The Message of Jesus I: Miracles, Continuing Controversies", III, 2520-2524.

¹⁰ H. MCCABE, "The Myth of God Incarnate", *Nbf* 58, 352.



To show the relation between the historical Jesus and the risen Jesus is to move from the empirical to the realm of faith. If the faith of the disciples is embedded in the resurrection of Jesus, it is important to note that they came to this faith experience through their prior experience of their life with Jesus, hearing his words and witnessing his deeds, especially the mighty deeds such as healings, exorcisms and raising the dead. Witnessing his miracles, the disciples responded to Jesus in faith.

Jesus' miracles were the most striking and attractive element of his ministry. It made considerable impact on his audience about his talk on the kingdom of God. Miracles have an important role in the Four Gospels because they were an indispensable part of the public ministry of the historical Jesus.

John Paul Meier regards the miracles of Jesus as moments of revelation. He writes, "The miracles of Jesus in the Gospels are presented as signs and realizations of the gracious power of the God of Israel, acting in the end time to save not only individuals but Israel as a whole through his agent Jesus"¹¹. He says that the light of revelation begins in the flesh of Jesus from the incarnation onwards. This becomes brighter in the signs and the miracles he performed during his public ministry (Jn 2:11; 11:40). But it shines out fully only when he is exalted on the throne of the cross (Jn 12:27-36; 17:1-5)¹². Jesus' miracles have to be taken seriously as moments of revelation of the glory of God the Father and of Jesus Christ himself. What the council of Chalcedon defined in philosophical terms in 451 is clearly narrated in the Gospels. They reveal the glory of Jesus started to brighten from his incarnation and becomes still brighter in the miracles and signs that Jesus performed during his public ministry with its fullness in his exaltation on the Cross as king in the glory.

Pope Benedict says that "in various ways the disciples were repeatedly able to sense in Jesus the presence of the living God himself"¹³ during their life with Him and this prior experience led them to recognize Jesus' divinity after his death and resurrection. Here miracles have prominent

place since they were his mainstream activity during his public ministry as attested in different forms and sources in the Gospels.

3. Miracles and the Identity of Jesus

Miracle stories help us to understand the identity of Jesus. Although the miracle stories do not focus on Jesus, they implicitly say something about the miracle-worker. The historian can help to understand the unique relationship of Jesus with God even before his death and glorious resurrection. The historian establishes the authenticity of Jesus' words and actions during his public ministry. The theologian in faith recognises this Jesus as someone different from any other miracle-worker, master or prophet (made possible by his words and actions). Based on the credibility of words and actions of Jesus provided by the historian, the theologian establishes that the same words and deeds which caused Jesus' death also led to identify him as Messiah. Jesus' disciples kept these words and deeds of the pre-Easter Jesus and remembered them after his resurrection to certify his status as Messiah.

4. Purpose of Jesus' Miracles: Revelation

Together with the words of Jesus, his deeds particularly his miracles, are real and meaningful events which reveal the mystery of God and the person of Jesus. Miracles have the double role of being elements of revelation and serving as vehicles of revelation¹⁴. Jesus was the first missionary sent by God to humanity to reveal himself and invite them to the love of God. He revealed God as well as himself as the Son of God, through his words and deeds. His activity became the basis and justification for the mission of the apostles. They would serve as the sign and guarantee of their mission and behind them stood the person of Jesus as the origin¹⁵. Such accounts of miracles have served for the missionary purpose of the primitive Church and the Easter *kerygma* confers depth to the miracles of Jesus through the epiphany of the risen Lord.

¹⁴Cfr. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 295.

¹⁵Segalla explains the Galilean tradition of the Synoptic miracles and indicates their geographical importance in Galilee. He says that the account of Jesus' miracles has a soteriological Christology and they are narrated not to satisfy popular taste or to elaborate extraordinary facts. Cfr. G. SEGALLA, "La cristologianellatradizionesinotticademiracoli", *Teologia* 5, 49-51.

¹¹J.P. MEIER, *Marginal Jew*, II, 545.

¹²J.P. MEIER, "Jesus Christ in the New Testament", *Dialogue* 31, 155-156.

¹³Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 302.



4.1. Christological Revelation

Miracles form an integral part of Jesus' message, person and his identity as the revealer of the Father. Since miracles have their origin in the being of Jesus, they reveal the mystery of his being as the Son of God. It is evidenced by the story of the paralytic at Capernaum (Mk 2:1-12). Rene Latourelle says that here, inventiveness is not relative to the details of the house, but to the person of the miracle-worker¹⁶. The miracles help us to recognise an aspect of incarnation, because they are destined to uncover in the author of miracles a man who is God in person¹⁷. They certify the authenticity of Jesus' divine mission. God attests the message of his envoy and its truthfulness through the miracles. They reveal that God – who is love and power – is 'among us' and 'for us'.

4.2. Trinitarian Revelation

History is the scene where God and man meet each other and God reveals his mystery to humanity. The signs through which Jesus revealed his glory are revelations of God the Father. They revealed the love, omnipotence, and wisdom of God in Jesus during his earthly life. The unity of the Trinity is revealed in Christ. Power, which is traditionally attributed to the Father, is expressed through his miracles and glorious resurrection and the wisdom and knowledge attributed to the Son are expressed through his doctrine and prophecies, and the holiness attributed to the Spirit through his love and sacrifice¹⁸. The whole life of God was revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ. The Trinitarian God expressed himself in the intimate union of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ (DV 2, 4)¹⁹.

¹⁶Cfr. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 97. Jean Galot asserts that miracles are signs of the person of Christ. They reveal the identity of the miracle-worker. In the case of the paralytic at Capernaum, through the controversy over the remission of sins, Jesus reveals not only the mission of Christ but also his mysterious identity. Cfr. J. GALOT, "Il miracolo, segno di Cristo", *CivCatt* 125, 136.

¹⁷Cfr. J. GALOT, "Il miracolo, segno di Cristo", *CivCatt* 125, 136.

¹⁸Cfr. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 3.

¹⁹ In the economy of salvation message and miracle form a unit. Dei Verbum says that God revealed himself in the OT to Israel in the words and deeds as the one, true, and living God (DV 14). An intimate union of words and deeds in the revelation of God in

4.3. Ecclesiological Revelation

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus performed different kinds of healings and exorcisms and gave to his disciples the authority to perform them. In the Church, he continues even today to perform miracles and invites people through conversion to his kingdom. Christ continues in the Apostles and God is still speaking through the apostolic Church; here, revelation becomes tradition²⁰. Today he mediates the continuance of his miracle-working activity through the saints. These saints are heralds of the presence of Jesus like the persons healed in Jesus' time. The presence of healed beneficiaries in the Church today becomes a witness for conversion and the resulting salvation of many.

4.4. Eschatological Revelation

Miracles show the 'already-but-not-yet' nature of redemption of humankind in Jesus. The time of salvation promised by the prophets was inaugurated in Jesus. His healings and exorcisms are signs of the salvation initiated in the ministry of Jesus. His healing of afflicted persons from the bondage of sin, sickness, and death and freeing them from the slavery of demons through exorcism indicate the beginning of the new order established in the person of Jesus. They refer to the eschatological salvation present in Jesus.

In short, we can say that the purpose of revelation is to enhance humanity and to liberate it not only from bodily but also spiritual paralysis. Jesus' miracles revealed the riches of God's love to the humanity. They not only revealed, but also accredited the truth of his message, giving authenticity to his witness. Together with his words, Jesus communicated God's intention of saving people by healing them through his actions. They not only liberated people from the slavery of sin, sickness and death, but also transformed their lives to the position of heralds of the kingdom.

5. Miracles and Kingdom of God

Jesus' miracles have to be understood in the context of his message and mission of the kingdom of God. According to

the OT and NT is noteworthy. Cfr. R. FISICHELLA, *La rivelazione: evento e credibilità*, 80-81.

²⁰Cfr. A. LIÉGE, "From Kerygma to Catechesis", *ThDig* 12, 75.



Meier, Jesus not only proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom, but also made it present to his audience partially in his miracles. Miracles are the “message of salvation in action”²¹. It is the prolongation of Jesus’ preaching on the kingdom of God. His words and deeds are charged with power to dethrone Satan and inaugurate the reign of God. “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20). Jesus’ miracles directly prove that the awaited kingdom and the time of fulfilment have come. At the same time, implicitly, they refer to Jesus, who is the author of these actions as the bringer of the new kingdom.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*) relate the miracles of Jesus to the theme of the kingdom. The miracles are a proof that the kingdom has already come upon earth (LG 5). The *Ad Gentes* refers to Jesus’ healing activity as a sign of the presence of the kingdom (AG 12). These Magisterial teachings express the close relationship between Jesus’ message and miracle and connect their origin to the person of Jesus.

6. Miracles and Faith

One of the most important characteristics of Jesus’ miracles was their close relationship to faith. Faith is an essential element for understanding the divine person of Jesus and his works. Both the Synoptics and the Johannine Gospel express this intimate relationship between faith and Jesus’ miracles. The Synoptics treat faith as a condition for miracles. Nonetheless, this faith is not a perfect faith; it requires renunciation and self-giving to Christ²². On the other hand, for John, faith is more than a simple condition for miracle; it is the acknowledgement of the glory of Jesus. The miracles have meaning and become significant

²¹ L. MONDEN, “Miracles of Jesus”, *SM* 4, 46.

²²Cfr. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 328. Käsemann makes the distinction between the faith before and after Easter. It is the distinction between ‘once’ and ‘once and for all’, from the experience limited by the boundaries of death to the presence of the exalted Lord. Cfr. E. KÄSEMANN, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 31. After each miracle his disciples believed in Jesus, nonetheless, their faith in him was short-lived and not deep. They distrusted him or doubted him even after witnessing his miracles. Whereas, after the greatest miracle of his resurrection, his disciples were led to their faith in him as a ‘once and for all’ experience.

actions only in the context of faith²³. This faith is expressed in the Gospels both as the cause and effect of the miracles²⁴. Sometimes faith of the beneficiaries persuaded Jesus to perform healings and exorcisms. On some other occasions, Jesus’ miracles caused people to realize the ‘Son of God’ in the man Jesus and to proclaim faith in him.

Salvador Pié-Ninot says that to recognise a miracle, prior faith or openness to faith is necessary. Miracle is affirmed in faith and in turn miracles sustain faith²⁵. However, this faith is not faith in Jesus Christ as in the post-Easter *kerygma*, but trust and confidence in Jesus’ miraculous power²⁶. Faith is the “native climate of the Gospel miracles” and “the context” that makes them meaningful²⁷. Jesus’ rejection of doing miracles at Nazareth due to their unbelief points to this fact (Mk 6:5).

7. Conclusion

Jesus can be understood in different ways. For example, we understand him in metaphysical terms as the Second Person of the Trinity or in terms of his mission and vocation to humanity as described in the Gospels such as healer, exorcist, proclaimer and bringer of the kingdom of God, etc. The category of a mission-oriented Jesus (Jesus as miracle-worker) helps us to understand better the crucified and risen Jesus, who is defined in new categories in the early Councils. The Chalcedon formula of Jesus as one Person in two natures is clear from Jesus’ mission to the humanity as the revealer of God’s mercy and love through his miraculous deeds. Jesus’ miracles are public acts through which he reveals the invisible mystery of God the Father and his personhood as Son of God who became man. An old philosophical dictum says “*agere sequitur esse*”, that is, “action follows being”. Jesus’ actions have their origin in his being. If we look at Jesus’ actions with

²³Pié-Ninot speaks of this interrelation between miracles and the act of faith as ‘circularity between the miracle and the act of believing’. He says that to recognize a miracle a little faith or openness to the faith is necessary. Miracles are affirmed in the faith and they help to sustain this faith. Cfr. S. PIÉ-NINOT, *La teologiafondamentale*, 304.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II enunciates the two forms of faith in relation to the miracles. Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Jesus, Son and Saviour: A Catechesis on the Creed*, II, 282-286.

²⁵Cfr. S. PIÉ-NINOT, *La teologiafondamentale*, 304.

²⁶Cfr. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 98.

²⁷Cfr. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 327-328.



faith, we would recognise his identity as that of the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, God became man. Therefore, a functional Christology leads us to an ontological Christology. Christology becomes authentic when our approach to Jesus starting “from below” reaches an approach “from above”.

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