

The Miracles of Jesus: A Historical Inquiry

by Christopher Price (Sep. 13, 2004)

I. Introduction

A concept popular with skeptics, if not with New Testament scholars, is that Jesus' miracles are best explained as fictions added by the early church to enhance its own cause and Jesus' image among potential converts. Many believe that the reports of Jesus' miracles are similar to—and no more persuasive than—other accounts of miracles from the first century. There are a number of problems with these beliefs. The earliest traditions about Jesus include accounts of his miracle working. They are intertwined with the earliest sayings traditions. Additionally, the attestations of Jesus' miracles are uniquely diverse and numerous. There are no first century equivalents. To clarify, this article does not equate Jesus' exorcisms that do not result in miraculous healings with his miracle working.

What I intend to provide in this article are good reasons for believing that Jesus, his contemporary followers, and his contemporary enemies, believed that he was a miracle worker. I also happen to think that—if we can set naturalistic assumptions aside—this article provides enough justification to explore the life and works of Jesus in more detail to see whether there is a possibility that Jesus in fact performed inexplicable deeds. Such an inquiry would need to be much more extensive than this one.

There are several evidences and arguments that support the proposition that Jesus was known by his contemporaries as a miracle worker. I will focus on four historical tools of inquiry: multiple attestation, divergent patterns, coherence, and dissimilarity.

II. Multiple Attestation

"Multiple attestation argues that a saying that appears in multiple strands of tradition (usually seen as Mk, Q, M, L) or in multiple forms (miracles, maxims, pronouncements, etc.) are likely to be authentic. The logic is that the more levels of tradition that attest an event, the more likely it reached the tradition early." (Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, p. 201) Not only does multiple attestation indicate the earliness of a tradition, but "[t]he same saying or character trait is unlikely to have been 'invented' within several independent Christian communities which were preserving parts of the gospel tradition." (Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, p. 161) According to John P. Meier, "the single most important criterion in the investigation of Jesus' miracles is the criterion of multiple attestation of sources and forms." (*A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, page 619) Every canonical gospel source, Mark, Q, M, L, and John, affirms the miracle-working activities of Jesus. Less friendly sources, such as Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud, also attest to Jesus as a miracle worker.

A. The New Testament Evidence

1. The Gospel of Mark

It is clear that Mark's miracle stories are not fictionalized accounts created by its author, but rather inherited miracles stories "from many different streams of first-generation Christian traditions." (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 618) This is proven, in part, by the diversity of the miracle narratives and sayings in Mark.

Of 666 total verses in Mark, 209 deal with Jesus' miracles. These verses are varied in form and content. There are blocks of miracles stories (4:35-5:43), individual, distinct miracle stories (9:14-29), miracle stories intertwined with broader narratives (6:7-8:21); and individual miracles embedded in the pre-Markan passion narrative (10:46-52). (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 618) Furthermore, Mark's miracle stories are varied. They are long and circumstantial, as well as short and pithy (1:30-31). They are detailed, including names of places and people, and they are nondescript, giving neither names nor places. They are physical healings, nature miracles, exorcisms, and miraculous knowledge. Jesus is portrayed both as performing miracles and as speaking about his miracles (3:20-30). In short, "when one looks at this vast array of disparate streams of miracle traditions in the first Christian generation, some already grouped in collections, some still stray bits of material, Mark alone -- writing as he does at the end of the first Christian generation -- constitutes a fair refutation of the idea that the miracle traditions were totally the creation of the early church after Jesus' death." (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 620)

Additionally, at least two of Mark's miracle stories contain Aramaisms: the raising of Jairus' daughter from death (5:41) and the healing of the deaf man (7:34). Because the gospel writers were attempting to reach a Greek speaking audience, most of the sayings and narratives are in Greek. The existence of an Aramaism, therefore, is generally regarded as evidence of early formation of the relevant tradition. See Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, page 202. ("The criterion of Aramaic linguistic features argues that traces of Aramaic syntax or wording underlying a tradition point to the tradition's age and authenticity.") Thus, the fact that two of the miracle stories persisted in retaining some Aramaic argues strongly for their early existence.

2. The "Q" Source

Mark does not stand alone in his early attestation of Jesus as a miracle worker. The so-called "Q" source, widely regarded to have been used both by Luke and Matthew despite some present day dissenters, also provides us with attestation of Jesus' miracle working. Q, although generally considered to be a sayings source, narrates Jesus' healing the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13). Furthermore, Q contains several statements attesting to the fact that Jesus was a miracle worker, including Jesus' statement to the disciples of John the Baptist' inquiry as to whether Jesus was the messiah: "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." Matt. 11:4-5. See also Matthew 10:1-8; 11:20-24; 12:22-32 *par*. Accordingly, although demonstrating no interest in "playing up" Jesus' miracles, Q nevertheless provides independent attestation of Jesus' miracle working.

3. The Special Material of Matthew and Luke

"M," the unique material in Matthew, and "L," the unique material in Luke, also contain miracle accounts. To be clear, "M" and "L" are not the material that Matthew and Luke share in common via Q. Rather, they are material that is unique to the respective gospel. That is, "M" is material that is literarily unique to Matthew and "L" is material that is literarily unique to Luke. Although I can anticipate the dismissive attitude some take towards the special "M" and "L" material, I believe it is uncritical and unwarranted. Given the nature of oral and even literary traditions, the fact that Matthew and Luke preserved materials not preserved in Mark is a matter of historical chance or preference rather than an indication that such traditions were simple inventions by the authors. Moreover, the evidence is strong that Matthew and Luke were reporting traditions well-established in their respective communities or sources, rather than inventing miracle stories from wholecloth.

Historical evidence indicates that Matthew's unique material consisted of several preexisting traditions, but not a distinct, large, written source. The inclusion of non-Markan, non-Q miracle stories is all the more significant because "in general, the author de-emphasizes miracles." (E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 146) Not only does he tend to shorten Mark's miracle stories, the author of Matthew excludes some of them altogether. Instead, Matthew focuses on Jesus' ethical teachings. For example, Mark begins Jesus' career with some rapid-fire miracle stories, whereas Matthew begins Jesus' career with the Sermon on the Mount. This is not an author bent on promoting the miraculous deeds of Jesus. Nevertheless, despite Matthew's de-

emphasis of miracles, his unique material independently preserves two distinct miracle accounts (14:28-31; 17:27). Thus, he adds another level of tradition attesting to Jesus' miracle stories.

Luke's unique material consists of almost one half of his entire Gospel. Distinguishing him from Matthew, however, is his preservation of several independent accounts of Jesus' miracles (5:1-11; 7:11-17; 8:2-3; 13:10-17; 14:1-6, 4:29-30). Although somewhat hampered by Luke's consistent Greek, scholarly study of Luke's unique material has yielded much fuller results than the more limited evaluation of Matthew's material. "Research into the historical Jesus has found the distinctive contents of Luke, both teaching and narrative, to have a high degree of authenticity." (Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside of the New Testament*, p. 137) Luke's unique material is thought to consist of fewer sources than Matthew. Although it is not one source in its entirety (his infancy narrative for example is considered a distinct internal unit), the biggest portion of "L" is commonly thought to be one independent written source. (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside of the New Testament*, pp. 137-38. See also Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus According to Luke*.)

One reason scholars are confident that Luke is passing along established traditions is because of his demonstrated careful use of Mark and Q. "The general fidelity to his sources M[ark] and Q, where these can be certainly identified, makes one skeptical of suggestions that he created material in the Gospel on any large scale. It is much more plausible that Luke's own attitudes were in considerable measure formed by the traditions which he inherited." (I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 31) This fidelity, although not absolute, is consistent with Luke's stated purpose in writing his gospel:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

Accordingly, we can be confident that Luke's unique material is derived from otherwise unknown, but pre-existing traditions in the early Christian community (perhaps even a significant literary source).

In sum, both the unique "M" and "L" materials contain independent references to Jesus' miraculous deeds. Those materials, moreover, were already in existence in their respective communities. Therefore, they provide independent sources to the miracle working of Jesus.

4. The Gospel of John

We also have the Gospel of John, which a majority of New Testament scholars believe to be independent of Mark and the other Synoptics. I accept this view and consider John's miracle stories to be a distinct witness to Jesus' role as a miracle worker. (Obviously, the strength of this point rests on whether one agrees on the issue of literary independence.) Despite its independence, John contains the same types of miracles as the Synoptics, with some direct parallels: healing, raising the dead, nature miracles, and prophetic knowledge. As with Mark, Matthew, and Luke, application of form and source criticism to the Gospel of John reveal that its miracle stories are derived from earlier sources (whether written, oral, or eyewitness accounts). W. Nicol, *The Semia in the Fourth Gospel. Tradition and Redaction*, pp. 37-39, 109-10; Urban Von Wahlde, *The Earliest Version of John's Gospel*, pp. 116-23; Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessors*; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 637; Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, pp. 5-11. Accordingly, John adds at least a fifth independent source attesting to Jesus' miraculous deeds.

5. Summary of New Testament Evidence

Moderate New Testament scholar Paula Fredriksen, explains the strength of the New Testament evidence of Jesus' miracles as follows:

[W]e note that Jesus as exorcist, healer (even to the point of raising the dead), and miracle worker is one of the strongest, most ubiquitous, and most variously attested depictions in the Gospels. All strata of this material--Mark, John, M-traditions, L-traditions, and Q--make this claim. This sort of independent multiple attestation supports arguments for the antiquity of a given tradition, implying that its source must lie prior to its later, manifold expressions, perhaps in the mission of Jesus himself. (Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, p. 114)

Barry Blackburn provides a verse-specific breakdown of the multiple attestation of Jesus' miracle working:

[T]he miracle-working activity of Jesus--at least exorcisms and healings--easily passes the criterion of multiple attestation. Such miracles are attested in Q [Matt 4:3 = Luke 4:3; Matt 8:5-10, 13b = Luke 7:1-10; Matt 11:4-5 = Luke 7:22; Matt 10:8 = Luke 10:9; Matt 11:20-24 = Luke 10:13-15; Matt 9:32-34 = 12:22-29 = Luke 11:14-15, 17-22], Mark, material unique to Matthew [7:22; 9:27-31; 17:24-27; 21:14] and to Luke [4:18, 23-27; 5:1-11; 7:11-17; 8:2; 9:54; 10:17-20; 13:10-17; 13:32; 14:1-6; 17:11-21; 22:51; 23:8, 37, 39; 24:19], and the Gospel of John (healings only), including the 'signs source'. Jesus' wonderworking is also attested in various forms of oral tradition isolated by form criticism: (1) controversy [Mark 3:1-6 par; Luke 14:1-6; 13:10-17; Mark 3:22-30; 2:1-12 par], scholastic [Matt 11:2-19 par; Mark 9:38-40 par; 11:20-25 par], and biographical apothegms [Luke 17:11-19; Matt 17:24-27; Luke 13:31-33. Bultmann also regards Mark 7:24-31 par and Matt 8:5-13 par as apothegms (cf. *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 38-39)], (2) dominical sayings, including logia (wisdom sayings) [Mark 3:24-26 par], prophetic sayings [Matt 11:21-24 par; 11:5-6 par; 7:22-23 par], church rules [Mark 6:8-11 = Matt 10:5-16 = Luke 10:2-12], and "I" sayings [Matt 12:27-28 par], (3) miracle stories, (4) legends, and (5) the passion narrative. (B.L. Blackburn, "The Miracles of Jesus," in Chilton and Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, pp. 356-57)

Examined for its sources, therefore, the New Testament provides no fewer than five independent sources attesting to Jesus' miracle working.

B. The Testimonium Flavianum

Some reject the strong scholarly consensus that Josephus' references to Jesus are genuine, although embellished. However, I agree with that scholarly consensus represented by such diverse and respected scholars as Dominic Crossan, John P. Meier, and N.T. Wright that the first and fullest reference to Jesus by Josephus is partially authentic, with detectable signs of tampering that can be disregarded. I have explained in detail the reasons for accepting the partial-authenticity of Josephus' first reference to Jesus [here](#).

The following is the relevant part of the reconstructed version of the Testimonium Flavianum accepted by a majority of N.T. scholars:

At this time there appeared 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 among many Jews and among many of Gentile origin.

As I explain in my article, the phrase "doer of startling deeds" has an especially strong claim to authenticity. Christians generally avoided this term because it could just as easily be interpreted in a neutral or even negative way, such as "controversial deeds." Professor Van Voorst notes that the phrase "is ambiguous; it can also be translated 'startling/controversial deeds.'" (*Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 78) Professor Vermes notes that *paradoxa* is not an unambiguous reference to a Godly miracle. In fact, "students of Josephus seem to agree that the word best expressing his notion of 'miracle' is" a different Greek term that Vermes translates "sign." This is especially true when the issue concerns an extraordinary deed achieved by a man of God. (Vermes, "The Jesus Notice of Josephus Re-Examined," *Journal of Jewish Studies* [Spring 1987], p. 7) The Testimonium does not use the unambiguous term but rather *paradoxa*. According to Vermes, *paradoxa* is simply too neutral standing alone to be a positive attestation. Though

Josephus uses this term for Moses and Elisha, he goes out of his way to explain that the deeds described there were from God. (Vermes, "The Jesus Notice," p. 8) Not so with Jesus. Obviously, a Christian would not leave the issue hanging in the air, but would more resolutely affirm such deeds.

Given the reconstructed text's language and theology, it is highly improbable that Josephus used the gospels, or their respective sources, when he wrote the Testimonium. Nor were Christians themselves a source for his material, especially not for Josephus' noncommittal description of Jesus' "startling deeds." Accordingly, Josephus' reference constitutes an independent, Jewish, source attesting to Jesus' miracle working. As John P. Meier states:

Apart from the idea of attracting many Gentiles during his lifetime, this bundle of assertions gives exactly the same configuration of Jesus' ministry as do the Gospels. Rarely does attestation of Gospel tradition by multiple literary witnesses reach out to encompass so many different sources, including a non-Christian one. But such is the case here, and the attestation includes a reference to Jesus' alleged miracles. (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 622)

Accordingly, writing around 92 CE, Josephus preserves another source of tradition—likely Jewish—attesting to Jesus' miracle working.

C. The Babylonian Talmud

Another Jewish source for Jesus' miracle working can be found in the Babylonian Talmud:

It has been taught: On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu. And an announcer went out, in front of him, for forty days (saying): 'He is going to be stoned, because **he practiced sorcery** and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and plead in his behalf.' But, not having found anything in his favor, they hanged him on the eve of Passover. (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a)

The reference to "sorcery" is clearly a statement that Jesus performed at least seemingly miraculous deeds. It is reminiscent of the accusations of the Jewish authorities that Jesus was in league with Satan (Mark 3:22; Matthew 9:34; 12:24). On the whole, however, this reference adds only little weight. The Talmud is, by comparison, a more recent reference that could have been replying to the beliefs about Jesus in a later century.

II. Divergent Patterns

Another interesting feature about some of Jesus' miracles is that they actually create unnecessary problems for their authors. This fact gives rise to what New Testament scholars call the criterion of divergent patterns, often known as embarrassment. It holds that facts or events in the New Testament which would have been "embarrassing" to the early Church are more likely to be true. "The criterion of divergent patterns argues that a story that is retained in the face of its difficulty is likely to be authentic. . . . The logic of this criterion is clear: the difficult text was preserved because it belonged in the tradition." Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, p. 201. This criterion applies to some of the miracle narratives, or statements about miracles, which are recorded in the Gospels. Because of the problems they create, it is unlikely that the early Church would have invented them.

A. A Jewish Leader's Faith

Mark 5:22 puts the leader of a synagogue in a favorable light.

And behold, one of the rules of the synagogue came, Jairus by name. And when he saw Him, he fell at His feet and begged Him earnestly saying, "My little daughter lies at the point of death.

Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live.... Then He took the child by hand, and said to her, "talitha cumi," which translated, "Little girl, I say to you, arise."

Given the early church's conflict with the Jewish authorities (probably strongest with leaders of the synagogues), and the gospels' other negative portrayal of Jewish religious leaders, it does not make sense that the gospel authors would invent such a miracle putting such a leader in a favorable light. Furthermore, specifically regarding miracles, Jewish leaders are seen as opposing Jesus' miracles (Mark 3:1-5; John 5:4-10), being offended by his miracles (Matthews 21:14-15), trying to squelch them (John 9:13-41), or portraying them as the work of Satan (Mark 3:20-30; Matthew 12:22-32). But Jairus is shown to have, and act on, faith in Jesus. Although it could be argued that this episode shows Jesus' enemies having to come to him for help, Jairus' role in any opposition to Jesus is not mentioned or even hinted at. Accordingly, it is unlikely that they would invent, or transmit, a false miracle story casting a synagogue leader in such a positive light.

B. Jesus in League with Satan

Both Mark and Q include the accusation of Jesus' opponents that he was able to perform miracles because he was in league with the devil. (Mark 3:20-30; Matthew 12:22-32) Not only is this doubly attested, but it is an unlikely fabrication. As N.T. Wright states, "the Church did not invent the charge that Jesus was in charge with league with Beelzebub, but charges like that are not advanced unless they are needed as an explanation for some quite remarkable phenomenon." (N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 188) It appears, therefore, that Jesus' religious opponents did make this charge, and must have had a reason for doing so. "It is noteworthy that Jesus' enemies are not presented as denying that he did extraordinary deeds; rather they attributed them to evil origins, either to the devil (Mark 3:22-30) or in the 2d-century polemic to magic (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.32.3-5)." (Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, pp. 62-63)

Blackburn offers the following:

Jesus' exorcistic and healing activity is mentioned or implied by a few dominical logia with strong claims to authenticity. Following the charge that Jesus exorcised as a sorcerer, both Mark and Q contain two dominical parables, the former of which, the 'divided kingdom' parable (Mark 3:24-26; Matt 12:25-26; Luke 11:17-18), almost certainly originated as a defense against the charge of demonically empowered healings and/or exorcisms. Only so could the language about Satan being divided against himself be meaningfully interpreted. Independently attested by Mark and Q and addressing a charge patently not created by the church, its claim to be an authentic dominical saying is good. (B.L. Blackburn, "The Miracles of Jesus," in Chilton and Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, pp. 356-57)

C. Jesus Fails to Perform Miracles

Another embarrassing statement which even the modern church has difficulty reconciling is recorded in Matthew. Specifically, Jesus admits that he did not perform miracles in Nazareth, his home town, because of the lack of faith among its residents. (Matthew 13:58). Jesus' admission that he cannot perform miracles in Nazareth because of a lack of faith is not something we would expect the early church to create. The gospels go out of their way to emphasize, not diminish, Christology. Nevertheless, the statement is recorded and passed along in the early church as a statement by Jesus. Jesus' admission that he could not perform miracles in a specific place indicates that he was thought, by himself and others, to have performed miracles in other places.

III. Coherence

The criterion of coherence is a common tool of historical inquiry. It is usually used after some material has been reasonably established as historical by the other methods. It holds that sayings or actions of Jesus that

fit in well with the established historical material amassed has a good chance of being historical. "The principle of coherence argues that whatever is consistent with what is already shown to be authentic also has a good claim to authenticity." (Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, p. 201) The argument from coherence is relevant to Jesus' miracles in two ways: (1) The initial inventory of narratives and sayings of Jesus blend with the miracles. That is, the sayings supplement the miracles and the miracles supplement the sayings; (2) The reports of Jesus' amazing deeds fits in well with the fact that Jesus succeeded in gaining a large number of followers during his ministry.

A. Message & Miracles

That Jesus was an impassioned advocate of the eschatological arrival of the kingdom of God is a conclusion central to the works of some of the most respected New Testament scholars, such as Albert Schweitzer, E.P. Sanders, and N.T. Wright. This belief is supported by a large number of well-attested sayings of Jesus and by Jesus' incontestable relationship with the ministry of John the Baptist. Fitting in well with Jesus success as an eschatological teacher are his reported exorcisms and healings. Jesus exorcisms are viewed as dramatic presentations and partial realizations of God eschatological triumph over evil through the actions of Jesus. Additionally, the healing miracles show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of such Old Testament figures as Isaiah. Perhaps it can best be put this way: Jesus' core teachings and miracles are supplementary and intertwined in our earliest sayings traditions. "What is remarkable in all this is how deeds and sayings cut across different sources and form-critical categories to create a meaningful. This neat, elegant, and unforced 'fit' of the deeds and sayings of Jesus, coming from many different sources, argues eloquently for a basic historical fact: Jesus did perform deeds that he and some of his contemporaries considered miracles." (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 623)

B. Attraction of Followers

Jesus attracted a large following during his ministry. This is testified to by the New Testament source material and Josephus. These sources indicate that part of the reason that Jesus attracted large numbers of followers was his miracle working. Certainly it is true that Jesus' miracle working would provide strong explanatory power as to his importance as a first century religious figure. "An ability to work cures, further, coheres with another datum from Jesus' mission: He had a popular following, which such an ability helps to account for." (Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, p. 115) Although I certainly find the teaching of the sermon on the mount to be an impressive discourse, I doubt its ability to attract and sustain large crowds. Some argue that this would also cohere with the endurance of Jesus' followers. The movement did not die out after his death. Most others did. Though plausible, a more likely explanation for the endurance of Jesus' followers is the reason stated by his followers themselves: the resurrection of Jesus. Our best evidence tells us that many of Jesus' followers experienced resurrection appearances after his death. Whether or not the empty tomb reaches as far back (I think it does), it seems clear that many of Jesus' followers attributed their continuing mission and fortitude to Jesus' resurrection appearances. The centrality of the resurrection to early Christian proclamation (in Paul's letters and in the early preaching discourses in Acts) adds weight to this explanation. Accordingly, while Jesus' ability to gather large followings or crowds during his ministry coheres with the miracle accounts, the endurance of such followers after his death is more likely explained by their resurrection experiences.

IV. Dissimilarity

Another important feature of Jesus' miracles is their dissimilarity from Judaism, Paganism, and the early Church. There are no examples of comparable miracle workers in Judaism or Paganism contemporary with Jesus. As Professor Raymond Brown notes:

[O]ne should be wary of the claim that Jesus was portrayed like the many other miracle-working teachers, Jewish and pagan of his era. The idea that such a figure was commonplace in the 1st century is largely a fiction. Jesus is remembered as combining teaching with miracles intimately

related to his teaching, and that combination was unique. (*An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, p. 63)

The focus of this section is on Jesus' healings and nature miracles, as there is evidence of other exorcists during Jesus' time.

A. Judaism

Given the very different world-views of Pagans and Jews, a focus on Jewish history and miracle claims is appropriate. That the miracle claims originated among Jesus' Jewish followers is beyond dispute. The authors of Matthew, Mark, and John were Jews. So too Paul. As for Luke, the sources for his miracle claims were Jewish ones. Although many people believe that the times of Jesus were full of claims about miracle workers, Jesus and his miracle working are unique in the history of his people and time.

Nevertheless, in his article, "Kooks and Quacks of the Roman Empire," Richard Carrier attempts to show that the ancients of Jesus' time were just too gullible to be trusted in their reports of miracles (see bibliography for link). Notably, the only Jewish examples he gives are some failed messianic claimants who promised miracles *but did not deliver*. First, Carrier discusses the Egyptian and his promise—reported by Josephus—that "at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down" (*Ant.* 20.170). The Romans came out in force and killed, captured, or forced to flee, the Egyptians followers. The Egyptian himself escaped but was not heard from again. Despite his claim that he would perform a miracle, no one ever actually believed or reported that he had performed them. Next, the self-styled prophet Theudas gathered a following after promising "that he would, by his own command, divide the river [Jordan]" (*Ant.* 20.97). Of course, he too was defeated and his followers scattered. Theudas himself was captured by the Romans and executed. No one ever claimed he was the Messiah after that and there are no reports that he ever followed through on his claim to perform a miracle. Indeed, there is a pattern here. A Jewish leader arises, claims to be the Messiah, and promises to do miracles. The Jewish leader is stricken down, the followers abandon the cause, and no miracles are reported. This is the opposite of what happens with Jesus. Jesus is stricken down, but followers continue with his mission. His followers and non-followers alike preserve multiple traditions about Jesus' miracle working. Accordingly, Carrier's article does more to add to the uniqueness of the reports of Jesus' miracles than he does to counter them.

Perhaps, though, Carrier's work is not exhaustive. Paula Fredriksen offers a similar line, also mentioning failed messianic claimants, but referring to some supposed Jewish miracle workers. In fact, there are few Jesus miracle-working "competitors" even to evaluate. The only two Fredriksen mentions are "Honi, the Circle-Drawer" and Hanina. Even these two, however, are not comparable to Jesus.

The two most frequently cited-Jewish wonder workers are Honi (Onias), the rain-maker (or circle-drawer) of the 1st century BC, and the Galilean Hanina of the 1st century AD. Almost all that is known of these men comes from much later rabbinic literature, and by that time legendary and theological developments had aggrandized the portrayal. Almost certainly in the earliest tradition they were not rabbinical teachers, and it is debatable whether they were primarily miraculous wonder-workers by their own power or men of persuasive prayer that brought God's extraordinary help. (Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, p. 63)

A close examination of Honi demonstrates Brown's point well. Honi died about 100 years before Jesus did. The first mention of him is by Josephus, writing in 93 CE. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus refers to "Onias," which is the Greek form of Honi. According to Josephus, Onias was "a just man and beloved of God, who once during a drought prayed that God would bring the drought to an end. Listening to [the prayer], God caused rain to fall."

Josephus refers to him somewhat like he does John the Baptist. Honi appears suddenly, is described positively, and is then put to death. It is also apparent that Josephus does not refer to Honi as a miracle worker. Rather, he recounts only one instance where God answered Honi's prayer for rain. There is no

indication of any messianic hopes or aspirations connected to him, nor any indication that he was considered a Rabbi, or teacher. The next mention of Honi comes at least one hundred years after Josephus (and over two hundred years after Honi's death). It is found in the Mishnah -- Jewish rabbinic literature. The Mishnah adds details to Josephus' brief mention of the famous prayer. It states that Honi's famous prayer at first went unanswered. He then draws a circle and swears that he will not step outside the circle until God makes it rain. It begins to sprinkle. Honi demands more, and a violent downpour ensues. Honi complains and the rain recedes to a moderate level. He then prays that the rain will cease and the rain ceases.

Notice that Honi is still not portrayed as a miracle worker, although there are some additional details about how God answered the prayer. There is no indication that Honi was a miracle worker himself, or that any messianic hopes were attached to him. In short, two hundred years later we have Honi portrayed as a man effective in prayer who has some links to the forerunners of the Pharisees. Honi, however, is eventually mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, written another couple of hundred years later. As portrayed by the Babylonian Talmud, he has been converted completely into a Pharisee and given the title "Rabbi" for the first time. Nevertheless, there were no messianic hopes attached to him. Nor can he fairly be called a miracle worker.

As J.P. Meier sums up:

To return from the end of the tradition history of 'Rabbi Honi' to its humble beginnings: all we can say with any probability about the 'historical' Onias/Honi is that he lived in the first half of the 1st century B.C., perhaps in Jerusalem, and was noted for an occasion when he prayed in a time of drought and God sent rain. Even this meager statement has to rest on two accounts written over one (Josephus) and two (the Mishnah) hundred years after the event. (*A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 484)

The somewhat murky figure of Hanina has even less to offer. Though he was probably active prior to the fall of Jerusalem, he rates no mention by any writer until the Mishnah. Of the three references to him in the Mishnah, one refers to a comment he made about prayer. m. Ber. 5:5. But does not even claim that his prayers had any special force, only that he claimed to be able to tell those who would live from those who would die. "The upshot of all this is that none of the three texts in the Mishnah explicitly and unambiguously presents Hanina as a miracle-worker in the more rigorous sense of that term (i.e., a human person who directly performs a miracle by giving certain commands or using certain gestures). Given the Mishnah's silence about miracle-working rabbis, we should not be surprised that Hanina ben Dosa is not really an exception." (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 586) Indeed, it is not until the Babylonian Talmud that Hanina is converted into a miracle worker. It seems all that we know about Hanina is that he probably was a Jewish teacher or religious leader who lived in the first century and was possibly, perhaps likely, known for praying for sick people. What kind of sick people and to what effect is not stated until hundreds of years later.

Finally, it could be argued that Jesus' miracles are based on the Old Testament. The main problem with this objection is that it misses the point of the divergent pattern criterion. It would be possible for any number of Jewish people or sources to invent miracle stories based on the Old Testament. But as the above discussion shows, they simply did not do so. Thus, it is no objection to this criterion to hypothesize a possible source for the material because it fails to explain why no one else bothered to do so. These stories were hundreds of years old and cannot serve to show that there were other miracle worker stories during Jesus' time. In any event, though some of Jesus' miracle stories may be similar to those in the Old Testament (unsurprising given the desire of Christians to portray Jesus along OT lines and something that would be hard to avoid given the breadth of the subject matter), many find no easy comparison. "No less than eight of Jesus' healing miracles are cures of the deaf, the dumb, the blind and the lame. These types of healings, though they may have been alleged to occur at pagan healing shrines, were completely without precedent in Jesus' own culture. Neither in the Old Testament nor in any subsequent Jewish writings do any such reports occur. In performing them, Jesus was breaking new ground, and seizing an option for which there was no precedent." (A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, p. 115) Moreover, if Jesus did

see himself as doing the work of God, it would be unreasonable to suppose that he would ignore the patterns and stories in the Old Testament as a source of inspiration for his own actions.

Accordingly, Brown's assessment of the existence of Jewish miracle workers is correct. Jesus stands unique among his people and time period as a reported miracle worker.

B. Paganism

Because it is well-established that the miracle accounts concerning Jesus arose in a Jewish context rather than a pagan one, the pagan evidence is of little relevance to our discussion of the uniqueness of Jesus' miracle accounts. Nevertheless, no evidence exists for any contemporary pagan figure comparable to Jesus.

"On the pagan side, there is little to report apart from the records of cures at healing shrines, which were certainly quite frequent, but are a rather different phenomenon from cures performed by an individual healer." (Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, pp. 103-104) Harvey's caution about comparing Jesus to such shrines is well taken. Yet it is just such phenomenon that Carrier mentions in his article: "the 'pagans' had Asclepius, their own healing savior, centuries before, and after, the ministry of Christ." Carrier's comments highlight the incongruity of comparing these pagan shrines and healing gods with the Gospels' presentation of Jesus. He is referring to "centuries" of traditions accumulated around a Greek god of healing, not one man's actions in a set period of time. It also appears that what was going on at these pagan temples and shrines was a mixture of primitive medicine, magic, and religion:

In the case of Asclepius, there is much debate as to whether he even existed as a real man. If he did, he was almost certainly a primitive physician and not just a miraculous healer, since his temple 'priests' later combined both medicine and superstition in their treatment of patients. (Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, p. 84)

Accordingly, this pagan phenomenon does not diminish the uniqueness of the Gospel's presentation of Jesus' miracle working.

However, there is one pagan figure (who is also mentioned by Carrier) that has more similarities to Jesus: Apollonius. As described in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Apollonius was a man reputed to do many miracles and healings, including raising a girl from the dead (though Philostratus seems to have some reservations about this story). There are, however, several factors which remove Apollonius as a figure comparable to Jesus.

First and foremost is that Apollonius lived *after* Jesus. He obviously could not be an inspiration or source of material for Jesus' miracle working. Indeed, it may be that Jesus was a source of inspiration for stories about Apollonius. Jesus' miracle working had been widely circulated throughout the Roman Empire by that time. Christianity was well-established and quite vocal about their Savior. Pagan authors such as Celsus knew and referred to the Gospels. Some scholars have argued that *The Life of Apollonius* was a response to Christianity's presentation of Jesus. Even those who do not go so far admit that Philostratus likely borrowed some of the Gospel stories or seen Jesus as an inspiration for his own creativity. (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 580) In any event, it seems probable that, if not influencing Philostratus directly, the stories about Apollonius that made their way into his *Life of Apollonius* were so influenced.

Next, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is a third-century account which dates over a hundred years after the life of Apollonius. No older accounts are extant. On the other hand, the epistles of Paul reveal knowledge about various details of Jesus' life and death between 20 and 25 years after Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is widely dated from 30 to 40 years after Jesus. Even the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are widely dated from between 40 and 50 years after Jesus. And their common source, Q, is dated decades earlier. Just examining the dates alone reveals that there was much more time for legendary material to develop around Apollonius. But perhaps even more important is that between the canonical Gospels alone there are five independent traditions about Jesus, whereas *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is the only real source of material about

Apollonius. Moreover, the author of *The Life of Apollonius* was born in 172 CE. Thus, Apollonius had been dead for decades before his biographer was even born. With the Gospels, it appears that their authors' lives overlapped with that of Jesus. At the very least, the Gospels authors wrote while many of Jesus' disciples were still alive. Not so with *The Life of Apollonius*:

[I]n a little over a generation after Jesus' death all the major facts and teachings of his life were fixed in writing, and by the end of the second or third Christian generation almost everything we know about Jesus had been written down. The contrast with the century-long gap in the case of Apollonius is stark. (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 579)

Finally, it appears that the stated source of material for Philostratus' biography was a fictitious person. The author claims that a major source of his information was Damis, a disciple of Apollonius. Damis is said to be from the city of Nineveh. But we know that Nineveh did not exist at that time because it was destroyed hundreds of years prior to the first century. For this and other reasons, scholars have concluded that Damis and his diary are complete fabrications. See, e.g., Howard Clark Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World*, pp. 255-265; John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, pp. 181-82; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, p. 193.

C. Early Christianity

Although the stories about Jesus' miracle working no doubt inspired his Christian followers, Jesus' miracles are depicted differently than those of the early Church. "In the Synoptics Jesus does not follow biblical or later Christian precedent in performing his cures; he does not pray nor does he invoke the sacred name." (Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus*, p. 159) For example, when Jesus performs miracles in Luke, he does not invoke the divine name, he does not rely on any incantation or vessel. He generally just commands. ("Then he came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.'" Luke 7:14.) In Acts, however, when Peter is shown as performing a miracle, he does so very differently: "Then Peter said, silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." (Acts 3:6) Moreover, when Paul conducted an exorcism, he stated, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." (Acts 16:18) This distinction is not limited to Acts, but is generally applicable to the earliest Christian accounts of miracles.

D. Summary of the Evidence of Dissimilarity

Even casting our net beyond the Jewish origins of Jesus' miracle working provides us with little evidence that miracle working such as the canonical Jesus was reported about other figures. Indeed, "[w]e have come to the remarkable conclusion that the miraculous activity of Jesus conforms to no known pattern." (Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, p. 113) Even if we take Carrier's arguments at face value—that the ancients were more gullible than we are today—this only adds to the impressiveness of the reports about Jesus. If people were so gullible, why did Jesus leave such a stronger tradition about his miracle working than any other figure of his time? The uniqueness of the Gospel reports stands out all the more by the rarity of such reports in ancient Roman times. Thus, the weight of the criteria of dissimilarity is very strong and adds great weight to the conclusion that Jesus' miracle working reputation began with Jesus himself.

V. The Assessment of Critical Scholarship

For all of the above reasons, modern scholarship has concluded that Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker originated with Jesus himself. His contemporary followers believed that Jesus was performing miracles in their midst. See B.L. Blackburn, "Miracles and Miracle Stories" (in *Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 556), "Among NT scholars there is almost universal agreement that Jesus performed what he and his contemporaries regarded as miraculous healings and exorcisms." Many of these scholars, though, would not concede that Jesus actually performed supernatural feats. For example, though Fredriksen believes Jesus healed the sick, she also is adamant that she "does not believe that God occasionally suspends the

operation of what Hume called 'natural law.'" Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, p. 114. Nevertheless, placing the origin of Jesus' miracles with Jesus himself is a significant historical conclusion. As such, I provide here a demonstrative sampling of respected scholars and their conclusions on the subject:

- "Any fair reading of the Gospels and other ancient sources (including Josephus) inexorably leads to the conclusion that Jesus was well known in his time as a healer and exorcist. The miracle stories are now treated seriously and are widely accepted by Jesus scholars as deriving from Jesus' ministry. Several specialized studies have appeared in recent years, which conclude that Jesus did things that were viewed as 'miracles'." B.D. Chilton and C.A. Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, pp. 11-12 (NTTS, 28.2; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998).
- "[T]he tradition that Jesus did perform exorcisms and healings (which may also have been exorcisms originally) is very strong." R.H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles*, p. 39.
- "[B]y far the deepest impression Jesus made upon his contemporaries was as an exorcist and a healer. . . . In any case he was not only believed to possess some quite special curative gifts but evidently, in some way or other he actually possessed them." Michael Grant, *An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, pp. 31, 35.
- "Yes, I think that Jesus probably did perform deeds that contemporaries viewed as miracles." Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, p. 114.
- "There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick and cast out demons." Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, p. 277.
- "In most miracle stories no explanation at all is given; Jesus simply speaks or acts and the miracle is done by his personal power. This trait probably reflects historical fact." Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, p. 101.
- "There is agreement on the basic facts: Jesus performed miracles, drew crowds and promised the kingdom to sinners." E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 157.
- "Yes, we can be sure that Jesus performed real signs which were interpreted by his contemporaries as experiences of an extraordinary power." H. Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories and the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 22.
- "That Jesus performed deeds that were perceived as miracles by both him and his audience is difficult to doubt." Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*, page 155.
- "[W]e must be clear that Jesus' contemporaries, both of those who became his followers and those who were determined not to become his followers, certainly regarded him as possessed of remarkable powers." Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 187.
- "[T]he tradition of Jesus' miracles has too many unusual features to be conveniently ascribed to conventional legend-mongering. Moreover, many of them contain details of precise reporting which is quite unlike the usual run of legends and is difficult to explain unless it derives from some historical recollection; and the gospels themselves show a remarkable restraint in their narratives which contrasts strangely with that delight in the miraculous for its own sake which normally characterizes the growth of legend." A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, p. 100.

VI. Conclusion

The miracle stories of Jesus originated very early, contained reports not likely to have been created by early Christians, and cohere well with the rest of what we know about Jesus and his ministry. The best explanation for this evidence is that Jesus was known during his life as a miracle worker. The uniqueness of such miracle working adds significant weight to this conclusion and leads us to the further conclusion that the feats of Jesus must have been impressive. Though, as Carrier points out, Jesus lived in a time of superstition and religiosity, his miracles are uniquely attested. No other person of that time period has anything close to the attestation Jesus receives as a miracle worker. Accordingly, even if your philosophical predispositions preclude you from believing that Jesus actually performed miracles that violated the laws of nature, it should be admitted that he performed feats that convinced his contemporaries that he did such deeds.

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