

Introduction

INTERPRETERS OF JESUS SEEM to be stuck when it comes to dealing with the healings and exorcisms. They are stuck in old terms and phrases that long ago became frozen into standard scholarly concepts and assumptions. The Gospels are full of episodes of healing and exorcism. In the Gospel of Mark they compose most of Jesus's ministry in Galilee. In the recent spate of books on Jesus, however, interpreters devote little or no attention to their interpretation. Why?

The development of the New Testament studies branch of theology in the age of Enlightenment is surely part of the reason. When critical theologians and biblical scholars finally tried to come to grips with the nascent culture of science in evaluating the Gospel accounts as sources for the historical Jesus, they dismissed most narratives as unreliable. The infancy narratives involved angels. The passion narratives were clearly testimonies of Easter faith. To Enlightenment reason it was clear that the healings and exorcisms—like multiplying food, walking on water, and raising the dead—did not happen by natural causes but must have involved supernatural causes (God). That is, they were “miracles,” perhaps even with elements of “magic.”¹ Modern scholars, of course, couched their interpretation in modern terms. Since modern, scientific people could not believe in spirits and miracles or magic, interpreters of Jesus tended to avoid the “miracle stories.” They focused largely on the more reliable sayings in the Gospel sources and presented Jesus mainly as a teacher. This left Jesus's healings and exorcisms classified as “miracles” or “magic,” along with raising the dead and “nature miracles,” and left skeptical interpreters with little or nothing to offer by way of illuminating discussion.

1. Since recent translations of healing and exorcism episodes in the Gospels and other relevant passages often use the language of biomedicine or other historically problematic terms, I have usually presented my own translations—sometimes as a deliberate alternative.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the grip of Enlightenment reason on what counts as reality has loosened considerably. Even the natural sciences are seen to operate according to certain models or paradigms. Yet even in the resurgence of research on the historical Jesus in the last generation, interpreters are stuck in what have become standard scholarly concepts. It somehow has not occurred to Jesus interpreters, who claim to be investigating Jesus in his historical context, to inquire how ancient people understood healing and exorcism. They were “amazed” or “astounded” at incidents of healing. But did they share our modern concepts of miracle or magic? Perhaps it would be appropriate to question key terms and assumptions that became standard in the field of New Testament more than a century ago.

The way interpreters of Jesus and the Gospels deal with Jesus’s healings and exorcisms has not changed much since the highly influential scholar Rudolf Bultmann’s important analysis nearly ninety years ago. Treating the Gospels as mere containers or collections of discrete sayings and stories that had circulated separately, contemporary interpreters following Bultmann dismantle the Gospels to isolate the individual sayings and stories. Such analysis then classifies the stories into different kinds, the most extensive category being “miracle stories,” under which scholars lump all of the stories that focus on healing or exorcism or “raising the dead / resuscitation” or “nature miracles / wonders.” Then, partly because “the sayings-tradition” also attests healings and exorcisms, contemporary scholars such as Meier and Funk (and the Jesus Seminar)² repeat Bultmann’s conclusion from 1926, that while most of the miracle stories are legendary, “there can be no doubt that Jesus did the kind of deeds which were miracles . . . , that is, deeds which were attributed to a supernatural, divine cause.”³

These same scholars, however, then ignore Bultmann’s other conclusion from 1926, that there is “no great value in investigating more closely how much in the gospel miracle tales is historical.”⁴ They devote great energy and hundreds of pages to searching through the isolated individual miracle stories for fragmentary “historical facts” or elements that “have a chance of going back to some event in the life of . . . Jesus.”⁵ Meier devoted twice as much space (530 pages) to the “miracle stories” as to Jesus’s message, and Funk and the Jesus Seminar devoted five years of research,

2. Meier, *Mentor*; Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *Acts*.

3. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 173.

4. *Ibid.*, 174.

5. Meier, *Mentor*, 648, 652, 726.

discussion, and voting (1991–1996) and five hundred pages to the “acts of Jesus.” As the result of this painstaking analysis of the miracle stories, however, they find precious few elements that they deem authentic.

While scholars define the types of stories ostensibly by (literary) form (e.g., as pronouncement stories or controversy stories), modern Western rationalist criteria are determinative for “miracle stories.” The concept of miracle came into prominence in the European Enlightenment. Recent interpretation of Jesus’s healing and exorcism is thus solidly embedded in two major controlling modern assumptions. The most determinative is that the healings and exorcisms were miracles and that miracle is a concept appropriate to social-cultural life in antiquity. The other, which is reinforced by the first and in turn strongly reinforces it, is that the sources for the historical Jesus are individual sayings and Jesus-stories. Accordingly, Jesus-interpreters isolate healing and exorcism stories from the literary context that might provide indications of their meaning context. Focused narrowly on the miraculous (that they find difficult to believe really happened), giving little or no attention to social interaction, scientific-minded modern interpreters then focus even more narrowly on whether any particular elements in these stories might possibly go back to Jesus.

This severely narrow focus, however, is limiting for investigation of (the Gospels’ portrayal of) Jesus’s healing and exorcism in historical context. Little or no attention is paid to the significance of healings and exorcisms in Jesus’s mission as portrayed in the Gospels. And little or no attention is given to the historical social-political context of the sicknesses and healings and the spirit-possession and exorcisms in which Jesus was reportedly engaged. The underlying question, however, is whether the two modern assumptions on which this narrow focus is based are valid: the assumptions that healings and exorcisms constitute miracles, and that authentic Jesus-material most likely takes the form of sayings.

The recent scholarly resurgence of interest in “magic” in the ancient world a generation ago has only compounded the problems of standard interpretation of Jesus’s healing and exorcism. In the twentieth century, history-of-religions scholars, among others, had constructed a synthetic concept of magic in the ancient Greek and Roman world from a variety of ancient sources, mostly from late antiquity. Without justification from ancient sources, New Testament scholars then expanded the concept of ancient magic to include healing and exorcism, and it became standard for interpreters of Jesus to find certain features of magic in healing and exorcism

stories. Morton Smith made a bold and far-reaching argument that Jesus himself was a magician, based mostly on an uncritical use of passages from the “magical papyri” of late antiquity.⁶ In yet another argument that Jesus was a magician, John Dominic Crossan further broadened the concept of ancient magic on the basis of Bryan Wilson’s abstract sociological typology developed during the 1950s and 1960s.⁷

Those of us interested in further exploration of Jesus’s healing and exorcism are thus faced with controlling concepts that have not been subjected to critical review. Such a review would seem to be required prior to further research into and interpretation of (stories of) Jesus’s healings and exorcisms. This book aims to begin such a critical review of the scholarly constructs of miracle and magic that have come to focus and even control investigation and interpretation of (stories of) Jesus’s healing and exorcism.

Part 1 examines whether the concept of “miracle,” rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and now embedded in the field of New Testament studies, is attested in ancient sources and applicable to the healing and exorcism stories in the Gospels.

Part 2 attempts a critical review of the modern scholarly concept of ancient magic and addresses whether it is applicable to the ancient texts and practices that are adduced as evidence. Because ancient “magic” is the result of successive steps of scholarly construction—and carries considerable modern Western cultural baggage—its critical deconstruction requires several steps. The steps of critical review taken in part 2 suggest that what became the standard concept of ancient magic is not attested by or applicable to the texts and practices adduced as evidence, and that the broadened construct of magic by New Testament scholars is not applicable to the healing and exorcism (stories) of Jesus.

Part 3 begins with a brief summary of why and how the Gospels, which have been increasingly recognized as sustained narratives and not as mere containers of sayings and stories, are the historical sources for Jesus in historical context, and why isolated stories are not. Then a critical reexamination of the healing episodes and the exorcism episodes as components of the Gospel stories—while noting in passing that they do not fit the modern concepts of miracle or magic—finds that the healings and exorcisms are portrayed as relational and interactional.

6. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*.

7. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*; Wilson, *Magic and Millennium*.