

# The Symbolic Significance of Selected Miracles in The New Testament

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## INTRODUCTION

Institutions, traditions, norms and values have been existing across cultures, societies and epochs of Mankind. They have been instrumental in framing the existential, social and historical evolution of people. Their provisions of beliefs, principles and conventions are held to be fundamental in the creation of any specific discourse within the human society. Moulding of the human mind (individual conscience based on personal opinions) and social duties according to the prevailing conditions (collective conscience) takes place under two kinds of influences—(a) the immediate surroundings, and (b) the perception of the ideas related on a one-to-one basis. Excellent examples from recorded data and excavations of historical sources, where society's flourish is seen as reflected in the literature, craftsmanship and architecture points to its structure and its efficiency of being an institution.

The social institution of Religion has been effective in both the past and present for the formulation and evaluation of certain values and responsibilities in the dynamics of unity among people. Its systematic approach in dealing with the sense of human faith, religious ideas and belief has imbued the introduction of the 'Supernatural'<sup>1</sup>—a topic of heated debates and recent academic pondering.

The Oxford Dictionary describes 'Supernatural'<sup>2</sup> both as an adjective and noun, events which "cannot be explained by the laws of science"<sup>3</sup> and something which "may seem to involve gods or

magic”.<sup>4</sup> Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton, in their Introduction to *The Supernatural in Society, Culture and History* discuss the term, its meaning and usage quite clearly. They opine that the ‘Supernatural’<sup>5</sup> would consist of ghosts and witchcraft. Falling back on David Hufford’s cultural authority (institutionalized religious belief) and the “intergenerational transmission of values”,<sup>6</sup> Waskul and Eaton also state a distinct difference between the interchangeable words ‘Supernatural’<sup>7</sup> and ‘Paranormal’<sup>8</sup> and suggest that it is the structure and working of cultural authority which legitimizes certain phenomena as supernatural (which may or may not be included in the theological discourse).

The element of the Supernatural, therefore, is a theme persistent across generations and is universal. It is considered to be a sensitive topic. The scope of it, when dealt with much consideration, gradually expands through the rational perspective of the term itself. According to E. Ritchie,<sup>9</sup> the dynamics of the Supernatural has a considerable effect on the ethical standards of any religion. Morality and the belief in the Supernatural are somewhat indirectly proportional to each other.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

The second narrative part of the Bible<sup>10</sup> is the New Testament. It is a collection of ecclesiastical literature, consisting of twenty-seven books, written by followers of Jesus. It embodies the doctrines and dogma of the Christian faith, dealing with Christ’s history, the establishment of the early Church and the Christian take on Apocalypse.

The Galilean Man’s ministries are referred to as Miracles all throughout the Four Gospels of the Bible, with the Gospel of John being unique among the rest. As the name itself suggests, the Miracle refers to an event or a phenomenon which is marvellous and wonderful, something which the common man would not experience

himself or in the immediate surroundings. William Dewar in his article ‘What is a Miracle?’<sup>11</sup> states that it falls under the umbrella term, Supernatural. In this case, the miracles are seen not only as a distinct experience but also as the manifestation of reality along with the attestation of a special message. Therefore, another reading from the point of view of the transcendental ethics presented in the Christian doctrine may be considered (instead of conforming to the natural order of the humans), establishing it as a wonder work, only to be left unexplained by the laws of nature.

## THE MIRACLES

It is interesting to note the overall consideration of the Miracles (Jesus’ Ministries) from the theological point of view. Miracles are seen as an act of the Supreme, an act of divinity, a work filled with grace, showing Christ’s duality as both a human and a spiritual existence (Son of God), a profound effect which continues to resonate among people today through faith and belief.<sup>12</sup> These events may be divided into various theme-based groups—food, water, healing and death. They are important not only as testimony to Christ’s lifestyle on earth, but as a reflection of Judean and Palestinian society, bearing important features of the Jewish culture and tradition. Unlike popular explanation, this paper aims to look into the existing elements of the Supernatural present in these events, which are otherwise seen as ecclesiastical occurrences.

The Miracle of Jesus turning water into wine and the Feeding of the multitude majorly deal with the theme of food. The first event took place at a wedding feast in Cana and only the Gospel of John<sup>13</sup> narrates the story. Alistair McGrath states it to be the “first public ministry of Jesus . . . at Cana in Galilee”.<sup>14</sup> According to this, Christ, invited to the wedding, arrived along with his disciples, and on the request of his mother Mary, miraculously turned water into wine after the existing supply of wine got depleted.

The verses do not do justice to the event since the turning of water into wine was only understood when the governor (master) of the feast tasted it and complimented its taste. It is, however, considered to be socially very significant due to certain reasons.

In a Jewish household, a wedding is a social sanctity and the serving of wine is second in importance. Jesus' response to his mother's request with the words "Mine hour is not yet come" creates a sense of wonder, and indirectly points to the supposed divinity of Christ. Special attention is paid to the material workings. The jars used for the event were six water pots made of stone, a container used specifically for Jewish purification rituals. The Hebrew word "firkins"<sup>15</sup> is translated to a unit of measurement, stating that amount which the jars could hold. William Barclay<sup>16</sup> strongly holds the view that certain instances mentioned bring out the theme of faith explicitly. According to him, it was the confidence and request of Mary which played a major role in his first wonder work.<sup>17</sup> Although there is lack of public account as first-hand witness, the matter is highlighted by the unnatural circumstances under which the conversion takes place.

The next Miracle under this category is the narrative about the Feeding of the Multitudes. It has been mentioned in the three books of Gospel, with five thousand people as witnesses. This story shows Jesus as a supplier of the needs of humans, setting the foundation for the famous connotation of the Bread of Life.<sup>18</sup> The Gospel of John states that Jesus asked his disciples to distribute five loaves of barley bread and two fishes, after giving thanks to the supernal power and breaking them. The food, however, does not finish, but keeps on multiplying, resulting in some leftovers later collected by the disciples. The fact that the food increases only after passing through Jesus' hand is seen as an act of creation by Steele.<sup>19</sup>

A symbolic act associated with the principle of giving and helping, it also draws a parallel with the provision of manna and quail by Yahweh to the Israelites through the leadership of Moses (Jesus and Moses are therefore acting as mediums of intercession between the

human realm and the world of the Supernatural), an occurrence sacred to Judaism.<sup>20</sup> An emphasis is also laid on Jesus praying, while looking up to the sky. Johannes Weiss considers that the supply was providential, hinting at its moral nature and the effect it had on certain writers of liturgy.

The second category of miracles deals with Christ's rule over the Natural order, with the incidents of Jesus walking on water and calming the storm (on different occasions). The first incident is said to have occurred on the same day, as the feeding of the multitude and Jesus' command over the natural world is highlighted well.

The faith of his disciples was shaken when they mistook their leader for a ghost. Jewish superstition considers ghost sightings at night as signs for people getting harmed in some way. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark talk of a prevailing wind which had made the boat buffet from the shore. Matthew 14:25 mentions an important fact, "And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea".<sup>21</sup> The 'fourth watch of the night'<sup>22</sup> refers to a specific time. The Romans had divided the night into four parts for time estimation of the hours. According to the story, the incident of Jesus walking on water occurs between three at night and six in the morning. Tradition and modern parapsychology often talk of this particular period when the human subconscious mind is most active and is perceptive to senses hardly felt during the physical activities of any other time of the day. In the Christian tradition, however, the hour between three and four at night was the devil's witching hour when the negative energy was at its peak. Christ's act is, therefore, seen as a defiance to the negative supernatural associations of the fourth watch of the night.

The walking of his disciple Peter on water (after Peter asks for Christ to allow him) and almost sinking (when the wind became boisterous), only to be saved by Jesus again highlights the theme of faith. The disbelief and questioning of the human witnesses clearly mark the episode as unearthly and mystical.

The Gospel of Mark mentions that the disciples' hearts were hardened after this incident since they did not understand or consider the miracle of the loaves.<sup>23</sup> The theme of the supernal power is previously encountered—the similar hardening of heart is spoken of in Exodus, where, due to the intervention of God through the plagues in Egypt, the Pharaoh's heart was hardened (Exodus 7:3)<sup>24</sup> pointing out the majestic omnipotent power, perhaps showing the disciples to be similar to those who questioned Christ's Miracles.

Another Miracle connected to the same theme was that of Jesus calming the storm. Here again, we come across the wondrous demonstration by Jesus over the natural order. The story produces the miracle as the natural expression of Christ's divinity. Reverend A.T. Robertson<sup>25</sup> too speaks of the spirit world being a part of his Human Nature, often merging into a single operation, resulting in a transcendental layer in his existence as the son of God—harping on the chord of supernatural strings as narrated in the Bible.

The Miracles of Healing are some of the most intriguing and well-known works of Christ which are associated with his inherent qualities. The healing of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood stand out as extraordinary mentions. Although they are narrated mostly in an overlapping fashion, the theme of faith again plays a major role, showing compassion and Providence through inexplicable actions.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke talk about a woman suffering from excessive hemorrhage and bleeding for twelve years. She had touched the hem of Jesus' garment (a cloak) when he was in a crowd and was immediately healed. In the Old Testament there are certain rules which the Jews would have to follow.<sup>26</sup> One of them is about the spiritual uncleanness and impurity of a woman's bleeding and what must be followed, so as to cause no harm in the community. There is a major possibility of the woman's mistreatment by society solely on the basis of these rules. It is quite possible for

her to have come to this Man of Galilee with, as Barclay points out, an inadequate faith, simply to be healed. A strange factor is the flow of power following the touch (since Jesus said that he felt his power leave the body after someone touched him without his knowledge).<sup>27</sup> The touch here strikes as a mystical element since the woman had not touched or felt the physical body of Christ directly. Unlike other Miracles, this took place without any kind of intercession or supplication. Christ's compassionate aura is shown in his addressing of the woman as 'Daughter'<sup>28</sup> despite her action.

Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, too, had come to Jesus with a similar motive, as a last resort, for his daughter of twelve years of age had died some time back. It is known as a healing simply by the fact that Jesus had claimed the girl to be sleeping instead of being dead. Modern scholars have trumpeted this explanation with a contrast to Lazarus' resurrection from death and about the possibility of the girl being in a coma (sleeping) instead of being fully dead. Yet, the girl's immediate response to 'Talitha cumi'<sup>29</sup> is similar to the immediate healing of the woman, an indication of the intensity of the instantaneous supernatural powers.

The Miracles of Jesus continue to be connected with different themes, accounts of which are in some texts, and translations vary.<sup>30</sup> Such is the account of the demon possession.<sup>31</sup> A story with typical supernatural entities as considered by the popular culture of the present century, it re-affirms Christ's authority over nature and the spirit world. It shows his human courage and sense of calm while dealing with the possessed man. The scriptures talk of the man as being naked, living in dark and unclean spaces like tombs and mountains. Luke also mentions that the man could not be kept in chains (he broke them free) and was living in the wilderness, because the devil made him do it. The atmosphere in which he was found is a typical setting for evil spirits and negative energy according to the Jewish superstitions. It was said and believed that it would haunt

people after dark (which is why his disciples mistook Christ as a ghost when he was crossing the lake), travellers and children, being most active during the midday and at deserts, tombs and mountainsides. Although the troubled man greets Christ in a tone of slight mockery, the demons' fear was also illustrated when they requested Christ to allow them to be cast into the herd of pigs nearby.<sup>32</sup>

The most astonishing Miracle performed by Jesus is the raising of Lazarus, a precedence to one of the fundamentals of Christian belief, the resurrection of all human life with the second coming of Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Lazarus (whose name meant 'God is my help'<sup>34</sup>) was sick and his sisters, Mary and Martha, had come to Jesus to inform him. Christ was not much worried but said that his sickness was to glorify God, in turn glorifying the Son of God too (himself). The story follows and on reaching the town, it was found that he had been dead for four days and was laid to rest already. This shows Christ's bonding and closeness with the sisters and Lazarus too (Martha had simply informed him of Lazarus' death). A sense of trust and faith among them scrubs the line of any kind of formality or superiority. One of the most famous lines spoken by Christ is evidenced in this story—"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . ." <sup>35</sup>

Towards the latter part of the story, Jesus exhibits the most humane aspect in him, by crying after being moved by the sisters' grief, despite the fact of intercession waiting to happen and Martha's faith being put to test, twice. Similar to the miraculous feeding of the five thousand people, Christ gave thanks for his glory while looking up, for the intention that people may believe him. It is only after his calling out to Lazarus to come forth that the dead was transformed back to living and came out from the tomb. Lazarus being dead for four days and being resurrected to life by Jesus, a human and the son of God, makes it the most unique Miracle performed by Christ, among others. It reflects the power of Christ's ability of creation (as

seen in the feeding of the people), intercession of Providence (Jairus' daughter, raising Lazarus and the feeding miracle), compassion (healing the woman and the wedding feast at Cana), compassion (healing miracles and Lazarus) and as unnatural inferences (the miracles performed in Nature and possession by the evil spirits).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Galilean Man's journey through the spiritual divinity of the Miracles has produced a mystical spectrum. The New Testament shows that the world of the Supernatural is not limited to possessions by evil spirits or mysterious actions, but perhaps is transcendental, where the good and the evil co-exist (one might question why Jesus didn't banish the demons to hell and instead allowed them to enter into animals). Miracles are seen as manifestations of it, rather than as socially ostracized phenomena. Their presence in Christian theology is quite representative and provides for the base of non-pagan, Western superstitious beliefs too. The idea of the supernal power intertwined with the wonder work as Providence stretches out the possibility of its inclusion in this category.

The Miracles of Christ have proved that his existence was both human and divine. The sense of morality portrayed in his ethics and his tender, yet strong character are etched with the moral messages presented in the religion. Christ's phrases of "O thou of little faith",<sup>36</sup> "Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole"<sup>37</sup> and "how is it that ye have no faith?"<sup>38</sup> are like affirmations to the actions causing the Miracles, questioning the audience's reception and belief. The Gospel narratives also show a trend in Christ's spiritual and human evolution. The attempt to re-investigate the Miracles has therefore brought home a different take on these selected Miracles not only as expositions of the religion, but also as those of symbolic significance, making a possible connection to the world of the Supernatural realm.

## NOTES

- 1 A. S. Hornby, "Supernatural", *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, ed. Leonie Hey and Suzanne Holloway, ninth edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1572.
- 2 Hornby, "Supernatural", 1572.
- 3 Ibid, 1572.
- 4 Ibid, 1572.
- 5 Excerpt from the Introduction, *The Supernatural in Society, Culture, and History*, eds. Dennis Waskul and Mark Eaton (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 6-9.
- 6 Waskul and Eaton, *The Supernatural in Society, Culture and History*, 6.
- 7 Ibid, 6-8.
- 8 Ibid, 6-8. (A strong distinction is made between the two words, where Supernatural is etymologically considered to be of older usage and refers to events which are above or beyond the natural order of life, while the latter is a relatively modern term, referring to events and psychic abilities failed to be understood in terms of scientific treatment, acting as a violation of the ethical standards.)
- 9 E. Ritchie, "Morality and Belief in the Supernatural", *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (January 1897): 180-191.
- 10 The King James Version of the Bible was used as a primary source.
- 11 William Dewar, "What is a Miracle?" *The American Journal of Theology*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1904): 240-255.
- 12 Dewar, "What is a Miracle?", 247.
- 13 The New International Version of the Bible uses the word 'signs' instead of Miracles, interpreting this event as a precedence of Christ's redemption for the distress caused by humans, what the prophets in the Old Testament considered would result in the flowing of the wine of joy after the arrival of their Messiah.
- 14 Alistair McGrath, *NIV Bible Commentary* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1988), 289.
- 15 John 2: 4, The Holy Bible, King James Version.
- 16 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Scotland: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), 17.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Some Coptic manuscripts state that Jesus' mother was a friend to the mother of the bridegroom of the wedding feast at Cana, which may also indicate Mary's insistence.
- 19 John 6: 38-40, KJV.
- 20 Rev. Albert Thomas Steele, "Jesus' Attitude toward His Miracles", *The Biblical World*, vol. 51, no. 4 (April 1918): 195-203.

- 21 Reference to the story of Manna provided as bread in the morning and quail as 'flesh to eat in the evening'. Exodus 16: 8, KJV Bible.
- 22 Matthew 14: 25, KJV.
- 23 Matthew, 14: 25, KJV.
- 24 Mark 6: 50-52, KJV.
- 25 Exodus 4: 21 and 7: 3, KJV.
- 26 A. T. Robertson, "The Miraculous Element in Mark's Gospel", *The Biblical World*, vol. 51, no. 5 (May: 1918): 287-292.
- 27 Leviticus 15: 25-27, KJV.
- 28 Luke 8: 46, "Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is gone out of me", KJV.
- 29 Luke 8: 48, KJV.
- 30 Mark 5: 41, in the Aramaic language, possibly spoken by Christ during the time, KJV.
- 31 The Gospels of Mark and Luke speak of one man being possessed, but Matthew mentions two men.
- 32 Luke 8: 26-39, Possession by Legion, KJV.
- 33 The NIV Study Bible uses the word 'abyss', which may be considered as a place of confinement for evil spirits.
- 34 Revelation 1: 7, 3: 11, 22: 12, KJV.
- 35 Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Scotland: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), 81.
- 36 John 11: 25-26, KJV.
- 37 Matthew 14: 31, KJV.
- 38 Mark 5: 34, KJV.
- 39 Mark 4: 40, KJV.