

The Miracles of Jesus: Three Basic Questions for the Historian

John P. Meier

ONCE UPON A TIME, down Mexico way—actually down in San Diego in 1988—an unsuspecting editor from Doubleday offered me a contract to write a book on the historical Jesus for the Anchor Bible Reference Library series. It was, of course, to be a one-volume work; so obvious was that to both sides that the point was never mentioned in the contract.

But the best laid schemes of mice and exegetes “gang aft a-gley.” In 1991 volume one of my study, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, saw the light of day.¹ Its 484 pages laid out the methodology for a critical quest for the historical Jesus and also considered what we could say about his birth and early years before the public ministry. The public ministry was left for volume two—or, as it now turns out, volumes two and three.

In November 1994 all 1,118 pages of volume two of *A Marginal Jew* finally appeared.² Doubleday is already asking me to refer to volume one as that little pamphlet I wrote. And, in a sense, volume one *was* an introductory pamphlet on method, sources, and chronology. Only in volume two do we get to the heart of the matter, which, like Gaul, is divided into three parts: mentor, message, and miracles.

“Mentor” deals with John the Baptist, the person who had the greatest single impact on Jesus as he began his ministry. “Message” deals with Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God as both future and yet somehow present in his ministry. “Miracles” deals with the reports in the Gos-

1. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One. The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (Anchor Bible Reference Library) (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

2. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two. Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (Anchor Bible Reference Library) (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

pels of Jesus' startling deeds of exorcism, healing, and other acts that go beyond mere human power. This third part, on miracles, includes an exegesis of all the miracle stories in all four Gospels and actually takes up half of the bulk of the volume. The reason for the 1,118 pages may be a bit clearer now.

My positions on these three major topics of mentor, message, and miracles have placed me willy nilly in direct opposition to many of the positions espoused by the Jesus Seminar in general and Professor John Dominic Crossan in particular.³ Indeed, some observers are already referring to volume two as the *Summa* against the Jesus Seminar. This was not the intent of volume two, but it may be an inevitable result.

In this essay I would like to focus on the problem raised in the third part of volume two, namely, the miracles of Jesus. One goal of this essay is to hammer home the point that it is a hopeless mistake to try to plunge into a treatment of individual miracle stories in the Gospels before three major questions of method have been faced. For convenience' sake, I call these three problems "miracles and the modern mind," "miracles and the ancient mind," and "the global question of Jesus' miracles."

(1) In "miracles and the modern mind," I ask how a modern historian should approach the miracles reportedly worked by Jesus in the Gospels. What questions should be raised, and what answers can be reasonably expected?

(2) In "miracles and the ancient mind," I ask whether Professor John Dominic Crossan is correct in using parallels in ancient pagan and Jewish literature to claim that there is no real difference between miracles and magic and hence that Jesus was a Jewish magician.

(3) In "the global question of Jesus' miracles," I ask whether there is sufficient reason to judge that the historical Jesus actually performed startling deeds that he and his disciples considered miracles. In other words, do reports about Jesus performing miracles go all the way back to Jesus' own ministry, or is the idea that Jesus performed miracles simply an invention of the early church, an invention retrojected onto the historical Jesus?

I. THE FIRST QUESTION: MIRACLES AND THE MODERN MIND

Obviously, any scholar approaching the question of the miracles of

3. For the work of the Jesus Seminar, see Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). For the work of John Dominic Crossan, see his *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); idem, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

Jesus does so against the background of his or her own religious tradition or lack thereof. Especially in this postmodern age, honesty requires that each participant in a dialogue admit his or her religious or philosophical matrix. Let me begin, then, by admitting that mine is Roman Catholic. Now, Catholics of a certain age and a certain girth can remember how many of us went through traditional programs of philosophy and theology. In these programs we learned the arguments for and against the possibility of miracles. Catholic apologetics often felt obliged to defend the historicity of every single miracle of Jesus as reported in the four Gospels. Such an approach can still be found today, for example, in René Latourelle's book, *The Miracles of Jesus*.⁴ On the other side of the dogmatic fence, non-believers who would pride themselves on their secular scientific historiography could hardly suppress a guffaw if someone raised the question of the historicity of Jesus' miracles.

Faced with these two fronts in a centuries-old battle stemming from the "Age of Reason" and the Enlightenment, we must take time to ask an initial and fundamental question: What should be the proper approach of a historian who is sincerely trying to be unbiased either way in his or her investigation of the historical Jesus? I would reply with two observations:

(1) In general, so-called quests for the historical Jesus have rarely been strictly historical investigations at all. Be they the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quests of Reimarus, Schleiermacher, and Strauss,⁵ or the twentieth-century quests of Günther Bornkamm and Ben Meyer,⁶ most quests are actually philosophical or theological projects incorporating historical insights rather than purely historical research. These works are usually suffused with the pro-faith or anti-faith stance of a believing Ben Meyer or an unbelieving David Strauss. Rarely is anything like neutrality vis-à-vis the Christian faith observed. If we wish instead to conduct a true *historical* quest, then philosophical and theological stances, be they pro- or anti-faith, must be bracketed and put aside for the time being. Our investigation will, of course, have its presuppositions, like any scientific study. But they will be the presuppositions of modern historiography in general and the study of ancient history in particular, and not

4. René Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988); in a sense, Latourelle continues in a more critical vein the apologetic tradition of H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (NovTSup 9) (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

5. These and other giants of the original "German quest" are represented in the "Lives of Jesus Series," published under the general editorship of Leander E. Keck by Fortress Press; see Charles Talbert, ed., *Reimarus: Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

6. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).

the special presuppositions of a particular philosophical or theological world view, be it pro- or anti-faith.

(2) This leads naturally to my second point. Wide-ranging questions like “*Can miracles happen?*” and “*Do miracles happen?*” are legitimate questions in the arena of philosophy and theology. They are illegitimate—or at least unanswerable—in a historical investigation that restricts itself to empirical evidence and reasonable deductions or inferences from such evidence.

This stance may seem like a “cop-out” to both believers and agnostics, but permit me to explain my position. First, let us be clear on what I mean by a miracle. I offer the following definition: a miracle is (1) an unusual, startling, or extraordinary event that is in principle perceivable by any interested and fair-minded observer, (2) an event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or in other known forces that operate in our world of time and space, (3) and an event that is the result of a special act of God, doing in a religious context what no human power can do. In this definition, I purposely avoid terms like “nature” or “natural law,” since the question of what is “natural” is so debatable in both ancient and modern philosophy. I prefer to speak in general terms of what human beings cannot do and of what God alone can do.

This last point brings us to the nub of the whole problem. Anyone who claims that a miracle has happened is saying in effect: “God has acted here in a special way, beyond all human potential. This extraordinary event was caused directly by God alone.”

Now, what is a historian to do when faced with such a claim? It is certainly possible that a historian might prove the claim false by pointing to overlooked human powers at work, or to new and previously unknown forces operating in our physical world, or even to trickery, hypnosis, mass hysteria, or psychological illness.

But what happens if the historian is able reasonably to exclude all these possibilities? Can the historian then say: “Therefore, this *is* a miracle. Therefore, God *has* directly acted here to accomplish what is impossible to humans?” My answer is no. I maintain that it is inherently impossible for historians working with empirical evidence within the confines of their own discipline ever to make the positive judgment: “God has directly acted here to perform a miracle.” The very wording of this statement is essentially *theo-logical* (“God has directly acted . . .”). What evidence or criteria could justify a historian *as a historian* to reach such a judgment? To be sure, a professional historian who is also a believing Christian might first make a purely historical judgment: “This extraordinary religious event has no discernible explanation.” And then the same person might proceed to a second judgment: “This event is a mira-

cle worked by God." But this second judgment is not made in his or her capacity as a professional historian. He or she has moved into the realm of philosophy or theology.

If the historian wishes to remain purely in the realm of the academic discipline called history, he or she may duly record the fact that a particular extraordinary event took place in a religious context and is claimed by some observers to be a miracle. But that is all the historian can say *as a historian*. I want to stress that the same limitation holds for a historian who is an atheist. The atheist, like the believer, may record the fact that, for example, a man born blind suddenly regained his sight at the command of a religious healer, and no adequate explanation can be discovered by science. The atheist might also make a further judgment: "Whatever the explanation may be, I am sure that this is not a miracle. God has not done this because God does not exist." The atheist's judgment may be as firm and sincere as the believer's. It is also just as much a philosophical or theological judgment, determined by a particular world view. It is not a judgment that arises simply, solely, and necessarily out of an examination of the evidence of this particular case.

By the way, the scenario of the believing and atheistic experts agreeing on the data but making opposite philosophical judgments about the data is not imaginary. The medical bureau at Lourdes, made up of doctors of different faiths and of no faith, would be the perfect setting for such a divergence of opinions.⁷ The medical bureau, as well as the International Medical Committee in Paris, may at times reach the conclusion that a cure at Lourdes is "medically inexplicable." Quite rightly, the medical group does not presume to issue any judgment as to whether God has directly acted in any given cure. That is a judgment beyond the competence of scientific medicine, just as it is a judgment beyond the competence of scientific history.

Of course, some people, especially in academia, would consider all this talk about miracles to be ridiculous from the start and unworthy of serious consideration. They would devoutly repeat the credo of Rudolf Bultmann (usually not revised to avoid sexist language): "Modern man cannot believe in miracles."⁸ This credo has dominated American academic circles for so long that practically no academician bothers to ask: "Is this credo *empirically* true?" Please note, what I am asking is not whether it is empirically true that miracles cannot happen, but rather

7. For full documentation concerning the origins of the Lourdes shrine, see René Laurentin and Bernard Billé, *Lourdes: Dossier des documents authentiques*, 7 tomes (Paris: Lethielleux, 1957-66).

8. For a short presentation of his views on the matter, see Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Rudolf Bultmann et al., *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1-44, esp. 5.

whether it is empirically true that “modern man” cannot believe in miracles. Given the great interest in sociology among biblical scholars today, one would have expected that some academics would have checked an opinion poll to see what “modern man” (and woman) *do* believe (and therefore *can* believe) about miracles. As a matter of fact, a 1989 Gallup poll found that 82 percent of Americans polled—presumably modern men and women—believed that “even today, miracles are performed by the power of God.”⁹ Bultmann and company cannot tell me what modern men and women cannot do when I have empirical data proving that they do it. This is a clear case where philosophical theory must give way to social fact. But to return to my main point: in what follows we will be pursuing the *historical* question of whether Gospel reports of Jesus’ miracles go back to deeds Jesus performed during his lifetime, deeds he and his disciples *thought* were miracles. Whether they actually were miracles in the *theo-logical* sense I have outlined is beyond the purview of a historical quest.

So much for miracles and the modern mind. Now let us turn to miracles and the ancient mind.

II. THE SECOND QUESTION: MIRACLES AND THE ANCIENT MIND

The problem of miracles and the ancient mind is almost the opposite of that of miracles and the modern mind. Apart from a few skeptical elites, most people in the ancient Greco-Roman world readily accepted the possibility of miracles—indeed, all too readily for our tastes.¹⁰ Muddying the waters still further is the fact that ancient people also often accepted the practice of magic. Indeed, especially in the more popular and syncretistic forms of religion, miracle and magic easily meshed. This has led recent scholars like the late Morton Smith of Columbia University, David Aune of Loyola University of Chicago, and John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University to claim that, in the light of the social sciences, there is no real, objective difference between miracle and magic.¹¹ Both Jesus and Hellenistic magicians used various words, gestures, and substances

9. See the detailed statistics in George Gallup and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier, 1989), 58; see also 4, 56, 119.

10. See Robert M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1952); Harold Remus, *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century* (Patristic Monograph Series 10) (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1983); Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (SNTSMS 55) (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 1986).

11. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1978); David E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Band II. 23/2* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 1,507-57; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 136-67, 303-32. See also John M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (SBT 2/28) (London: SCM, 1974).

to effect healings and exorcisms. Both, claim Smith and Crossan, were equally magicians. To try to distinguish Jesus from Hellenistic magicians is to engage in Christian apologetics: my religious hero works miracles, while your religious heroes work magic—even though they basically do the same thing. This equation of miracle and magic, and this affirmation that Jesus was a magician, is one of the basic assertions of Crossan's recent books on the historical Jesus.

What is one to say about this claim? Is miracle simply magic performed by "our guy"? Permit me to make two observations.

First, if one is looking for a neutral, objective term to cover both Jesus and various Hellenistic wonder workers, "magician" is not a good choice. In both the ancient and the modern world, the word "magic," when used in a religious context of religious figures, usually carried and does carry a pejorative sense. Calling the deeds of both Jesus and Hellenistic religious figures "miracles" comes much closer to the supposed "neutrality" that academic studies espouse.

Second, and more to the point, I think it highly questionable to claim that there is no real observable difference between the stories of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels and the spells and techniques found in the magical papyri of the ancient Roman period.¹² If one studies the collections of magical papyri and then compares them to the Gospel miracles, perhaps the best way to express the differences yet similarities is to draw up a sliding scale, a spectrum, or continuum of characteristics. At one end of the spectrum would lie the "ideal type" of miracle, at the other end the "ideal type" of magic. In reality, individual cases might lie in between the two ideal types, at different points along the spectrum. But we can list the characteristics that, on the whole, distinguish the ideal type of miracle, as reflected in many of the Gospel miracle stories, from the ideal type of magic, as reflected in many of the Greco-Roman magical papyri. I stress that, at this point, I am dealing with two bodies of literature and the pictures they project, not with historical events that may lie behind the texts.

In my opinion, there are seven basic characteristics of the ideal type of miracle, as seen in the Gospel stories of Jesus' miracles:

(1) The usual overarching context for a religious miracle is that of an *interpersonal relationship* of faith, trust, or love between a human being and a deity.

(2) More specifically, the person in need often seizes the initiative by

12. The classical collection of the Greek magical papyri is that of Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1928, 1931). A new edition, edited by Albert Henrichs, appeared in 1973-74. For an English translation of the magical papyri (without original texts) that includes the demotic spells of Egypt, see Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

asking for the miracle, and this in itself is a tacit expression of faith. Alternately, especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus seizes the initiative and performs a miracle to foster faith. In either case, the overall context in the Gospels is the *birth and growth of faith in Jesus*.

(3) Jesus usually grants the miracle with a terse but *intelligible set of words* spoken in his own language. At times the words are accompanied by a symbolic gesture, at times not. In a few cases, there is a gesture and no words. In any case, there are no lengthy incantations or endless lists of esoteric divine names or unintelligible words, charms, or recipes.

(4) There is *no idea that a petitioner can use coercive power to force the miracle worker to perform a miracle against his will*. Nor does the miracle worker try to coerce the deity.

(5) Specifically, Jesus' miracles take place within the *context of Jesus' obedience to his Father's will*. The overarching context is the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done."

(6) Jesus' miracles stand in an *eschatological* and communitarian context. That is to say, they are not just isolated acts of kindness done for isolated individuals. Jesus' miracles are signs and partial realizations of the kingdom of God, the God who comes in power to save his people Israel in the last days through Jesus' ministry.

(7) Jesus' miracles *do not directly punish or hurt* anyone. This trait forms a stark contrast with some of the magical papyri, which include spells for causing sickness or getting rid of one's enemies.

At the other end of the spectrum of religious experience, the ideal type of magic, as reflected in the Greco-Roman magical papyri, is practically the reverse mirror image of the ideal type of miracle. Let me simply highlight the most important characteristics of the ideal type of magic:

(1) Magic is the *technical manipulation of various (often impersonal) forces or the coercion of a deity* to obtain a desired concrete benefit. A string of divine names and nonsense vowels is often used in the spell to coerce the deity.

(2) The benefits sought in magic are often surprisingly *petty* and often *obtainable by human means*; for example, winning a horse race or winning a lover away from a rival.

(3) The Hellenistic magician does not usually operate with a fairly stable circle of disciples or believers. Between the magician and the individual who consults him there are no lasting bonds that make them members of some community. The magician has a *clientele*, not a church.

(4) Especially important for magic is the secret magical *spell*, often made up of a string of esoteric divine names and nonsense syllables. So, for example, we find in the magical papyri tests like this: A EE EEE III OOOOO YYYYYY OOOOOOO, come to me, HARPON KNOUPHI BRINTANTEN SIPHRI—and many other words and names that are

equally unintelligible. The secret spell, known only to the practitioner, is of the essence of Greco-Roman magic. The magician keeps repeating all the secret names and sounds until he hits the right button and gets the desired effect. Efficacy was all that mattered. Magic was a kind of ancient technology, as it were; and so anyone who learned the secrets of the technique could perform the magic. Thus, magic was of its nature a *learnable technique*, provided you discovered the secret. You simply had to learn the right string of nonsense syllables and esoteric names. The terse, intelligible commands of Jesus, sometimes spoken before an audience, stand in stark contrast.

Admittedly, the two ideal types I have just described are two extremes. There are gray areas in both the Gospels and the Greek magical papyri. For instance, in the Gospel of Mark the story of the hemorrhaging woman who is cured simply by touching Jesus' cloak looks very much like magic. And some magical papyri have elements of prayer and personal devotion. But on the whole, the Gospels move in the direction of the ideal type of miracle, while the papyri move in the direction of the ideal type of magic. Hence I do not agree with Smith or Crossan in identifying miracles with magic and in labeling Jesus a Jewish magician. "Miracle worker" is the more correct label, and that is not just apologetics.

Actually, apart from these arguments about definitions and types, there is a simple, common-sense reason for not applying the label of "magician" to Jesus. The New Testament uses the words "magician" and "magic" (see Acts 13:6, 8-9, 11; 19:19), but these words are never applied to Jesus or his activities. According to the New Testament, neither Jesus nor his disciples ever used these words for self-designation. Nor, most significantly, did the adversaries of Jesus or of the early church in the decades immediately after the crucifixion attack Jesus with the precise charge of magic—though they certainly accused him of many other things, including being in league with the prince of demons. As a matter of fact, the first time we hear of Jesus being attacked with the precise label of magician is in the writings of Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century A.D.

III. THE THIRD QUESTION: THE GLOBAL QUESTION OF JESUS' MIRACLES

Having gotten these two preliminary questions of method out of the way, we come at last to the miracles of Jesus globally considered. My question here is indeed *global*: Do the stories of Jesus' miracles come *entirely* from the creative imagination of the early church, which dressed Jesus in the robes of a miracle worker like Elijah in order to compete in the first-century marketplace of religion? Or do at least some of the miracle stories go back to events in the life of Jesus, whatever those events

may have been? Again, I stress that I am not asking the *theo-logical* question of whether Jesus' startling deeds were actually miracles worked by God.

The idea that the miracles of Jesus are largely, if not entirely, the creation of the early church was maintained by some historians of religion in the early twentieth century, notably Wilhelm Bousset in his book *Kyrios Christos* (1913).¹³ A miracle-free Jesus is, of course, as American as apple pie and Thomas Jefferson, who produced an edition of the Gospels with all the miracles of Jesus cut out.¹⁴ While Bultmann and his followers did not go so far, Jesus' miracles were definitely pushed to the sidelines, and the creativity of the early church was often invoked to explain them.

More recently, authors like Morton Smith and E. P. Sanders have helped redress the balance by pointing out the sheer massiveness of the miracle traditions in the four Gospels.¹⁵ The large percentage of Gospel texts given over to miracles makes sweeping them under a respectable modern carpet unacceptable. Even if we do not count parallel narratives, the Gospels contain accounts of six exorcisms, seventeen healings (including three stories of raising the dead), and eight so-called nature miracles (such as the stilling of the storm), plus numerous summary statements about Jesus' miracle working, allusions to miracles not narrated in full, various sayings of Jesus commenting on his miracles, and accusations by his enemies that he performed exorcisms by being in league with the prince of demons.

Now this overview does not mean that all the items I just listed go back to the historical Jesus. Oral tradition in the early church plus the creativity of the evangelists did play their roles. But, at least at first glance, the miracle tradition seems too mammoth and omnipresent in the various strata of the Gospel tradition to be purely the creation of the early church. To move beyond this first glance and first impression, though, we must employ the usual criteria of historicity used in the quest for the historical Jesus and apply them to the miracle traditions.

The two criteria of historicity that are of pivotal importance here are the criteria of multiple attestation and of coherence. Other criteria supply only secondary support.

(1) For the miracle tradition of the Gospels, the single most important criterion of historicity is the criterion of multiple attestation of sources and forms.

13. An English translation is available: Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1970); see, in particular, p. 98.

14. For the texts, with a helpful introduction, see Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels. "The Philosophy of Jesus" and "The Life and Morals of Jesus"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1983).

15. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, passim; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 157-73; idem, *Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 132-68.

(a) As for multiple sources, the evidence is overwhelming. Every Gospel source (Mark, Q, the special Matthean material, the special Lucan material, and John), plus every evangelist in his redactional summaries, plus the Jewish historian Josephus in Book 18 of his *Jewish Antiquities* (published around A.D. 95) affirm the miracle-working activity of Jesus.

Let us take as a prime example the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel to be written, ca. A.D. 70. Roughly 209 verses out of a total of 666 deal directly or indirectly with miracles—in other words a little over 31 percent of the Gospel treats of miracles. If one considers instead only the bulk of the public ministry in the first ten chapters of the Gospel, the number goes up to 47 percent. This is clearly not due just to Mark's creativity. Form critics of Mark's Gospel have isolated various blocks of miracle stories as well as individual isolated miracle stories with strikingly different styles and tones. These collections of miracles clearly reach back into many different streams of first generation Christian tradition. In addition, Mark contains sayings of Jesus commenting on his miracles.

Quite different from Mark is the so-called Q tradition, that is, the material common to Matthew and Luke but not present in Mark. The Q tradition is made up almost entirely of loose sayings of Jesus. Yet one of the very few narratives in Q is the story of the healing of the centurion's servant. Various sayings of Jesus also testify to Q's knowledge of his miracles.

The special traditions of Matthew and especially of Luke know of further miracle stories not represented in Mark or Q. The independent tradition of John's Gospel likewise knows of many "signs" Jesus performed. One also finds brief, retrospective references to Jesus' miracles in the sermons of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁶ Another brief reference is found in Josephus' quick sketch of Jesus' ministry in Book 18 of his *Jewish Antiquities* (18.3.3 @63-64): "At the time [of the governorship of Pontius Pilate in Judea], there appeared on the scene Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Gentile origin." Notice: Josephus first gives Jesus the generic title "wise man" [*sophos aner*]. Then he unpacks that title by enumerating its major components: (1) Jesus worked startling deeds, *paradoxa*, a word Josephus also uses of the miracles worked by the prophet Elijah. (2) Jesus imparted teaching to people who were searching for the

16. Admittedly, the mention of Jesus' miracles in the kerygmatic speeches in Acts could be attributed simply to Luke's knowledge of Mark, Q, and L. However, at least some commentators see in these speeches pre-Lucan tradition. See Gerhard Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte. II. Teil* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 63, for Acts 10:38; Ulrich Wilckens, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte* (WMANT 5), 3rd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), 126, for Acts 2:22-23.

truth. (3) This combination of miracles and teaching attracted a large following. Thus Josephus' independent witness basically parallels the picture of Jesus given in the Gospels.

(b) Besides multiple attestation of literary *sources*, such as Mark, Q, and John, miracles are also supported by multiple attestation of literary *forms*. That is to say, both narratives *about* Jesus and sayings *of* Jesus, two different literary forms that probably had their separate history of development in the oral tradition, testify independently to Jesus' miracle-working activity. Moreover, both the narratives and the sayings treat various types of miracles: for example, exorcism, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

In short, multiple sources intertwine with multiple forms to give abundant testimony that the historical Jesus performed deeds deemed by himself and by others to be miracles. If the multiple attestation of sources and forms does not produce reliable results here, it should be dropped as a criterion of historicity. For hardly any other type of Gospel material enjoys greater multiple attestation than do Jesus' miracles.

(2) The multiple attestation of sources is "backed up" by a second criterion, that of coherence or consistency. The inventory we have just run through shows that we have here a grand example of various actions and sayings of Jesus converging, meshing, and mutually supporting each other. For instance, the various narratives of exorcism cry out for some explanation, which the narratives themselves do not give. The explanation is given in the sayings material of both Mark 3:27 par. and Luke 11:20 par.—i.e., in both Marcan and Q material. Jesus' explanation is that the exorcisms are dramatic presentations and partial realizations of God's eschatological triumph over Satan through Jesus' ministry. Similarly, the various narratives of healing, especially prominent in Mark and the special Lucan tradition, receive their interpretation in a Q saying of Jesus found in Matthew 11:5-6 par. In this saying Jesus responds to the envoys of John the Baptist, who ask: "Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus replies by pointing to his miracles, which, he implicitly claims, fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the time of Israel's salvation: then shall the blind see and the lame walk, lepers be cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead be raised and the poor have the good news preached to them.

What is remarkable in all this is how many different deeds and sayings of Jesus, though drawn from various sources and forming critical categories, converge to create a meaningful, consistent whole. This neat, elegant, and unforced "fit" of the deeds and sayings of Jesus, coming from many diverse sources, argues eloquently for a basic historical fact: Jesus did perform deeds that he and at least some of his contemporaries considered miracles.

The argument from coherence may be approached from a different angle as well, namely, the success of Jesus in gaining many followers. All four Gospels as well as Josephus agree (1) that Jesus attracted a large following and (2) that the powerful combination of miracles and teaching was the reason for the attraction. After all, John the Baptist was also a powerful preacher, but he worked no miracles. It may be no accident that his following sooner or later disappeared from the scene, while the followers of Jesus, who claimed to continue his miraculous activity, flourished despite persecution.

Multiple attestation of sources and forms *plus* coherence are thus the two major criteria favoring the historicity of the global tradition that Jesus performed deeds that he and others claimed to be miracles. While the other criteria of historicity are not as strong in this regard, they do in general favor the same conclusion.

Let us look first at the criterion of the dissimilarity or discontinuity of Jesus from his environment. The criterion of discontinuity or dissimilarity can obviously be of only limited use, since miracles were ascribed to many religious figures of the ancient Mediterranean world, Jewish and pagan alike. Yet many Jewish and pagan miracle stories differ in some notable ways from the miracle traditions of Jesus. Mark and Q, the earliest documents recounting Jesus' miracles, date roughly forty years after the crucifixion. In contrast, many of the pagan and Jewish sources, recounting the miracles of figures like Apollonius of Tyana, Honi the Circle Drawer, or Hanina ben Dosa, often come from centuries after the time these persons lived. Moreover, rabbinic figures like Honi and Hanina are not so much miracle *workers* as holy men whose prayers that God work a miracle are answered. To take another example: Josephus tells of various "sign prophets," who whipped up the Jewish populace just before the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-70). But these prophets *promised* miraculous deliverance; they are never said to have performed miracles. The intriguing truth is that, despite all the scholarly claims to the contrary, it is very difficult to *name* another Jewish miracle worker in Palestine precisely during the time Jesus lived—to say nothing of giving an extended description of the miracle worker's historical activity and message.

(4) Let us move to the criterion that focuses on elements in Jesus' ministry that would have embarrassed or caused difficulty for the early church. The criterion of embarrassment applies at least to the special case in which Jesus' adversaries attribute one of his exorcisms to his being in league with the prince of demons (a charge that is found in both the Marcan and Q traditions: Mark 3:20-30; Matt. 12:22-32 par.). It seems unlikely that the church would have gone out of its way to create such a story and such an accusation, one which puts Jesus in a questionable light. The accusation and therefore the exorcism it seeks to stigmatize most likely go back to Jesus' own day.

Beyond these four criteria, some individual miracle stories have a few tantalizing indications of historical recollections. To appreciate this point, we should realize that most miracle stories in the Gospels have been quite generalized and schematized by the time they reach the evangelists. The stories usually contain anonymous persons acting in unnamed locales with no indication of a time frame, and the stories are told for the most part with stereotypical formulas.

All the more striking, therefore, are the few miracle stories with concrete, colorful details. For instance, it is in two miracle stories of Mark's Gospel that we hear the only Aramaic commands spoken by Jesus during his public ministry: *talitha koum* ("little girl, arise") in the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:41) and *ephphatha* ("be opened") in the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment (Mark 7:34).

Similar to these occurrences are the rare cases when we learn the name of a petitioner or beneficiary of a miracle who stands outside the circle of Jesus' immediate disciples. In the Synoptics, the only cases are Jairus and Bartimaeus. The case of Bartimaeus is especially striking since his proper name is connected with the name of the city Jericho and the time of year just before Passover, when Jesus is going up to Jerusalem for the feast. The occurrences of the names Jairus and Bartimaeus cannot be summarily dismissed as examples of later Gospel traditions inevitably creating legendary expansions of earlier stories, since the later Gospel of Matthew drops both names when it takes over the two stories from the earlier Gospel of Mark.

The naming of a beneficiary of a miracle is just as rare in John's Gospel, despite the very lively and detailed nature of some of John's miracle stories. The only example of a named beneficiary outside the immediate circle of disciples is Lazarus. Here again, a place name, Bethany, is connected with the story, which occurs close to the final Passover of Jesus' life. To be sure, these concrete details do not automatically guarantee the historicity of the stories in which they appear. But insofar as they go against the grain of anonymity and bland stereotyped formulas found in the vast majority of Gospel miracle stories, they do demand serious attention.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, then: the historical fact that Jesus performed extraordinary deeds deemed by himself and others to be miracles is supported impressively by the criterion of the multiple attestation of sources and forms and by the criterion of coherence. Other criteria supply only secondary or "back-up" support for these primary criteria. But, putting it negatively, at least we can say that none of the other criteria runs counter to our two decisive criteria; all give at least weak support.

The curious upshot of our overview is that, considered globally, the tradition of Jesus' miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity than are a number of other well-known and often readily accepted traditions about Jesus' life and ministry: for example, his status as a carpenter or his use of 'abba' in his own prayer to his heavenly Father.¹⁷ If I may put the point dramatically but with not too much exaggeration: if the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *entirely* as unhistorical, as a pure creation of the early church, then so should every other Gospel tradition about Jesus, and we should conclude by confessing total ignorance about the historical Jesus. For if the criteria of historicity do not work in the case of the miracle tradition, where multiple attestation is so massive and coherence so impressive, there is no reason to expect that these criteria would work any better elsewhere in the Gospel tradition. The quest for the historical Jesus would simply have to be abandoned. Needless to say, this is not the conclusion I have reached in this brief overview.

Rather, the massive presence of the miracle stories in the Gospel tradition is a vital clue to the mystery of how Jesus saw himself and presented himself to the people of Israel in the first century A.D. In the whole of the Old Testament, there are only three Israelites who are noted for performing a whole *series* of miracles: Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. Of the three, only Elijah and Elisha are reported, like Jesus, to have been itinerant prophets active in northern Israel and to have raised the dead. And only Elijah was expected by many in Israel to return to usher in the last days, when God would regather the scattered twelve tribes of Israel. In short, the miracle tradition of the Gospels points toward a Jesus who consciously chose to present himself to first-century Israel as the eschatological prophet clothed in the mantle of Elijah. What that means for our overall understanding of Jesus begins to be sketched in volume two of *A Marginal Jew*, but will be fully spelled out only in volume three. In the meantime, though, we have come to appreciate one vital point: if scholars search for the historical Jesus and yet insist on downplaying or ignoring the massive miracle tradition in the Gospels, they condemn themselves to repeating the mistake of Thomas Jefferson. In his truncated edition of the Gospels, Jefferson cut out all the miracles of Jesus and thus created a bland moralist supposedly more relevant to the modern age. The trouble is, as twentieth-century Americans have learned all too well, nothing ages faster than relevance. The historical Jesus, a first-century Jew from Palestine, will always seem strange, alien, and even offensive to us. He is a person who will never be immediately relevant to our little agendas. And in that consists his abiding.

17. For Jesus' status as a carpenter (better: a woodworker), which hangs on the thin thread of Mark 6:3, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:280. For the classic treatment of 'abba', see Joachim Jeremias, *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 15-67.