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The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles

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The author has written a clear and detailed book, nicely restricted in focus given the boundless domains “Jesus” and “Jewish context.” It reviews major literary themes from Second Temple Judaism as found in texts ranging from Josephus to Qumran fragments. Themes of miracle concern wondrous events caused by God, semidivine agents, or human agents. The book’s synthesis presents specific kinds of evidence to demonstrate how Gospel reports of the miracles of Jesus are congruent with Jewish traditions contemporary to them. The work directly addresses observations set forth by W. Kahl (*New Testament Miracle Stories in Their Religious-Historical Setting*), that the only two figures from the Gospel period consistently portrayed as “Bearers of Numinous Power” were Jesus and Apollonius of Tyana. Kahl’s view parallels Jesus most closely with non-Jewish sources; Moses, the prophets, and indeed all known Jewish precedents are essentially different in kind from Jesus. The author also addresses observations set forth by G. Vermes, P. W. Barnett, and R. Gray, that a hypothesized class of Palestinian holy men or first-century prophets formed the group of which Jesus was a member. He expertly unhinges the latticework modern scholars have built up around figures such as Honi, Hanina Ben Dosa, Theudas, the Egyptian, the Samaritan under Pilate, or the Imposter under Festus. Even so, the book concludes that the precedent for the miracle-working Jesus is indeed that of the prophet as depicted, broadly and consistently, in a variety of Jewish traditions. Simultaneously, the author yet notes that there is no Jewish tradition, not even about the prophets, that exactly parallels Jesus in terms of the sheer number of healings and exorcisms attributed to him.

Chapters 2–8 review miracle and exorcism stories in Second Temple literature, correlating these reports to what is found in the Gospels. Chapter 2 is dedicated to Josephus, chapter 3 to Philo. For both writers, miracles are strikingly unexpected events

believed to be acts of God. For Philo, they are events that are explicitly humanly impossible. Josephus reports few miracles outside those already reported in scripture. For Philo it is the same, and he favors miracles implicating Moses. His focus for miracles is not on individual healings but on issues of national defense or national provision. Both authors display a basic Greek vocabulary for the anomalous and miraculous. Between them, there is some overlap in use of the terms *semeion* and *paradoxos*. In them, little parallels the Gospel accounts of miracles.

Chapter 4 reviews Wisdom and Ben Sira. The latter is restrained about miracles; the former has a full Greek vocabulary for them (*semeion, thaumatos, teras, paradoxos*). In Wisdom only God is the miracle worker, and miracles function as doxology or proofs of God's power. Two healing miracles are mentioned, though they are still based on scriptural accounts (Num 16; 21). Miracles in Wisdom function differently than miracles in the Gospels, if for no other reason than the eschatology of Wisdom is different.

Pseudo-Philo is the focus in chapter 5. This literature is closer to the Gospels because it shows more interest in exorcism, especially Davidic (*Bib. Ant.* 60). In Pseudo-Philo there are punishment, salvation, and sign miracles. Unlike what is found in the Gospels, each of these represents ideas strictly about God's powers of reward and punishment. Even with a Davidic exorcism account, there is here little in common with the volume of healings and exorcisms found in the Gospels.

Chapter 6 reviews miracles in *1 En.* 1–36 and *Jubilees*. As with the Gospels, in *Enoch* evil spirits predominate, although there are no miracle stories. Different from the Gospels as well, in *Enoch* evil is resolved only at the last judgment. In *Jubilees* miracles are performed by God, and, notably, Moses. Noah, and Abraham perform exorcisms (*Jub.* 10 and 12). Even so, these are traditional figures, functioning as ciphers of biblical theology. The author suggests that the focus on evil spirits in *Enoch*, *Jubilees*, or *4 Ezra* may, however, shed some light on the theological environment of the historical Jesus.

Chapter 7 analyzes three Qumran texts: *Genesis Apocryphon*, *Prayer of Nabonidus*, and *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521). In general, miracle stories are sparse to nonexistent in the Qumran texts; there are no nature miracles and not really any healing stories. Considerable time is spent with 4Q521, discussing detailed problems with its interpretation as to whether or not it refers to miracles to be performed specifically by the Messiah. Brief studies of a few other Qumran texts lead the author to conclude that Qumran materials may contain broader popular theories about spirits and evil spirits. They contain little that is overtly like the number and type of miracle stories in the Gospels.

Chapter 8 reviews Tobit and the work on Moses by Artapanos, both viewed as romances. Tobit has but one healing and one exorcism. The author suggests that the theological position Tobit is that a good and pious person can perform miracles as necessary. Artapanos is different. For him, Moses is a true “Bearer of Numinous Power” (again, in reference to Werner Kahl). Moses’ rod functions almost like a magic wand, pushing the picture of Moses here closer to social deviance. Even so, these romances are said merely to bear an affinity to the miracle stories in the Gospels.

Chapter 9 presents summary conclusions about miracles in Second Temple literature and proposes a typology of miracles. There are miracles of healing (few), exorcism (few), national deliverance (many), and natural provision (mostly exodus-related). Miracles are performed primarily by God, sometimes by human agents, but more often by semidivine agents. The reader discovers that there are not many stories from the Jewish context that are dead-on similar to Gospel stories. Even so, the author argues that there is enough overlap between the Jewish context and the Gospels to show that the Gospels fit into that context comfortably. This conclusion is based on analysis of the figure of the prophet (including Moses), whom the author argues is the figure from the Jewish context that best parallels the miracle-working Jesus.

The book adopts a different method in chapters 10–13. The author examines specific reports about Honi, Hanina Ben Dosa, Theudas, the Egyptian, Charlatans’ Collective under Felix, the Samaritan under Pilate, the Imposter under Festus, and sundry other healers, magicians, and exorcists. Although others will take issue with it, I found convincing his conclusion that there was no class of Palestinian charismatic holy men. Honi and Hanina were prophet-types, based essentially on Elijah and Elisha. Josephus referred to the other cast of characters as specific types of prophets, namely, false. For him, they were flimflam deceivers (*goetes*) who claimed to perform *semeia* and *teras*. Indeed, they were popularly perceived as prophets as they went about cloaking themselves in traditions of Moses, the exodus, and national deliverance. Once again, the figure of the prophet is persistently linked to the miraculous in the Jewish context.

Reports about exorcists in Josephus (King David in *Ant.* 6.166–169; Eleazar in *Ant.* 8.45–49), Qumran (Abraham in *Genesis Apocryphon*), Luke (sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13–20), and rabbinic literature (R. Simeon in *b. Me’il.* 17b; R. Johanan b. Zakkai in *Num. Rab.* 19:8) show, mostly, that exorcisms were rare in the Jewish context, at least as reported. Outside of the formal literature, their frequency might have been greater. Exorcisms entailed a battle of spirits, evil against divine; it was another way of linking the miraculous to the figure of the prophet, who bore the Spirit of God. In general, the book argues that the Jewish context offered a crystallization of the figure of the prophet, who had evolved into the legitimate bearer of God’s Spirit. It linked this figure to the

miraculous. Such was the theoretical background against which the sudden inrush of miracles and exorcisms reported about Jesus can be seen.

The most relevant context for understanding miraculous healings is that of pathology, cure, and medicine: healing in the context of what illnesses and injuries? what doctors? what sickness concepts? what folk medicine? The author addresses these pertinent questions in chapter 13 but determines that there is too little evidence to answer them prudently (the limits of etic analysis [366]). Generously, on the way to this conclusion, he makes reference to Arthur Klineman and Octavio I. Romano and their anthropological work on folk healing and folk healers. Even with its limitations, this seems the appropriate road to take in order to make something of the real context of Jesus' healing miracles.

The author focuses on a different kind: that of written traditions. His book, then, is a major piece of work in comparative literature. But not only so, the book can be read as an attempt to describe what an ancient Jewish context might, in fact, have been. While it is true that the author refers to many texts and traditions universally identified as Jewish, when reading through his various expositions one wonders how it is that such ideas actually functioned as a Jewish context. There is a marvelous sentence on 244: "Most of the Jews who produced Second Temple literature were more interested in keeping the law, or in the history or prospects of the nation, or in wisdom and right living, or in the revelation of heavenly realities, or in promoting their own party or people and condemning their enemies." Indeed. This was the focus, as opposed to long-term interest in stories of either exorcisms or healings. However, a question persists. The author describes a context that, consisting of literature, is semiological. Certain words and concepts reappear in different texts, thereby proving the existence of a persistent set of ideas. Some historical figures were reported to have enacted them, to a certain extent. What that was like for those around them is difficult to ascertain; to enact these ideas, the model of the prophet was most often used. One is thankful for information in the book that adumbrates a certain percentage of use of miracle stories in Second Temple literature and a different percentage in the Gospels. After such literary-critical work I should think it is necessary to remember that miracles were, in any social or religious context, a messy business. Claims about them pushed some radically to belief and others to skepticism. Miracles divided people as well as unified them. Hellenistic paradoxographers and their opponents (Palaephatus, Lucian) expressed themselves in some detail about these matters. One gets the impression that, from the Jewish context, through the multitude of examples so expertly solicited by the author, miracle stories were like a controlled substance. Their potentially incendiary content was used to stoke other fires, be they eschatological or theological. The safest haven for them seems to have been the scriptural narrative past, with its heroic, able men and prophets. Miracles were reported

infrequently in the Jewish context, until the Gospel accounts. The real question left to answer, then, is if the increase in frequency and variety with Jesus represents a difference in emphasis or a difference in kind. The author opts for emphasis. Those who opt for kind will have, after this book, much work to do.