

The Gospel Miracles

by F.F Bruce

The Gospel miracles are not just historical events, but signs of the messianic age and demonstrations of the power of God, which have a personal meaning for every Christian.

Scripture: Isaiah 35:5, Mark 11:22, John 20:31, Romans 1:4, Hebrews 6:5

Topics: "Divine Miracles", "Kingdom Of God"

Description

F.F. Bruce delves into the credibility of miracle stories in the Gospels, emphasizing the importance of understanding them in the context of Jesus' character and the significance of His resurrection. He highlights that the miracles are signs of divine power and should be viewed as object lessons of the kingdom of God, challenging believers to have faith in God as revealed in Christ. Bruce explains that the miracles, whether healing or nature-related, signify the messianic age and the power of God at work, ultimately pointing to the resurrection of Christ as the greatest miracle of all.

Transcript

Before we leave the Gospels, something ought to be said about the miracle stories which are found in them. Anyone who attempts to answer the question which forms the title of this book must recognize that for many readers it is precisely these miracle-stories which are the chief difficulty in the way of accepting the New Testament documents as reliable.

To some extent it is true to say that the credibility of these stories is a matter of historical evidence. If they are related by authors who can be shown on other grounds to be trustworthy, then they are worthy of at least serious attention by the historian. In literature there are many different kinds of miracle stories; but the Gospels do not ask us to believe that Jesus made the sun travel from west to east one day, or anything like that; they do not even attribute to Him such monstrosities as we find in the apocryphal Gospels of the second century. In general, they are 'in character'-that is to say, they are the kind of works that might be expected from such a Person as the Gospels represent Jesus to be. As we have seen, not even in the earliest Gospel strata can we find a non-supernatural Jesus, and we need not be surprised if supernatural works are attributed to Him. If we reject from the start the idea of a supernatural Jesus, then we shall reject His miracles, too; if, on the other hand, we accept the Gospel picture of Him, the miracles will cease to be an insuperable stumbling-block.

No doubt, the historian will be more exacting in his examination of the evidence where miracles are in question. But if the evidence is really good, he will not refuse it on a priori grounds. Thus, in a book which

treats the life of Jesus from the purely historical viewpoint, Professor A. T. Olmstead, a leading authority on ancient Oriental history, says with regard to the account of the raising of Lazarus in John xi, which he accepts as the narrative of an eyewitness: 'As with so many accounts found in our best sources, the historian can only repeat it, without seeking for psychological or other explanations. ' This may not satisfy the physicist or the psychologist; for the matter of that, it does not satisfy the theologian. But it shows that the historical method has its limitations, just as the scientific method in general has' when it is confronted with a phenomenon which is by its very nature unique.

Again, the miracle stories of the Gospels can be studied in terms of Form Criticism; they can be compared with stories of similar wonders in literature or folklore, and various interesting inferences can be drawn from a comparative examination of this kind. But this approach will not lead us to firm conclusions about the historical character of the Gospel miracles, nor will it explain the significance which these miracles have in the context of the life and activity of Jesus.

Our first concern about the Gospel miracles should be not to 'defend' them but to understand them. And when we have learned to do that, we shall find that their defense can take care of itself. The centre of the gospel Christ Himself; we must view the miracles in the light of His Person. It is thus really beside the point to demonstrate how as a matter of fact many of those miracles are in the light of modern science not so impossible after all. Interesting as it may be to restate the healing narratives in terms of faith healing or psychotherapy, this will not help us to appreciate their significance in the Gospel record. One very popular preacher and writer has dealt with several of the miracles from the psychological point of view in a very able way, without always carrying conviction, as when, for example, he traces the trouble of the man possessed with a legion of demons' back to a dreadful day in his childhood when he saw a legion of soldiers massacring the infants of Bethlehem, or another dreadful scene of the same kind. If this sort of argument helps some people to believe the Gospel record who otherwise would not believe it, so far so good. They may even be willing to accept the stories of raising the dead, in view of well authenticated cases of people who have been technically dead for a few minutes and have then been restored to life.

These may make it easier for some people to believe in the raising of Jairus' daughter, or even of the young man of Nain, but they will hardly fit the case of Lazarus, who had been four days in the grave. And these other railings of the dead remind us of the chief Gospel miracle of all, the resurrection of Jesus Himself. Attempts have been made to rationalize or explain away the resurrection story from the very beginning, when the detachment of the temple guard deputed to watch His tomb were bribed by the chief priests to say: 'His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept' (Mt. xxviii. 13). That was but the first of many rationalizations. Others have suggested that Jesus did not really die. George Moore treated this theme imaginatively in *The Brook Kerith*, but when we read it we realize that such a situation could have had nothing to do with the historical rise of Christianity. Other suggestions are that it was the wrong grave that the women went to; or that the Jewish authorities themselves had the body removed, lest it or the grave should become a centre of devotion and a cause of further trouble. Or the disciples all with one consent became the victims of hallucination, or experienced something quite extraordinary in the nature of extrasensory perception. (The idea that they deliberately invented the tale is very properly discountenanced as a moral and psychological impossibility.) But the one interpretation which best accounts for all the data, as well as for the abiding sequel, is that Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead was a real and objective event.

As regards details of time and place, some well known difficulties arise when we compare the various accounts of resurrection appearances. Some of these difficulties might be more easily solved if we knew

how the Gospel of Mark originally ended. As appears from the textual evidence, the original ending of this Gospel may have been lost at a very early date and the narrative breaks off short at xvi. 8. (The verses which follow in our Bible are a later appendix.) But when we have taken note of the difficulty of harmonizing all the accounts we are confronted with a hard core of historical fact: (a) the tomb was really empty; (b) the Lord appeared to various individuals and groups of disciples both in Judaea and in Galilee; (c) the Jewish authorities could not disprove the disciples claim that He had risen from the dead.

When, some fifty days after the crucifixion, the disciples began their public proclamation of the gospel, they put forward as the chief argument for their claims about Jesus the fact of His rising from the dead. 'We saw Him alive,' they asserted. Paul quotes the summary of the evidence which he himself received. 'He appeared to Cephas (i.e. Peter) then to the Twelve, then He appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now (c. AD 54, nearly twenty five years after the crucifixion) but some are fallen asleep; then He appeared to James [His brother], then to all the apostles' (see I Cor. xv. 5-7). It is noteworthy that in their public references to the resurrection they did not appeal to the testimony of the women who had actually been first at the sepulchre; it would have been too easy to answer: 'Oh, we know what value to attach to the visions of excitable women!'

As it was, the public proclamation of Christ as risen, and as therefore demonstrably the Messiah and Son of God, made an immediate and deep impression on the Jerusalem populace, so much so that the priestly authorities had soon to take steps in an attempt to check the new movement. But they were unsuccessful. If, however, Jesus had really not risen, they could surely have provided sufficient evidence to prove it. They had all the necessary power, and it was to the interest of the Roman authorities to help them. It could not have been such an insuperable difficulty to find and produce the body of Jesus, dead or (only just) alive. It was to the interest of the Sanhedrin to produce His body, or else to procure certified evidence of its disposal. The fact that the first story put about to counter the Christians' claim was that the disciples had stolen the body simply means that the Sanhedrin did not know what had happened to it. It must be remembered that to the apostles and their opponents alike resurrection meant one thing-resurrection of the body. And if we ask why the Sanhedrin did not sponsor a more convincing story than that of the disciples' theft, the answer no doubt is that (as Arnold Lunn puts it) they knew what they could get away with.' They must have reviewed and regretfully dismissed several beautiful hypotheses before they settled on this as the least improbable one.

But, while Christ's resurrection was proclaimed by the early Christians as a historical event, it had more than a merely historical significance for them. First of all, it was the grand demonstration of the Messiahship of Jesus. It did not make Him Messiah, but it proved that He was Messiah. As Paul says, He was 'declared to be the Son of God with power, . . . by the resurrection of the dead' (Rom. i. 4). Again, it was the grand demonstration of the power of God. That power had been displayed many times in the world's history, but never with such magnificent completeness as in the resurrection of Christ. Nor is this display of God's power simply an event in history; it has a personal meaning for every Christian, for the same victorious power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power which operates in His followers, achieving in their lives triumph over the dominion of evil. Properly to appreciate the power of God in the resurrection of Christ, one must appreciate it in one's own experience. That is why Paul prayed that he might thus know Christ, and 'the power of his resurrection' (Phil. iii. 10).

Jesus on the cross had been a spectacle of foolishness and weakness, so far as the eyes of men could see. But when we look at the cross in the light of the resurrection, then we see in Christ crucified the power and the wisdom of God. And only thus can we properly consider the miracle stories of the Gospels.

If Christ is the power of God, then these stories, far from being an obstacle to belief, appear natural and reasonable; from Him who was the power of God incarnate, we naturally expect manifestations of divine power. Our estimate of the miracles will depend on our estimate of Christ. They are related in the Gospel record just because they are illustrations of that power which was supremely revealed in the resurrection and which in the gospel is freely put at the disposal of all believers. Seen from this point of view, the miracle stories appear instinct with evangelical significance.

So the question whether the miracle stories of the Gospels are true cannot be answered purely in terms of historical research. Historical research is by no means excluded, for the whole point of the gospel is that in Christ the power and grace of God entered into human history to bring about the world's redemption. But a historian may conclude that these things probably did happen and yet be quite far from the response which the recorders of these events wished to evoke in those whom they addressed. The question whether the miracle-stories are true must ultimately be answered by a personal response of faith—not merely faith in the events as historical but faith in the Christ who performed them, faith which appropriates the power by which these mighty works were done.

This response of faith does not absolve us from the duty of understanding the special significance of the several miracle stories and considering each in the light of all the available knowledge, historical and otherwise, which can be brought to bear upon it. But these are secondary duties; the primary one is to see the whole question in its proper context as revealed by the significance of the greatest miracle of all, the resurrection of Christ.

If we do proceed to ask what the independent non-Christian evidence for the Gospel miracles is, we shall find that early non-Christian writers who do refer to Jesus at any length do not dispute that He performed miracles. Josephus, as we shall see, calls Him a wonder-worker; later Jewish references in the rabbinical writings, as we shall also see, attribute His miracles to sorcery, but do not deny them, just as some in the days of His flesh attributed His powers to demon possession. Sorcery is also the explanation given by Celsus, the philosophic critic of Christianity in the second century.' The early apostles referred to His miracles as facts which their audiences were as well acquainted with as they themselves were; similarly the early apologists refer to them as events beyond dispute by the opponents of Christianity.

The healing miracles we have already touched upon; they generally present little difficulty nowadays, but the so-called 'nature miracles' are in a different category. Here in particular our approach to the question will be dictated by our attitude to Christ Himself. If He was in truth the power of God, then we need not be surprised to find real creative acts performed by Him. If He was not, then we must fall back on some such explanation as misunderstanding or hallucination on the part of the witnesses, or imposture, or corruption of the records in the course of their transmission or the like.

Take the story of the changing of the water into wine in John ii, a story in many ways unique among the miracle stories of the Gospels. It is possible to treat it as one writer does, who suggests that the water remained water all the time, but that Jesus had it served up as wine in a spirit of good-humoured playfulness, while the master of the ceremonies, entering into the spirit of the harmless practical joke, says: 'Of course, the best wine! Adam's wine! But why have you kept the best till now?' -but to do so betrays an almost incredible capacity for missing the whole point and context of the story, while it is ludicrous to link such an account with the following words: 'This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory' (verse 1), to say nothing of its irrelevance for the purpose of the fourth gospel: 'These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God' (Jn. xx.

31). such a reconstruction is not even worthy to be dignified with the name of rationalization. Whatever difficulties the story as it is told by John may contain, it is clear that something of a very wonderful and impressive nature happened, in which the disciples saw the glory of God revealed in their Master.

'This beginning of signs did Jesus.' The miracles of the fourth Gospel are always called 'signs', and elsewhere in the New Testament the word for 'miracle' or 'wonder' regularly linked with the word for 'sign'. 'Signs and wonders' is a frequent phrase, as if to teach us that the miracles are not related merely for their capacity of getting wonder in the hearers and readers, but also cause of what they signified. Our Lord did not esteem very highly the kind of belief that arose simply from witnessing miracles." His desire was that men should realize what these things signified. They were signs of the messianic age, such as had been foretold by the prophets of old. So also are the miracles in Acts, for they, too, are wrought in the name of Jesus and by His power, transmitted through His apostles. They are 'mighty works', signifying that the power of God has entered into human life; they are 'the powers of the age to come' (Heb. vi. 5), signifying that the age to come has in Christ invaded this present age. Many people were simply attracted by the wonder of these deeds, but others saw what they signified, and could say with John: 'The Word became flesh, and pitched his tabernacle among us; and we beheld his glory' (see Jn. i. 14).

Thus the healing miracles were signs of the messianic age, for was it not written in Isaiah xxxv. 5 f.: 'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing'? Besides, the power that was effective in conquering these ailments was the same power that could prevail over evil in all its forms; the authority by which Christ said to the paralytic, 'Rise, take up your bed, and walk,' was the same authority by which He said, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' The visible operation of His healing power was the evident token of His forgiving power (Mk. ii. 10 f.). So, then, all the miracles of healing are in a sense parables of the soul's deliverance from sin, and therefore the Prominent place they occupy in the Gospel story is amply justified.

So also the nature miracles were signs of the messianic age, which was to be a time of unprecedented fruitfulness; this was betokened by the sign of the wine and the multiplication of the bread. The messianic age was also depicted as a marriage feast, and the miracle performed by Jesus at the marriage in Cana was thus a sign of the abundant joy of that age, a token that, as He and His disciples proclaimed, the kingdom of heaven had drawn near. It also signified that in spite of the proverb, 'The old is better,' the new order which He came to introduce was as superior to the old order of Judaism as wine is superior to water.

The other great nature miracle is the feeding of the multitude with the loaves and fishes. There are two narratives of this kind in the first two Gospels, one where 5,000 were fed with five loaves and two fishes (Mt. xiv. 15 ff., Mk. vi. 35 ff.), and another where 4,000 were fed with seven loaves and a few fishes (Mt. xv 32 ff.; Mk. viii. 1 ff.). These have frequently been taken for duplicate accounts of one event, but this is an oversimplification. These two feedings belong respectively to two parallel series of similar incidents, one series being enacted on Jewish soil, the other on Gentile soil to the north and east of Galilee. The incidents are selected in order to show how Jesus repeated on this occasion among the Gentiles acts which He performed among the Jews. Indeed, it has been suggested that there is significance in the difference between the two words for 'basket' used in the two accounts, the one in the first account being a basket with special Jewish associations, that in the second account being a more general word. Since Peter was the chief authority behind the second Gospel, it is not incredible that the apostle who used the keys of the kingdom of heaven to open the door of faith, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile, should have related these two similar miracles in his gospel preaching to show how Christ was the bread of life for Gentiles as for Jews.

The feeding miracles, according to the plain sense of the narrative, were acts of superhuman power. In truth, to rationalize them robs them of all point. It is easy to say that the example of the boy's handing over his bread and fish led all the others to share their provisions too, so that there was enough for all; but that is not the gospel story. Here, again, our estimate of Christ makes all the difference to our approach to the miracle. The multiplication of the loaves was a token of the messianic feast; it signified the abundance of provision that men might find in Christ, the true bread of God. If the bread represents the harvest of the land, the fish will represent the harvest of the sea. We may recall, moreover, the early Church's use of the fish as a symbol of Christ. In this case, the majority of those who saw the miracle saw as a miracle only; but it is rather striking that in Mark Jesus helps His disciples to understand the real significance of the multiplication of the bread in a passage (Mk. viii. 19-21) which comes only a few verses before the declaration of Peter at Caesarea Philippi:

'When I broke the five loaves among the 5,000, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up? They say to Him, Twelve. And when I broke the seven among the 4,000, how many baskets full of fragment! did you take up? They answer, Seven. And He said to them, Do you not understand yet?'

Between these words and the incident at Caesarea Philippi comes, significantly enough, the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida who received his sight gradually, first seeing men as trees walking, and then seeing all things clearly (Mk. viii. 22 ff. a parable of the disciples, who had hitherto perceived His Messiahship dimly, but were now, through their spokesman Peter, to declare outright, 'You are the Messiah.' Was it not this that Jesus meant when He asked, 'Do you not understand yet?' And was not this the great truth of which the feeding miracles, like all the others, were signs?

Two more miracles may be mentioned, as both have been widely misunderstood. The one is the story of the coin in the fish's mouth (Mt. xvii. 24 ff.). This has been dealt with in terms of Form Criticism. The question must frequently have arisen in the early Jerusalem church, whether the Jewish Christians should continue to pay the temple tax, the half-shekel due from each adult Jewish male. According to some Form critics, they came to the conclusion that, although they were under no obligation to pay it, they would do so, lest they should cause offense to their fellow Jews. This, then, was the 'life-setting' of the story. But when we are told that, by a sort of legal fiction, the decision was thrown back into the lifetime of Jesus so as to be invested with His authority, we must demur. The whole question came to an end with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and when it was debated in the Jerusalem church there must have been many who would have a good idea whether such a thing had taken place in Jesus' lifetime or not. The 'life-setting' in the Jerusalem church probable enough; but what it explains is not the invention of the story, but its recording. When the problem of the temple tax arose, the natural question was: 'Did our Master say anything about this? Did He pay the half-shekel?' Then the incident was remembered, and recorded for a precedent. A 'life-setting' in the early Church does not preclude a prior 'life-setting' in the life of Jesus Himself.

But, apart from what the story signifies, some have felt a difficulty in the miracle implied in the words of Jesus with which the incident closes. (We are not told that Peter did find a coin in the fish's mouth; but we are clearly intended to understand that he did.) It is again, easy to say that Peter caught a fish which he sold for a shekel, thus getting enough to pay his own tax and his Masters, and this time the rationalization does not greatly impair the significance of the story. But some rationalizers seem to suppose that the miracle consisted in Peter's finding the coin in the fish's mouth. There was nothing miraculous in that; such objects have often been found in the mouths or stomachs of fish. The miracle, if such it be, is that Jesus knew in advance that Peter would find the coin there, so that once more we are brought to realize that we

must first make up our minds about Christ before coming to conclusions about the miracles attributed to Him

The other miracle is the cursing of the barren fig tree (Mk. xi. '2 ff.), a stumblingblock to many. They feel that it is unlike Jesus, and so someone must have misunderstood what actually happened, or turned a spoken parable into an acted miracle, or something like that. Some, on the other hand, welcome the story because it shows that Jesus was human enough to get unreasonably annoyed on occasion. It appears, however, that a closer acquaintance with fig trees would have prevented such misunderstandings. 'The time of figs was not yet,' says Mark, for it was just before Passover, about six weeks before the fully formed fig appears. The fact that Mark adds these words shows that he knew what he was talking about. When the fig leaves appear about the end of March they are accompanied by a crop of small knobs, called *taqsh* by the Arabs, a sort of forerunner of the real figs. These *taqsh* are eaten by peasants and others when hungry. They drop off before the real fig is formed. But if the leaves appear unaccompanied by *taqsh*, there will be no figs that year. So it was evident to our Lord, when He turned aside to see if there were any of these *taqsh* on the fig tree to assuage His hunger for the time being, that the absence of the *taqsh* meant that there would be no figs when the time for figs came. For all its fair show of foliage, it was a fruitless and hopeless tree.'

The whole incident was an acted parable. To Jesus the fig tree, fair but barren, spoke of the city of Jerusalem, where He had found much religious observance, but no response to His message from God. The withering of the tree was thus an omen of the disaster which, as He foresaw and foretold, would shortly fall upon the city.

But, as Mark records the incident, the withering of the tree had a personal significance for the disciples; it taught them to have faith in God (Mk. xi. 22). And this is the moral which the miracle stories have for us today. They are recorded as signs of divine power; and even if we could prove their historicity up to the hilt we should still miss the point of their narration if we failed to see in them tokens of the activity of God in history, culminating in the appearance of Christ on earth. As the Gospel parables are oral lessons of the kingdom of God, so the Gospel miracles are object lessons, acted parables of the kingdom. Like the Gospel story as a whole they challenge us to have faith in God, as He is revealed in Christ. When we turn from our attempts at rationalizing them so as to make them more acceptable to the spirit of our age, and try rather to understand why they were recorded by the evangelists, we shall be in a position to profit by them as the evangelists intended we should. We shall learn then by experience 'that it is true of the miracle-stories, as of every part of the gospel record that ' these things were written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life in His name' (Jn. xx. 31)'.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ff-bruce/the-gospel-miracles/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net

