

JESUS' MIRACLES AND NEW TESTAMENT JEWISH WORLDVIEW

A Paper

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by

Eric Belz

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1. Introduction

“Simon, you’ve gotta check this guy out! He’s amazing! I think he might be the One!”

Out of breath, Andrew ran up to his brother who was just finishing cleaning his fishing nets after a long night. Simon looked up, searching his little brother’s face. He’d seen Andy get caught up with the latest fads and personalities before, following various religious leaders, but something about him seemed changed. Simon took the bait and asked, “Who are you talking about?”

Andrew just about jumped off the ground that his brother wanted to hear more. “Well, you’ve heard of the young Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. He invited my buddy and me to be his disciples, and he said we’d see amazing miraculous things if we followed him. I’ve heard stories of those who do miracles, but I was always skeptical. But Jesus is different, in every way!”

Andrew hesitated, wondering if he should continue. “During the night I had the most vivid dream of my life. You and I were together with Jesus, watching him as he healed people, cast out demons, calmed a storm on the sea and even raised people from the dead! I know it sounds crazy, and we’ve both heard the stories of other ‘miracle workers’ who turned out to be frauds, but some of the rabbis say these things really happen. In my dream, you and I even started doing some of these same miracles by Jesus’ power. This morning when I shared about my dream with Jesus, he acted like he knew all about it. Simon, I think we need to spend more time with him and find out who he really is. Will you come with me and see if Jesus is the One we’ve been waiting for, the Messiah?”

Friends, I extend to you this same offer. Join me on a journey, investigating Jesus’ miracles and how people of that time responded to them. Then we’ll consider what we can learn about first century Jewish worldview, and finally we’ll touch on a few implications for ministry today, particularly in the African context.

Problem statement

The primary problem statement we will seek to address is: From looking at Jesus' miracles and the responses recorded in the Bible, what do we learn about first century Jewish worldview? Flowing from this central question are five sub-questions:

1. How are we to understand "miracle" and related terms?
2. What miracles did Jesus do and why did he do them?
3. How did first century Jews respond to Jesus' miracles?
4. What do the responses reveal about their worldview?
5. From what we learn about divergent worldviews relating to the supernatural, what are some implications for present-day ministry, particularly in Africa?

Outline for where paper is going.

In an effort to clearly understand the flow of this paper, following the opening introduction, explanation of problem statement and some key terms, there will be a treatment analyzing the biblical record of the miracles Jesus did along with some investigation as to the meaning behind the miracles, primarily from looking at the Gospels of Mark and John. Interwoven with this will be some exploration into the responses of first century Jews to Jesus' miracles and what people of the day thought of this "miracle worker." This will lead us to consider and make some interpretive suggestions about their varied worldviews. The responses and worldview interpretations are the thrust of the paper, and while there will be thoughts interspersed throughout, more attention will be given near the end to worldview matters. Finally, I will offer some brief implications, based upon findings, to guide ministry, particularly in the context where I work in training African pastors.

2. Understanding of key terms (miracle, supernatural, worldview)

First of all, we must understand what we mean by some key terms such as miracle, supernatural and worldview. This will help to frame our discussion in this paper. Oftentimes people refer to a variety of great, exciting things as “miracles.” For example, in their enthusiasm people refer to the birth of a baby as a miracle. There is aeronautics as a “miracle” of modern science. Some people refer to compounding interest as the miracle of economics as we try to get young people to invest early. You can even go to your local gardening store and get “MiracleGro” which will help your plants be healthier. Are these really miracles?

Sometimes, we think of a miracle as something that is “supernatural,” something that goes beyond the realm of nature in an extraordinary, inexplicable way, as if caused by something above nature. In particular, this is a favored definition in the West where many consider reality ruled by “natural law.” Anything that defies the laws of nature we are both skeptical of, thinking that we just don’t understand how nature works yet, or we dismiss it as supernatural and for those who are “unscientific” and a bit nutty to explore and discuss. William Lane Craig addresses this in Geisler’s volume by saying, “If we presuppose naturalism, then events like the incarnation, the virgin birth, Jesus’ miracles and his resurrection go out the window before we even sit down at the table to look at the evidence. As supernatural events, they cannot be historical.” (2004, 140) He goes on, “Skepticism about the Gospels is not based so much on historical considerations as on the presuppositions of naturalism.” (2004, 143)

In volume 1 of Craig Keener’s massive two volume work entitled “Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts,” he distinguishes between the modern concept of “supernatural” and the more common idea for ancient audiences of “suprahuman.” “Most ancient audiences, including Jews, Christians and, later, Muslims, recognized other suprahuman

beings in addition to God. Likewise, many cultures today do not accept the Western dichotomy between natural and supernatural.” The point is that many cultures, including those in Jesus’ time, see the miraculous as “natural,” God and spirits interacting in a natural way in the world. However, the Western term for this working is “supernatural,” so this understanding will continue to be used. (2011, 7)

For our purposes in this paper, we are interested in an understanding of miracle by the Gospel authors and the people of New Testament times. The New Bible Dictionary suggests there are a variety of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek terms used in the Bible to refer to a supernatural working of God in the history of people. Some of these are translated as “miracles,” “wonders,” “signs,” “mighty acts,” and “powers.” (1982, p.782) Three Greek words are used for miracles: Terata = wonder. Semeion = sign. Dunamis = power. All three of these work together to communicate a full understanding behind the act (Belmonte, 2012). Acts 2:22 has all three words used in one verse! Lockyer shares that “the miracles were seals by which God authenticated the miracle-worker himself.” (1988, 16) Thus the miracle was a sign that legitimated God’s representative.

Winifried Corduran, in “To Everyone an Answer” describes a key element in defining what is a “miracle.” “For believers and skeptics alike, a miracle is an event that leaves everyone speechless, trying to find some explanation other than supernatural intervention but not being able to do so.” (2004, 160) Thus inexplicability is essential for an event to be a miracle. Perhaps a good working definition of “miracle” in this context is “an extraordinary event in human history that is unable to be explained by normal means, and is thus attributed to the working of God in history.” These events can be done directly by God or through human or superhuman

agents, and communicate God's saving or judging purposes, according to the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (1992, p.549).

Norm Geisler says that miracles are defined in one of the following two ways: "A miracle is a highly unusual event within nature, either what rarely (second class miracles) or never (first class miracles) occurs by known natural causes. Further, a miracle is an event that is morally and theologically compatible with a theistic God." So a miracle happens by the will of God and for His purposes. The possibility of miracles can be shown philosophically, but this is insufficient, for we want to know if they are reality, and this can only be shown historically, experientially. (1976, 282) CS Lewis, in his highly influential and oft-quoted book "Miracles: A Preliminary Study," says that a miracle is "an interference with Nature by supernatural power." (1947, 5) Thus, something above or outside nature, causes the miracle, and so it is called "supernatural." Lewis argues that if you agree to the presence of God, then it is logically necessary also to agree to miracles, since a supernatural Being will do supernatural acts. In Geivitt and Habermas's "In Defense of Miracles," Richard Purtill shares five qualities of a miracle. A miracle is "an event(1) that is brought about by the power of God(2) that is a temporary(3) exception to the ordinary course of nature(4) for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history(5)." (1997, 72)

McDowell notes four elements that describe the nature of miracles:

1. They are supernatural acts of God.
2. They do not violate natural laws. The system of natural law is not closed, and so it cannot violate the system. By the way, CS Lewis also argues for the openness of the natural system (1947, 59).
3. Miracles are immediate.
4. Miracles are always successful. (1999, 664)

We must diverge on a brief tangent which Charles Kraft articulates in his book, "Christianity with Power," in which he quotes himself from an article entitled "The Question of Miracles,"

“Are there miracles in the kingdom of God? No. Only normal events such as people being saved and obeying God who then are involved in other normal events such as healings, deliverances, control of weather, angelic protection, leading and revelation via words of knowledge and wisdom, salvation, loving the unlovable, “important” people serving “unimportant” people, forgiving the guilty, refusing to worry or be bitter or to take revenge or to seek worldly prestige and honor. Such things are only miracles to those whose definition of normalcy is tied to the earth.... The concept of miracle as we ordinarily understand it is not helpful to us as we strive to see and relate to things as Jesus taught us. May we learn to judge normalcy by Jesus’ standards.” (1989, p.115 originally quoted in the *Pentecostal Minister*, v.6, Winter 1986, p.27).

One final definition which must be clarified is that of “worldview.” James Sire defines worldview as, “a more or less coherent frame of reference for all thought and action.... A worldview is a set of presuppositions which we hold about the basic make-up of the world.” (Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue, 1998. 16-17) Hiebert backs this up with his definition in anthropological terms, “the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives.” (2008, 25) In contrast with Jewish perception, Hiebert says that the dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a development introduced by Greek dualism post biblical times. Issues of faith, religion, miracles, God, angels and demons belonged to the spiritual and supernatural realm, which was sharply distinguished from the natural realm of science, humans, animals, matter, experience and the secular (2008, 144). Winifried Corduan in Geisler’s “To Everyone an Answer” ties worldview and miracles together by suggesting that one’s worldview is the single biggest factor in shaping the possibility and “knowability” of miracles. My perspective of the nature of miracles is most profoundly affected by the “rational coherence for my worldview.” One’s belief system combined with cultural heritage lead to the acceptance or rejection of the validity of miracles (2004, 168). Chuck Kraft states that by far the most significant factor that affects our view of reality is our worldview. Our upbringing mixed with cultural assumptions direct our perspective on life. Kraft defines worldview as, “the

culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments underlying a people's perception of reality." (1989, 20) (For other terms, see Appendix).

3. Identifying miracles, meanings and responses.

A. Non-specific texts, types of miracles and general information.

Let us begin to explore the biblical account of the miraculous acts of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels, paying particularly close attention to those recorded in the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John. While there are many specific episodes recorded of Jesus working miracles, there are also other non-specific statements that summarize his miracle-working activities. For example, in Mark 1:32-34 we read, "That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."

Although there is some discrepancy about the exact number of miracles Jesus did, perhaps based on how the miracles are defined and categorized, yet most would concur that there were at least 34 specific miraculous events performed by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Porterfield documents 72 accounts in the Gospels of exorcisms and healings performed by Jesus, 41 of which represent distinct episodes (2005, 21). There are another fifteen texts that summarize his miraculous activity as the one above in Mark 1. There are also miracles in which Jesus is more the object of the miraculous action rather than the instigator of the miracle (e.g. immaculate conception, baptism, transfiguration, resurrection and ascension). In addition, there are the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, the times when angels presented themselves, and the miraculous activity of the disciples. Clearly, miracles figure very prominently in the Gospels (1992, 549). While the incarnation and resurrection are arguably the most significant of the miracles involving Jesus, yet these will not be explored in this paper in favor of focusing on

those miracles where Jesus was the primary acting agent performing the miracle during his earthly ministry. At the same time, one can agree with CS Lewis in his classic “Miracles” as he states, “The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.” (1947, 108)

It must also be clarified that any listing of miracles is incomplete due to the claim of John, “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25) Therefore, we can conclude that the sampling that the four Gospels offer is given for a reason, perhaps as a sketch of the types of miracles Jesus did, or perhaps they elucidate the specific purposes for why Jesus did miracles when combined with his teaching. Clearly, miraculous works were an essential part of the record of Jesus’ ministry. The miracles he performed are key markers that distinguish him from other religious leaders such as Muhammad or Buddha. One can be a Muslim or Buddhist and know nothing about the founder, but one cannot be a Christian unless you believe certain things about who Jesus was and what he did (2004, 162). Jesus’ miracles were vital to substantiate his message, but more will be shared on this later in the paper.

In addition to the most significant miracles which really stand in a class of their own – the incarnation and the resurrection and ascension, there are four different classifications of miracles. Although these can be worded in different ways, they communicate the same distinction: authority over sickness (shown in healing/curing the sick), authority over nature (shown in control over natural elements), authority over demons/spirits (shown in casting out spirits/exorcisms), and authority over death (shown in raising the dead). Another classification which could be considered as miraculous is a supernatural knowledge, or wisdom, or

understanding that is beyond what a human could perceive, which Marshall describes as an extraordinary understanding of the mind of God (2002). This type of miracle will not be explored in this paper. A listing of the miracles by categories might look something like this:

1. Healing/curing the sick

Simon's mother-in-law, centurion's servant, woman with the issue of blood, man with the shriveled hand, man with leprosy, paralyzed man, Canaanite woman's daughter, deaf mute, blind man at Bethsaida, two blind men (Bartimaeus), two blind men (another time), crippled woman, man with dropsy, ten lepers, high priest's servant's ear, official's son in Capernaum, sick man at pool of Bethesda.

2. Control over nature

Calming the storm, feeding of 5000, walking on water, turning water into wine, feeding of 4000, miraculous catch of fish (two times), withering of fig tree, coin in fish's mouth.

3. Exorcisms/Casting out demons

Man in synagogue, Gadarene demoniac, boy with a demon, demonized blind and mute man, mute man with a demon.

4. Raising of the dead

Jairus's daughter, widow of Nain's son, Lazarus.

B. Specific miraculous events, particularly from Gospels of Mark and John.

The Gospel with the greatest proportion of miracles to text is undoubtedly Mark. This is the most miracle-driven and miracle-infused of the synoptic Gospels. Almost a third of Mark is devoted to accounts of miracles, including half of all verses in the opening ten chapters (Porterfield, 2005, 32). Keener says 40% of Mark's narrative has to do with Jesus' miracles. "Just as the kingdom of God stands at the center of Jesus' preaching, so healings and exorcisms form the center of his activity." (2011, 24) (cf. Historical Jesus scholars Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Guide*, 281.) This fast-moving, action-oriented retelling of Jesus' ministry is bursting with miraculous events that support Mark's claim of Jesus as the wonder-working "Son of Man." The shortest of the three Synoptic Gospels, yet most of the miraculous events are recorded here, 18 in all, with only ten others offered in either Luke or Matthew. While I will not go into the length necessary to exegete all of these miraculous events, I will touch on several noteworthy examples.

While Mark highlights an excellent sampling of Jesus' miracles, he does not record the first chronological miracle Jesus performed. The first of Jesus' recorded miracles, which John calls "signs," occurs in John 2:1-11. In truth, Jesus' miracles began not with the wedding at Cana but with his incarnation. God became a man. "The Source of all miracles was a miracle Himself." (Belmonte, 2012, 75) At this wedding event, Jesus turned 120-150 gallons of water in six stone water jars into the best of wine. There is heavy symbolism in this act, showing that he is breaking with the old ceremonial Jewish traditions, superseding the Law and he is creating a new covenant from the old, but that is a matter for another paper (2012, 78). John shares with us that this act was "manifesting his glory" and that his disciples believed in him (John 2:11), which communicates one key aspect of why Jesus performed his miracles.

The first miracle recorded by Mark, which also appears in Luke, is of Jesus casting out an "unclean spirit." (Mark 1:23-28) Interestingly, John does not record any of the spirit exorcisms. Mark's description of the spirit is noteworthy as he employs the purity/pollution socio-cultural value set to characterize the spirit as impure or unclean although it manifests itself in the synagogue. The spirit sees and recognizes Jesus and calls out to him, acknowledging that Jesus has the power to "destroy us." Jesus promptly exorcises the spirit, cleansing the man, and the crowd stands in awe. They were "amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'what is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" (1:27) And Jesus' fame spread quickly throughout the region. From the text, it is clear that Jesus was not only teaching in a unique and authoritative way, but the miraculous acts he was doing were unusual as well.

After healing many people in the area (Mark 1:34), including Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-31), Jesus cleanses a leper with a noteworthy "touch," which would make him unclean

(Mark 1:40-45). Yet instead of receiving the leper's uncleanness, he confers his own purity, power and cleanness to the leper. As a result of the leper broadcasting the news about his healing, Jesus is restricted in where he is able to go due to the mass of people coming out to him.

In Mark 2:6-7 we see the first negative reaction to Jesus' work and ministry as he pronounces forgiveness of sins upon the paralytic. The scribes charge him with blasphemy saying only God can forgive sins, and right they are, yet they do not perceive that in fact Jesus is God. The result of that healing is that all were amazed and glorified God, proclaiming that they have never seen anything like this. So clearly the constituent elements in how Jesus healed had some very unique components, in this case being tied with the forgiveness of sins.

The negative reaction continues in Mark 3 as the Jewish leaders were watching Jesus enter the synagogue, to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, giving them grounds to accuse him and undermine his ministry (3:2). Their worldview was being threatened and overturned by this young miracle-working Rabbi. Following the miracle of healing the man with the withered hand and putting the Jewish leaders down, the Pharisees and Herodians held meetings together about how to destroy Jesus. Removing him was the best way to preserve their way of life. The contrast is graphic and pronounced, for in the very next verse Mark shares how great crowds followed him, "from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon." (3:8) People clamored even to touch his garments, and unclean spirits screamed out his identity in his presence. It must have been quite a scene wherever Jesus went.

Next we are presented with another negative reaction as the scribes state that Jesus "is possessed by Beelzebul," performing his demon exorcisms by the prince of demons (Mark 3:22). In this way, the religious leaders communicate some more of their worldview, that spirits are the cause of certain unusual behavior and actions.

To some degree in a class of their own are the times Jesus demonstrated authority over nature and the natural order. Events like calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41) and walking on water (Mark 6:45-52) were terrifying to the disciples, despite the fact that they had seen him perform many amazing miracles. They were not terrified by the healings, nor even by the exorcisms or raising people from the dead, which would freak me out. People “marveled,” “were in awe” and “were overcome with amazement” at these healings and other miracles. It is one thing to heal a sick person, but another to demonstrate power over nature and storms, which were often thought to be the result of spirit activity (cf. Jonah 1). In Mark 6:49, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water, they thought he was a ghost and cried out. Their belief in the supernatural is obvious, and spirits manifesting their presence among people is something apparently the Jewish worldview of this time permitted. In our worldview course, Dr. Hayward posited that Jesus stilling the storm and walking on water might have been demonstrations of his power over the spirits of the water that the disciples and people of that time believed in. The unique reactions demonstrated by Jesus’ followers to his authority over natural elements lead us to consider several questions related to worldview. Was their fear and terror because these were more powerful demonstrations by Jesus, possibly directing spirits which inhabited and maybe controlled natural elements? Or was it that they had seen or at least heard stories of healings, exorcisms and the like, but controlling nature was unheard of? Or was part of their worldview wrapped up in belief that only God could control nature, and the pieces began adding up that this Jesus was not just a healer, a great teacher, a wonder-working Rabbi, but might in fact be God? These are uncertain issues worth considering.

The exorcism account in Mark 5:1-20 is quite extensive and will not be retold to save space, but has some interesting elements relevant to our study. Following the removal of the

demons and demise of the pigs, the people of the town, who may have been Gentiles, “beg Jesus to depart from their region.” It seems they were afraid of one who had such power over spirits, which is perhaps a clue into another aspect of the worldview of the people of this area and time. Instead of gratitude for being freed from the terrorizing demons, the townspeople were more in fear of the one with such authority over the demons. In contrast, the man freed from demons begged to remain with Jesus, yet obeyed Jesus’ charge to spread the news of how the Lord had transformed his life (5:19).

The raising of Jairus’ daughter, interwoven with the bleeding woman, is also worthy of note, for there are some elements that communicate much about the perspective of the people of the time (5:21-43). Touch again figures prominently in both stories. The bleeding woman had “suffered much under many physicians,” so part of the worldview of people of the time was that physicians could help cure people, although in this case it certainly did not work. Instead, the power of Jesus and the faith she had in him is what brought about healing. In the house of Jairus, as the girl had already died, there was much commotion, weeping and wailing. Part of the worldview of the time was loud and intense sorrow over death. Jesus counters their commotion with a foreign perspective on death, proclaiming that she is only “asleep,” whereupon he “awakens” her. (5:39) A similar case occurs in Luke 7:11-17. Jesus raises a young man who is the son of a widow, telling those nearby not to weep, and then instructing the man to arise. Fear gave way to worship of God in this case as the people proclaim, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” (Luke 7:16)

The other lengthier case of Jesus raising someone from the dead occurs in John 11:1-44 when Jesus raises Lazarus. Jesus clearly states his purpose, “It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (11:4) A bit later, he states that the purpose in

Lazarus's death was so that his followers would believe in him (11:15, cf.11:40-42). In 11:22-27, Martha communicates some glimpses into her worldview by sharing her faith in Jesus and belief in a resurrection on the last day. Following the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus, many Jews believed in Jesus, yet others plotted with the chief priests and Pharisees to stop Jesus, and thus again we see polarizing reactions to Jesus, presumably based upon divergent worldview.

As we continue to explore the miracles Jesus did, tied with the reaction of the Jewish people, Mark 1:45 shares that Jesus' fame spread to the point that he could not enter towns, but needed to stay in desolate places, yet people continued seeking him out "from every quarter." A familiar theme we find is that Jesus draws massive crowds. According to John 6:2, the reason the crowds follow Jesus is because they see the signs he is doing. At times they leave their food behind in a consuming desire to be with him, as happens in Mark 6 and a short time later in Mark 8. Out of compassion for the massive crowd, Jesus performs another miracle over forces of nature by taking a limited supply of food and creating an unlimited supply, enough to feed many thousands of people with food left over. Initially, it seems that the crowd might have not even been aware that Jesus was performing a miracle in their midst. John adds that when they perceived that he had done this sign, they proclaimed, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" (John 6:14) Jesus used this miraculous event as an object lesson to teach that he is the "bread of life." (6:35) Jesus satisfies the hunger of the human heart. His teaching and miracle work in tandem.

The Gospel of John offers seven miraculous "signs" that Jesus did prior to his death and resurrection which point to him being the Son of God and the anticipated Messiah. They are the teachings of Jesus acted out visibly, graphically, memorably (Belmonte, 2012).

Sign

2:1-11 - Changing water into wine

Truth it points to

Jesus is the source of life.

4:46-54 – Healing the official’s son	Jesus is master over distance.
5:1-15 – Healing the invalid at Bethesda	Jesus is master over time.
6:5-13 – Feeding the 5000	Jesus is the bread of life.
6:16-21 – Walking on water, still storm	Jesus is master over nature.
9:1-41 – Healing the man born blind	Jesus is light of the world.
11:1-44 – Raising Lazarus	Jesus has power over death.

(MacArthur Study Bible, 1997, p.1579 and ESV Study Bible, 2008, p.2023)

Speckled throughout John are brief glimpses into the responses of people to the miraculous works Jesus was performing. For example, in John 2:23 he shares that many believed in Jesus’ name when they saw the signs that he was doing. Even the high ranking Pharisee Nicodemus believes. “You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” (3:2) In 4:19ff, a Samaritan woman at a well experiences a different sort of miracle as Jesus speaks truth about her that there is no way he could have known apart from supernatural means. From his testimony, she comes to understand that he is the Messiah (4:26, 29, 39). Jesus recognizes that without signs, the people will not believe (4:48).

In an important section of John’s Gospel on the authority of the Son which proceeds from the Father, Jesus shares that the miracles he is doing are from the Father (5:17), and show he is from the Father (5:36). The Jews were seeking to kill him, partly because he was breaking their traditions (Sabbath), but more importantly because he was making himself equal with God by calling God his Father. The Jewish worldview was inextricably linked with their traditions, such as the Sabbath, and they could not see beyond this to perceive who Jesus really was. A few chapters later, Jesus teaches that even beyond his clearly stated claims that he is the Christ, his works bear witness about his identity (10:25). In fact, Jesus invites people to believe in him because of his works even if they cannot believe his words (10:38; 14:11). So clearly a major reason for why Jesus is doing these miracles is so people will believe in him and acknowledge his unity with the Father. RA Torrey states from a non-charismatic perspective, “Jesus Christ

obtained power for His divine works not by His inherent divinity, but by His anointing through the Holy Spirit. He was subject to the same conditions of power as other men.” (1898, 94)

Jesus shares a key thought in John 6:29 as the people are asking how to do the works of God like Jesus is doing. He tells them that the ultimate miracle (work of God) is faith in Christ. This is what they should be focusing upon. The Jews communicate part of their worldview in the statement they make in John 7:31, as many people are believing in him, and they said, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” So from their perspective, the signs are vital in confirming Jesus’ Messiahship. Even the Jewish officers were amazed at his teaching (7:46), which irritated the priests and Pharisees to no end.

In John 9 we glimpse again into the worldview of the first century Jewish people as they ask about the man born blind, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” Any physical malady of this nature must be the result of sin, in the Jewish mind. Jesus corrects their thinking, telling them that his blindness was so “that the works of God might be displayed in him.” Even after Jesus heals the man, the Pharisees refused to believe in Jesus, convinced that he is a sinner. (9:24) Their worldviews will not be altered. Jesus heals the man of his lifelong blindness so that he will never need to walk in darkness again, just as those who believe in him would never walk in spiritual darkness again (John 8:12). The miracle follows and reinforces the teaching.

Craig Keener makes the point that nearly all the miracle accounts follow the same formula: “a description of the circumstances of the healing, the healing itself, and its confirmation or effects on the audience.” Thus the reaction of people was always a key element that the Gospel writers shared, for it shows the shifting of the worldview of many in Jesus’ day, and the rigid worldviews of others. The reactions of the Jews are very pronounced in 10:19-21 as there is a sharp division between them over how to perceive Jesus words and works. Some

emphatically stated that he has a demon, others that he is insane, yet others claimed that his words and works do not align with one oppressed by a demon. This is significant, for we can see that wherever Jesus went, there were strong reactions and diverse opinions about him, usually based upon divergent worldviews. In some ways the situation reminds me of a certain Republican candidate – people either love him or hate him.

In a lengthy treatment on the opposition to Jesus (11:45-57), the religious leaders communicate their fear that “everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” A fear of losing prestige and popularity and position of influence with the Romans factored largely in their plotting. The opposition continues in John’s narrative as he records, “Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,” which fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy (John 12:37).

Jesus teaches more about his miraculous works in the Gospel of John than in any of the other Gospels, despite John recording fewer of Jesus works than the other Gospels. In 15:24 Jesus says, “If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father,” which is in fact a fulfillment of prophecy from Psalms. So Jesus is making clear that he is unique among miracle workers, and his obvious and ubiquitous works lead to the culpability of the Jewish witnesses.

The final pertinent passage in John, which must not be omitted, is found in 20:30-31. John shares that there are many other miracles which Jesus performed which he did not write down, as he also mentions in 21:25. But his specific purpose in sharing these is so that those who read this Gospel “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The ultimate goal of Jesus doing the miracles he did, and in John

recording them, is so that people will have eternal life by believing in the name, person and work of Christ.

In summary, Martin Manser, in his *Dictionary of Bible Themes* (2015), shares four responses to Christ's miracles:

- Terror and fear (Mk 4:41; Lk 8:25. See also Mt 8:34; Mk 5:15; Lk 8:35)
- Wonder and amazement (Lk 4:36; Mk 1:27. See also Mt 9:33; 12:23; Lk 9:43; 11:14)
- Faith and gratitude (Lk 19:37. See also Mk 5:18-20; Lk 8:38-39; Lk 17:15-16; Jn 9:38; 14:11; 20:30-31)
- Opposition and hatred (Jn 15:24. See also Mt 11:20-21; Lk 10:13; Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:15; Jn 12:10-11,37-38)

Most of these responses flowed from diverse worldviews about who the Messiah was, how the supernatural interacts with daily life, and how Jesus' message impacted them personally.

C. Thoughts on reasons for Jesus' miracles.

Regarding why Jesus performed miracles, although much has already been shared, a few more thoughts may be offered. One of the main reasons Jesus performed miracles of healing was simply to offer health to the hurting. He wanted to make whole those who were sick. This may seem obvious, but Craig Keener reminds us that it is important for modern interpreters not to read into the miraculous accounts exclusively spiritual significance (2011), although there was always a spiritual purpose included (Corner, 2005). At other times, he pointed them beyond the "sign" to faith in him. Warrington points out that there were motivations involved, even beyond compassion for the hurting, for he did not heal everyone with needs. How Jesus used his hands in healing was an act of compassion as well as an act of prophetic symbolism, representing the hand of the Lord, where the power came from (2000). Mark Corner clarifies that Jesus' miracles are not done to draw attention or enthrall the crowd, for oftentimes they are done in private, striving for few people learning of the act, nor are they a reward for good behavior (2005, 89).

Jesus also wanted to reveal the kingdom of God among men (Matt. 12:28). In first century Palestine, “the social and political structures were inextricably intertwined with Jewish religion.” (Moseley, 2003, 96) As a religious leader, Jesus’ ministry was also viewed as having political and social implications, although his message was widely misunderstood (2005, 36). As Jesus performed miracles, he was showing his kingdom rule over demonic forces, sin, sickness, nature and even death. He also did miracles to fulfill Old Testament prophecies (Matt. 8:16-17 cf. Isa.53; Luke 4:18-19 cf. Is.61; Luke 4:21; Is.14:1; 49:13; 54:8; 55:3, and others from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah and Zech.) Most scholars who support the authenticity of Jesus’ miracles would affirm that a central part of the purpose of his miracles was to reveal and confirm his credentials as the Messiah (Luke 7:19-22; John 5:36; 10:25,37-38; 11:42; Acts 2:22). (Manser, 2015, article 2351) Ultimately, Jesus did miracles to bring glory to God (John 11:4; Luke 17:14-15; Matt. 15:31), to fulfill the work that God had called him to do. He was a man on a mission from which he would not be deterred (Mark 1:37-38).

4. Worldview analysis of Jewish responses to Jesus’ miracles

Certainly there have been many interpretive comments offered to this point about the worldview of first century Jews tied with Jesus’ miracles. To be clear, it is uncertain exactly what the first century Jewish worldview was. The best we can do is offer some reflections, assumptions, interpretations and educated guesses based on the record found in the Gospels.

A. Causation

In terms of what caused the miracles, and how to view Jewish worldview through the lens of Jesus’ miracles, there is much speculation since the issue is loaded with worldview presuppositions. Each of the three primary worldviews suggests different answers to this issue and how to understand miracles: the naturalistic, Western, secular worldview vs. the theistic,

biblical worldview vs. the spiritistic, tribal, animistic worldview. Craig Keener cautions the Western naturalist, “The a priori modernist assumption that genuine miracles are impossible is a historically and culturally conditioned premise. This premise is not shared by all intelligent or critical thinkers, and notably not by many people in non-Western cultures. The assumption is an interpretive grid, not a demonstrated fact.” (764)

Mark 3:22 suggests that demon possession was something that Jewish religious leaders were familiar with, and was part of their worldview. From several of our passages, it seems that not only Jewish leaders but the Jewish people in general were somewhat familiar with the spirit world encroaching upon the physical world. Their worldview blended the two, so that even sicknesses, strange behaviors and other maladies were blamed on sin, spirit possession, or at least spiritual issues (John 9:2). In her book entitled, “Healing in the History of Christianity,” Amanda Porterfield addresses causation issues in the minds of first century Jews by stating,

“In the communities where the gospels were written and first heard, belief in a cosmic battle between good and evil influenced understanding of ... Jesus’ work as exorcist and healer. But first century interpretations of ... Jesus also drew on an older theme in Hebrew scripture that interpreted disease and misfortune as God’s punishments for sin and disobedience of his law, and health and prosperity as blessings from God in response to repentance from sin and recommitment to his law.” (2005, 33)

“In the world of Jesus,” historian Geza Vermes wrote in “Jesus the Jew,” “the devil was believed to be at the basis of sickness as well as sin.” (1974, 58–69). Tying in the theme of sin with sickness, Porterfield aptly suggests,

“From the gospel writers’ perspective, sin lay at the root of sickness as the underlying cause of the malevolence to which all kinds of misfortune could be traced; so illness and disability clearly had spiritual implications, either as punishments from God or as manifestations of malevolent spiritual powers lurking about the cosmos.” (2005, 22)

She also mentions that for the Gospel writers, and perhaps the prevailing sentiment of the day, was that demon possession (literally demonizing) was different than lameness, blindness or

leprosy. In Mark 1:32, people “brought to him all who were sick *and* possessed with demons.” So some distinction was made in the minds of the Gospel writers. Mark Corner adds that oftentimes, people in this day viewed illnesses as caused by evil spirits, including physical illnesses (cf. Luke 13:11,16). Thus “healings were the outcome of a contest between good and evil powers.” (2005, 78) So it would appear that in terms of causation, both of the illness and healing, spiritual factors figured prominently in the Jewish mind.

B. Historicity of Jesus’ miracles

Having explored the biblical record of the miracles and responses, perhaps a bit of time should be spent on the historical understanding of miracles, their historicity, by first century Jews and modern scholars. I Howard Marshall states that the men who recorded the story of Jesus, and the Jews who were his contemporaries, all agree to his supernatural powers. Even those who opposed him did not deny his miraculous powers. “It is significant that despite the polemical character of the Jewish reports and the clear desire to play down Christian claims about Jesus, there is no denial of the supernatural elements.” (2004, 55)

Norm Geisler (1976) writes that many theologians of this past century, such as Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard and Rudolf Bultmann, have reasoned that “whether all the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth really occurred is irrelevant to faith. The important thing about a “myth” or “miracle” is not whether it happened in history but whether or not it evokes an appropriate religious response.” (299) Obviously I take strong exception with this relativizing of the biblical record, as do most modern biblical scholars. Geisler sums up the historicity of miracles by saying that “miracles are more than historical (empirical), but are not less than historical.” (301) “Miracles can occur in the historical process without being of that natural process.” (304) Thus miracles are historical, but they supersede the laws of history and nature by

their very definition. Related with Geisler's findings of liberal scholars, Craig Keener says, "Some earlier modern theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, insisted that "mature" modern people do not believe in miracles and that no one can or does seriously maintain such early Christian perspectives." Yet what Bultmann unwittingly did was to exclude from "modern people" the majority of the world's population in a manner that today would be considered unforgivably ethnocentric (2011, 8). He goes on to validate the historicity of Jesus miracles with the following statements, "There is a general consensus among scholars of early Christianity that Jesus was a miracle worker." (19) "Although limited in kind (i.e., no artifacts), the available evidence for Jesus as a miracle worker is substantial." (22) In fact, he says there is more evidence for Jesus' miracles than any other historical claim about Jesus. In addition to a preponderance of biblical evidence, there are testimonies from non-Christian Jewish and pagan sources that attest to Jesus and his early followers being miracle workers. For example, the first century Jewish historian Josephus claims Jesus was a miracle worker (25). (Josephus, Antiquities, 18.63) "Most people in Mediterranean antiquity believed that miracles occurred, and the Gospels and Acts include a relatively high proportion of such claims." (764) The point of Keener's massive two volume set, he states, is "to demonstrate the plausibility of miracle claims in the Gospel and Acts, with a secondary purpose of suggesting that these claims need not all be explained solely by recourse to natural causation." (2011, 768) In a summative statement, Keener concludes, "Whether in the end one shares the early Christian worldview concerning signs, it is ethnocentric simply to despise it. And whether in the end one despises it, one cannot objectively expunge from the record the clear evidence that early Christians (and many people since then) believed that they witnessed these phenomena." (765) Keener lists hundreds of pages of examples to support his conclusion.

Historically, it was perceived that there were many miracle workers. Eric Eve (2002) offers a thorough accounting for diverse miracles as recorded by many historians and writers in early Jewish times. These include miracles recorded by Josephus, Philo, Enoch, in Hebrew Wisdom literature, in second temple literature, and others. Keener (2011) validates Eve, and adds that part of the acceptance by the public of miracles which Jesus did can be attributed to the fact that it was widely known that miracles occurred in contexts outside Christianity, such as in the Asclepius shrines and the healings done by Apollonius (p.35ff). As was mentioned earlier, the miracles Jesus performed demonstrating authority over nature were particularly telling concerning worldview of the time. Jews believed in “ghosts” (Mark 6:49), spirits and spirit possession (Mark 5:2; 3:22). The supernatural and the natural, spiritual and secular, heavenly and earthly, were not so segregated as in our Western culture where any unexplainable phenomenon must have a naturalistic cause. Marshall helps to clarify some of the beliefs of the day as he suggests that it was commonly believed that many people had supernatural powers in Jesus’ day. Jews had stories that some of their rabbis were able to perform healing miracles similar to Jesus. Roman Emperor Vespasian, who reigned after Nero, was said to be able to heal. Many miraculous stories from this time period exist. The issue in this is not if others were able to perform miracles, but that the worldview of people at this time readily accepted the presence of the supernatural in the realm of reality (2004, 57). However, Eve says that from the surviving Jewish literature of the time, it seems that Jesus is unique in the large number of healings and exorcisms which he performed. While there are occasional accounts of these happening with others, yet they were far from commonplace. This is part of why people were so enamored with Jesus and amazed at his abilities, especially when coupled with his teaching and authority (2002, 378). The central issue according to apologist William Lane Craig is not the authenticity of the

miracles but faith in the existence and working of God. “Once the non-Christian understands who God is, then the problem of miracles should cease to be a problem for him.” (1984, 125)

C. Other worldview issues

Regarding if a first century Jew would have expected a wonder-working Messiah, there is much disagreement. Belmonte states that they would have expected this, being familiar with passages like Is. 35:5-7 and others (2012, 75). But Keener disagrees, stating that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that Jews at this time would have expected a miracle-working Messiah (2011, 27). Again, ascertaining the worldview of NT Jews is a matter of interpretation.

Eric Eve (2002) makes an interesting case about the first century Jewish worldview linking Jesus with the history of the Jewish people. The historical miracles of the deliverance of the Jewish nation in the OT led to the Jews in Jesus’ time holding a strong belief in and hope for signs and wonders in their time. This belief was widespread throughout Jewish society for three reasons: The healings Jesus did to some degree resemble OT healers, such as Elijah and Elisha. Early Jewish literature also spoke to the healing and exorcism of demonic spirits which would be coming. Finally, the sea miracles and those of feeding multitudes Jesus did have some similar characteristics and flavor to the exodus event and miracles done by the greatest miracle worker in the OT – Moses, as well as Elisha and others. Thus Jesus is linked with these iconic figures and the national deliverance that went along with their time of leadership (2002, 377).

Without a doubt, Jesus was in the business of worldview transformation. Chuck Kraft (1989) shares that the people of Jesus’ day held a worldview that if the omnipotent God of the universe came near them, they would die. However, Jesus taught and showed that when people draw near to God and he to them, things go well for them (Luke 5). First century Jews also believed that one should love their neighbor and hate their enemy, but Jesus instead shifted their

paradigms by proposing love for all, including enemies (Luke 6:27-36). Jesus taught forgiveness and acceptance rather than unforgiveness and rejection of offenders or outsiders (1989, 83-84).

In an early event in Jesus' ministry, shortly after calling the first disciples, Luke records Jesus causes a massive supernatural haul of fish (Luke 5:1-11). For our worldview study, what is significant is Peter's reaction to the Lord's miracle. He begs Jesus to go away, for "I am a sinful man!" Peter's worldview led him to the point of understanding his own sinfulness in the presence of holy God, that he was unworthy and did not deserve Jesus' mercy. Jesus comforts Peter by casting a vision for Peter that was infinitely greater than anything Peter could have imagined, "from now on you will be catching men." (Luke 5:10) In this way, Jesus transforms Peter's worldview from being focused on catching fish (the earthbound and temporal) to being focused on leading men to follow Christ (the heavenly and eternal)." What a transformation, and Peter would never be the same! The second time Jesus performs a miraculous haul of fish was also a monumental turning point in Peter's life, for it was at this time that he was reinstated as a disciple and charged with caring for Jesus' followers, despite his earlier denial (John 21:1-19). He was also charged to care for those who are followers of Jesus.

An element of Jewish worldview which I touched upon earlier but must not be missed is the central role of the religious traditions in the life of any good Jew. When Jesus comes along and breaks with their traditions in his teaching and demonstration, for example by healing on the Sabbath, this rocks the world of these Jews (John 2:6; 5:18). The paradigm shift is too significant for them to handle "putting new wine in old wineskins." (Matt. 9:17) Their religious practices were their life, the externals are what made the man. Jesus teaches and demonstrates that what is inside is what counts (Matt. 23), and that is a worldview paradigm that cannot be grasped by the majority of Jews, particularly those who were wrapped up in the rituals. The intense negative

reactions of Jewish leaders should not surprise us for their very worldviews are at stake. Jesus didn't fit into the paradigm of the Messiah Jewish leaders expected, so they opposed and rejected him. They felt threatened by the changes he brought to their worldview and way of life.

While not a miraculous event, the parable Jesus shares in Luke 16:19-31 of the rich man and Lazarus communicates an important message about the worldview of the people of the time closely linked with miracles. If a dead man is raised and goes to the rich man's brothers, he says that they will believe the message. But Abraham disagrees, saying that if they don't believe the Law and Prophets, nothing will persuade them. It seems Jesus is suggesting that their worldview will prohibit their faith in Christ to the point that if Scripture cannot lead one to repentance, not even a miracle of this nature will transform them.

So what was Jesus' worldview? From the biblical record, among other worldview aspects we can discern that Jesus assumed the existence, nature and activities of God. God has absolute authority over and involvement in the affairs of the world. He opposes oppressors and relates to people on the basis of motive rather than superficial obedience. Jesus assumed the existence of the spirit world and believed in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan (Matt.12:22-29). Jesus also believed in power confrontation with spiritual forces (Lk.4, et al), and that power ultimately flows from the Holy Spirit (Lk.3:21-22) (cf. Kraft, 1989, 108-114).

5. Final Thoughts - What are a few implications for present-day ministry, particularly in Africa where I minister, in view of divergent worldviews relating to the supernatural? In view of the present length of this paper, I will only share a few thoughts.

The issue of authority is enormously significant for anthropologist Charles Kraft. Kraft makes the case that the authority that Jesus had from the Father has now been granted to his followers, to do his work in his place. This includes many areas, such as authority to bless and

curse, bind and loose, authority in the spiritual realm, authority over cultural forms, authority over places and organizations, authority in spiritual attack, authority in the family and in ministering to others, as well as in the church (1997).

From his years spent ministering in Nigeria, Kraft learned how significant the supernatural is for non-Western cultures, and how important it is for missionaries to be engaged in these areas. He shares in “Christianity with Power” that Africans are very conscious of the power/fear socio-cultural value set. They not only want to hear the words of power, but they want to see the acts of power that support the words (cf. Luke 10:9). Yet most times western missionaries do not bring acts of power to reinforce their message. The end result in Nigeria with the Krafts was that the Nigerians “developed a kind of dual allegiance: a loyalty to Christianity to handle certain needs paralleled by a continuing loyalty to traditional religious practitioners to handle their power needs.” (1989, 4) This type of syncretism is common throughout Africa and is taught against by missionaries, yet an effective antidote is rarely given.

We have much to learn about the supernatural from our more experienced African brothers. As missionaries, we often act like “Western scientific methods are more effective than prayer.” (1989, 5) Although we pray, the message our African brothers receive is that “God works only through Western cultural ways,” such as medicine, agriculture and education, which appear to use very secular methods. There seems to be a disconnect between the powerful and miracle working God of the Bible and the Western God who rarely does miracles.

Kraft states that this is part of the reason for the exponential growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal church in Africa. “The major reason for this is that signs and wonders are a prominent dimension of charismatic Christianity.” (1989, 95) Kraft suggests that reading the Gospels with the assumption that these things can happen today, followed by observing what is

happening globally, will not only transform your understanding of Scripture but your worldview will irrevocably shift.

From my experience living and working in Africa, as well as from talking with many Africans, and from the research I have done, there is no doubt in my mind that the African worldview is much closer to the worldview of New Testament times than is our Western worldview, particularly relating to the miraculous and supernatural. In the West, we have many limitations in how we understand the Bible and the supernatural world because of our Western worldview. We are naturally skeptical of the miraculous in ways that NT Jews and modern Africans are not. These factors limit our preaching of the Gospel in a context where demonstrations of power must accompany the spoken word, just as they did in Jesus' ministry. (See the appendix for a helpful diagram comparing worldviews in different societies.) Missionaries and church leaders must consider these issues if they want to be most effective in reaching Africans with the Gospel of Christ and growing the church in Africa.

Truly we serve a God who functions in ways today and throughout history which are beyond our comprehension. Therefore, it is essential that particularly those of us who work in regions where God regularly intersects the world in miraculous ways must stay flexible and open to how God may want to work, theologically-grounded and biblically-centered, yet recognizing we serve a God who did unprecedented miracles, in type, quality and number, during his brief time incarnate on earth. As I reflect on the reactions of the New Testament Jews who were privileged to be eyewitnesses to Christ's miraculous works, I want to be in that number that quickly and enthusiastically embraces the Lord's activity, dropping to my knees in worship of the wonder-working, miracle-manifesting God over all creation.

Finally, it is necessary to pause from the academic analysis of worldview and the supernatural to consider the more personal side. In much of the Majority World, modern medical treatment is not possible for those who are struggling and suffering from a variety of maladies. One's heart breaks for those crowding streets of African cities, begging for scraps, helpless and hopeless for any remedy to their condition. Perhaps this is part of the reason why miraculous events seem to happen more frequently in non-Western locations, for in God's mercy he offers supernatural assistance to those who are unable to receive adequate medical treatment. So we can be grateful for medical personnel when God uses them, and for supernatural means when he chooses this avenue.

Keener (2011) reminds us that the presence of miracles points us to look beyond this life to the coming of a "better, eschatological kingdom" for all who hope in Christ, where there will be no more weeping, pain or suffering (Rev. 21:4), where wholeness will be ubiquitous, where the cross, resurrection and return of Christ will wipe away any consequence of sin, and where the glory of God is manifest in complete kingdom power and goodness. May our hearts remain soft and sensitive to the innumerable needs globally for healing, whatever the method might be, just as the heart of our compassionate God breaks for the plight of the hurting. And may we read with a fresh perspective the Gospel accounts of God's intervention in human history to demonstrate his supernatural power and divine compassion for those who are desperately in need.

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Appendix

Some of the other terms which could briefly be clarified are terms related to magic. Eric Eve touches upon a couple terms within his study of the Jewish context. “Witchcraft is harmful magic performed by innate ability, and sorcery is magic performed by acquired technique.” (2002, 361) McDowell offers a comparison between a true miracle and magic (a false miracle) (1999, 666) (cf. Geisler, Signs and Wonders, 1988, 73):

Miracle	Magic
Under God’s control	Under man’s control
Done at God’s will	Done at man’s will
Not naturally repeatable	Naturally repeatable
No deception involved	Deception involved
Occurs in nature	Does not occur in nature
Fits into nature	Does not fit into nature
Unusual but not odd	Unusual and odd

Chuck Kraft shares a helpful, albeit oversimplified, diagram to communicate worldview spheres in different societies, (1989, 199). He shares that non-Westerners are more on the wavelength of the Bible than Westerners are, from a worldview perspective.

Biblical Societies	2/3 World Societies (e.g. Africa)	Western Societies
Spirit Sphere	Spirit Sphere	Spirit/God Sphere
(God the primary focus. Spirits as lesser focus.)	(Spirits the primary focus. God as lesser focus.)	Human Sphere
Human Sphere	Human Sphere	Nature Sphere
Nature Sphere	Nature Sphere	