

MIRACLES and BIBLICAL TRADITIONS OF WRITING

We think of the miracle stories as demonstrations of Jesus' power over nature.

On a literal level, they are. But that doesn't get us very far. On the level of popular imagination, this "power over nature" was the way miracles were understood even in the days of Jesus, as we see in Mark 6.14, where Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist returned from the dead: "This is why he has this power to perform miracles."

But on a deeper level, the miracle stories are symbolic or poetic stories. What is important is their "meaning", a meaning that pushes us beyond the way we usually understand the world—not a violation of natural laws but a change in our orientation, an awakening to new possibility. Myfanwy pointed out that the Bible was "Poetry Plus" not "Science Minus".

Let's look at some Biblical conventions of story-telling. First off look at poetic exaggeration ("hyperbole") in Isaiah 43.1-2:

Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name. You are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flames shall not consume you."

A popular form of Biblical literature casts such poetic statements into narrative form, as we have in the story of Shadrach, Mesach and Abednigo and the fiery furnace in Daniel 3.19-25. The miracle of their survival would not have been taken literally, but as a commentary on a sentiment like we have in Isaiah.

This practice of "interpreting" an exclamation about our experience of God by casting it in narrative form is called a "midrash". You can also see this happening in the story of Jesus walking on water (Mark 6.45-52).

It isn't easy to read and understand biblical narrative when we are so used to the conventional ways of writing of our own times. Biblical conventions were very different (but no less familiar then); once we know them, we have a better chance of knowing what is going on in the "miracle" stories.

The story of the walking on the water is the end frame of an extended section in Mark, beginning with the opening frame of the calming of the storm Mark 4.35:

- A Calming of the storm
- B Healing of Gerasene demoniac (demons' name is "Legion"—Roman army unit of 5,300)
- C Jairus' daughter is dying—send for Jesus
- D Interlude: healing of haemorrhaging woman—12 year illness; faith makes her well)
- E Jairus' daughter raise from dead --12 years old
- F Jesus rejected in home town (failure)
- F' 12 Disciples sent to strangers (success)
- E' John the Baptist raised from dead?
- D' Interlude: Herodius' daughter dances/Herod makes vow
- C' Death of John the Baptist
- B' Feeding of the 5,000; 12 baskets left
- A' Walking on the water

The sequence looks rather out of joint, doesn't it? What we have here is a conventional pattern of Biblical story telling, with episodes that look like they don't have much to do with each other when read the way we do, in sequence. Their deeper meaning emerges when the episodes are seen to mirror each other in an unfolding pattern called a "chiasm", after the Greek letter "chi", which looks like an "X". Our own writing convention of the psychological novel took more than two hundred years to develop, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and now is so conventional it seems universally and eternally natural. I remember visiting an elderly lady once, and while she was making me a cup of tea I counted up the number of Catherine Cookson novels she had on her shelf: 37 as I remember. Cookson writes in a formula spun out in novel after novel, so predictable the reader doesn't have to think. It's hard to imagine, the chiasm looks so strange to us, but the writing conventions of the Bible felt just as natural to the people then as the psychological novel does to us now. And remember something else; even the idea of a "fact" wasn't around until the nineteenth century. The intellectual world we live in is a very recent creation!

So study the chiasm above. How do the mirroring pairs of episodes help you interpret what is going on in this section of the Gospel? The frame gives you a hint that this section is going to be telling us something about keeping the faith, as in that old Simon and Garfunkle song, "Bridge over troubled waters":

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all;
I'm on your side. When times get rough
And friends just can't be found,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.

Look at where the chiasm turns, at F and F', the rejection of Jesus by those familiar to him and the success of the disciples among strangers. Note that the disciples are sent out with nothing, no resources, no support, and that their number is 12. That number will recur in this section, and you will want to see that when it does it is meant to be significant.

Next look at the curious pairing of the feeding of the 5,000 and the healing of the demoniac who has been chained out among the tombs (i.e., among the dead) at Genesera. His healing is a kind of resurrection, and also a re-socialisation of the community that has rejected him. The group on Tuesday figured out a key significant detail in this story: the name of the demons is "Legion", a Roman army unit of about 5,300 men. This pairs with the feeding of the 5,000 story (in popular understanding, a legion would probably be understood rounded off to 5,000). It also connects the occupation of the demoniac by the demons with the occupation of Palestine by the Romans, fracturing communities, overwhelming them, literally possessing them—and all these dynamics are repeated inside the mind, the soul of the demoniac. Notice that the demons know and fear Jesus (and so the Romans had him executed as a threat to their occupation!), and he casts them into swine (extremely un-kosher beasts). The community itself finds Jesus threatening—liberation is always threatening, as it requires them to make room for the one they had excluded. The demoniac wants to follow Jesus, but Jesus insists he go back to rejoin his people. Being a follower of Jesus is important here, but so is community cohesion. His healing is his social inclusion, however difficult that may be. He and his community have to take responsibility for this.

Now look at how this story is paired with the feeding of the 5,000—roughly a "legion" of those who are hungry. Here everything is disorganised, and the disciples don't know where to start. They feel they have nothing to offer. (Remember how the 12 are sent out with nothing.) Jesus has them divide

up the crowd into small groups of fifty and a hundred, as Moses' father-in-law Jethro advised Moses to do when he was in a similar state of panic in the wilderness. Jesus breaks the bread, as the one presiding at the Eucharist would, and the disciples, as elders, distribute it among the people. (Note the resemblance to the operation of the Lord's Supper, which would have been this liturgically developed by the time Mark wrote.) The twelve baskets of leftovers tells us that there will always be more than enough when we give ourselves away in ministry ("empty" ourselves, Philippians 2.7; Isaiah 53:12), as the disciples learn to do. This number also represents the fullness of the tribes of Israel, a kind of "the kingdom of God has come" image. How is this a comment on the problem of the occupation (demonic possession) of Israel by Rome? There is a distinct contrast between the plenitude resulting from breaking bread and the multiplicity of forces occupying the soul of the demoniac. The feeding of the 5,000 is a rich image. At the end of the day it is not so much about the power of Jesus as much as it is a story about the disciples overcoming their sense of inadequacy and the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God, what the "good news" is all about in Mark.

Now look at the way C, D and E are paired. Herod thinks he is in trouble because John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this causes Mark to go back in time to tell the story of John the Baptist. This image of a raised-from death John is mirroring the news that Jairus' daughter is near death.

As Jesus is on his way to see Jairus' daughter, there is this interlude story (D) in which the woman who has suffered menstrual bleeding for 12 years brazenly breaks the "holiness code" taboo against touching someone like Jesus while ritually unclean (unclean, she makes him unclean by doing so). Jesus says it is her faith that has made her well. Remember the frame of this section—the sense of "faith" that enables us to stride through troubled waters. Her faith brings about social inclusion (important in the healing of the demoniac) and breaks the Levitical division between clean and unclean. What is important here, more than literal cure, is this healing social inclusion.

Note how this interlude is paired with the story of Herodius' daughter dancing before Herod, who makes a solemn vow to do whatever she wants. By mirroring this duty to fulfill what one has vowed no matter what the consequences with the crippling effects of the Levitical law in the other story, we begin to understand better how Jesus was such a religious revolutionary. The social exclusion motif from the Jewish religious context of the other stories in this chiasm is put in parallel with what is going on in Herod's house, its resistance to moral principles, its extravagance, its jealousies and its violence.

Now return to Jairus' daughter. She's 12 years old. What happens to 12-year-old girls that is hinted at by the woman's 12 years of menstrual bleeding? I think the story is saying, in a way, that Jairus is afraid he has lost his little girl. Well, he has, in a way. She is no longer a little girl, but is becoming an adult, sexual being. In essence, the image of Jesus bringing her back to life is saying that it is OK to be an adult sexual being. This contrasts with its mirror story in the chiasm, in which John the Baptist condemns Herod for the sin of marrying his brother's wife. Sex is OK. Immorality isn't. The story of John the Baptist is a story gone wrong that ends in his death. The story of Jairus' daughter is a story gone right that ends in new life, in her coming alive as an adolescent. Note that the disciples are also being taught in this section the importance of growing up, which means not being so dependent on Jesus but realizing they can do what he does. This may be a link between their twelve and the girl's twelve. The number twelve is traditionally symbolic of wholeness, completeness.

So, here we are. How does your experience of the interaction of these narrative episodes inform your understanding of the faith it takes to "walk through troubled waters"? The sense of the miracles as stories about breaking the laws of nature through superhuman power falls away as we discover

how much richer these stories are when we open up their depth of meaning. It's what they signify in terms of our own discipleship that is important.

Here's another instance of the same chiasmatic pattern in Mark:

- A healing of blind man (Mark 8.22)
- B Who do say I am? Messiah! But suffering and death
- C Transfiguration (association with Moses and revelation of law): Jesus in glory
- D Healing boy with evil spirit (Father says I believe, help my unbelief)
- E Discussion of suffering and death/keeping faith
- F Argument over who is the greatest (first/last)
- G Welcome/accept little child
- G' Welcome/accept outsiders who do what we do
- F' Temptation to sin (who's outsider?)
- E' Faithlessness and divorce
- D' Blesses the children/access
- C' Rich young man (he has fulfilled all the law) who wants glory
- B' Suffering and death/ James and John want glory. Discussion of suffering and death.
- A' Healing of blind Bartimaeus

Now have a go in looking at the significance of the mirroring pairs. What are we "blind" to? What makes us blind? What enables us to see? Note here that "the blind shall see" was a symbol of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. See Isaiah 42.16, for instance, and Isaiah 35.4-8:

He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way.

In Mark, the good news is the good news of the Kingdom of God. How does this collection of seemingly disjointed episodes say something important about the Kingdom of God, when the blind shall see?

Write down your thoughts, and share them with others in the group.

Response from a colleague:

Hi Tom.

Great literary analysis but, for me, an entirely inadequate understanding of miracle - and not so much because it is reductive and bound to a dated and inadequate modernist (Humean) dismissal of miracles as "violations" of the "laws of nature". I have no interest whatsoever in futile evangelical apologetics that attempt to establish miracles on the basis of God the super-scientist with his higher causal powers meddling in his creation in interventionist ways. However I am with Robert Jenson when he says that "the true problem" with miracles is "not whether they are possible but how we are to distinguish them from events in general." And also with Keith Ward when he suggests that miracles "are occasions when the normal physical regularities are modified by a more overt influence of the underlying basis of all beings. . . [This] modification will show finite things in their true relation to their infinite ground. It will not be an arbitrary breaking of rational and self-contained laws. Thus

miracles have their own internal rationality, which can probably only be perceived by us when the totality of the cosmic process is completed."

Furthermore, the unreconstructed liberal idea that miracles are just metaphorical (midrashic) expressions of human subjectivity and experience just doesn't do it for me, this time hermeneutically. In fact - ironically - liberals and evangelical make the same hermeneutical mistake here - and with biblical narrative in general - of identifying textual meaning with historical reference, the difference being that while evangelicals aggressively maintain the identity, liberals abandon it altogether. On the liberal reading, the miracle stories are not *really* necessary once we know their "inner" meaning; they are ornamental rather than essential. But as any good storyteller knows - and Mark, as you profoundly demonstrate, is a hell of a good storyteller - stories cannot be translated into non-narrative form without the loss of something essential, viz. their redescription of the world.

As Garrett Green explains, what liberals seek to do is "to show that biblical narratives 'really' have a non-historical (e.g. ideal, mythical, existential) meaning. But in that case the literal sense of the texts (since it is not factual) can only be assumed to be fictional, and therefore untrue. If conservatives have wanted to return to a pre-critical 'first naïveté,' liberals have embraced historical criticism while trying to save the faith by abandoning the truth claims of the literal text. The task at hand," Green continues - and I entirely agree - "is to see whether there is another option, a 'second naïveté' that would allow the scriptural narrative to be read literally without sacrificing either the truth claims of the text or the critical integrity of the interpreter." But this is a legacy of the Yale school, and there is no doubt in my mind that your sympathies lie with the "other place", Chicago. So I suspect that we'll just have to agree to disagree on this one.

But, hey, things could be worse: you could be a follower of the abysmal Spong! You're not, are you?

Best wishes,
Kim

Dear Kim,

What a heated response! This really must be getting under your skin, and you yet again accuse me of being an "unreconstructed liberal"--the first time you did that was when I confessed to not accepting a literal belief in the virgin birth, a stance which seems to be hardly open to question these days. You should know, by the way, that the term "second naïveté" is originally from Paul Ricoeur, under whom I studied at the University of Chicago. PR is not at all interested in retaining the factuality of the literal level, which he assumes we have all grown beyond, but seeks to return to the energy of the mythic level of story "as if" we were operating on the literal level. That "as if" is important. Your Yale school of thought seems to have formed the backbone of that ridiculous, fundamentalist television mini-series on The Miracles of Jesus starring Ragi Omar, produced by the evangelical Jerusalem Trust for the BBC, which shows the Lord multiplying loaves as if he were the star performer in a commercial for Orville Redenbacher popcorn. Come on, Kim. The structure of that miracle story conforms too closely to the story of the mustard seed and the grain of wheat that falls to the ground to escape a symbolic reading. That's just the way miracle stories work. You can't hide fundamentalism behind fancy phrases like "the underlying basis of all being" and think it doesn't show. The next thing you will be arguing for is Intelligent Design. What I was trying to show on that evening was a way to read the Bible according to its own rhetorical principles. That's important. The whole panic of not being able to let go of the question of whether or not this stuff really happened is a modernist hang-up. It seems to be clear from Scripture itself that there was then, as now, a spread between the credulous and the more enlightened minds, and the movement from one to the other is known as a dialectical discourse, more clearly practised in the Gospel of John, in which it is obvious that the literal level is meant to disappear like the booster rocket from the Space Shuttle. We

discussed this dialectical pattern on Tuesday night in relation to John's story of the healing of the man born blind, which is actually the story of the continuing blindness of the Pharisees. This kind of reading has nothing to do with the tired label of "liberalism". It's just paying attention to biblical rhetorical conventions in order to safeguard against reading everything as if you are still reading a Catherine Cookson romance.

By the way, I did like your thing about institutional racism in Reform

All the best, Tom

Hi Tom

Thanks for your response. I wouldn't have said what I said if I didn't know that you can give as good as you get!

As I started your email, I was ready to take back the label "unreconstructed" from the liberal. As I went on, I became less sure, but I will certainly withdraw it on the basis of better mutual understanding - and the "liberal" too, for that matter. It is true that labels can be libels.

I remember our discussion of the virgin birth - where you accused me of fundamentalism! It still makes me smile, as in many quarters of the URC I am taken for a raving liberal - as I am taken by the CU at the university here! Actually, by the way, I am agnostic about the virgin birth - but not on the grounds that miracles don't happen, rather for literary, historical, and theological reasons. And as for ID, I have blogged intensively against its biological ignorance and, more, its *theological* nonsense - and precisely for the same reason I reject an *interventionist* understanding of miracle. By the way, do you regard Polkinghorne and Ward as fundamentalists?

But the thing that really gets me about your reductive analysis is the way you elide fundamentalism with the Yale school - which, in any case, was always more a mood than a movement. Lindbeck, for example, had a very different agenda from Frei - but he drew from sources like Aquinas and Barth, let alone Wittgenstein and Geertz, who are hardly card-carrying fundies. And in any case, things have moved on. I would highly recommend Paul J. DeHart's new book *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (2006).

If you want to know where I'm at from living theologians I consider mentors and conversation partners, they would include folk like (and as different as) Jenson, Tanner, Hauerwas, and Hart in the US; Lash, Williams, Webster, and Fiddes in the UK (alas that Colin Gunton is dead); and Moltmann, Pannenberg, Jüngel, and Sauter on the continent (I am ambivalent about Radical Orthodoxy, as I am, for different reasons, about Generous Orthodoxy/the Emerging Church movement in the US). If these folk are fundies, then however you would describe your theology, it would surely strike me as theologically barren. (Again, you're not a disciple of Spong, are you?)

What you say about the hang-up about a certain understanding of reference and history is good, but it opens the discussion rather than closes it - unless, with a popular but erroneous interpretation of Derrida, you really do believe that "there is nothing outside the text", which I'm sure you don't.

Take care.
Kim

Dear Kim,

You know I really have too much to do to respond to this stuff, but I need to thank you from the immeasurable depths of my heart for withdrawing the unreconstructed liberal accusation. I don't even know what it means. Anyway, I am not an agnostic about the virgin birth. I am an atheist on that one, except that I don't know of a better way to say what I do believe. I think John says it better in John 1.12-13 than Luke does in his story. Mary and the baby Jesus is an icon of my own re-birth.

You have to realize that I don't spend as much time sitting around reading as you do, being half blind and all that, so I don't know many of the authorities you cite. I did know poor old untimely dead Colin Gunton, and often wondered if he was too tied to a kind of scholastic Synod of Dort Calvinism to lead us in a helpful, progressive direction. But he was a nice guy. I have never had much use for Stanley Hauerwas. But I have a lot of time for Moltmann, and know him and his work pretty well—met his daughter once and have had long conversations with the wise old man. But I have an exceedingly low tolerance for Barthian neo-orthodoxy and tend to shy away from anything that refers to the orthodox camp, whether that be radical orthodoxy, generous orthodoxy or re--heated orthodoxy. I cut my theological teeth on Paul Tillich, I suppose, but for the most part my thought world is formed by my background as a scholar of literature. I suppose that I am closer to Derrida than to most of the theologians you cite, but I've never tried to put myself in any one camp. Everyone seems to have ideas that are, in part, useful, though I do think the literalism and the fundamentalism of our time is not only illiterate but dangerous. I try to put all this stuff in the far back of my mind and just get on with preaching the text (I am a very exegetical preacher), opening the Word for our time rather than giving theological or political lectures, and getting on with the cure of souls. What's wrong with Jack Spong? You see him as an enemy? He is not a scholar but a popularizer of the basic stuff most of us got in seminary but are too intimidated by our laity to speak about in public. I don't agree with everything he says by a long shot, but he has enabled an awful lot of people who would otherwise have ditched the whole thing a long time ago to remain Christian. Same thing with Marcus Borg. A brilliantly clear writer. Again, I don't agree with everything, but if he's not against us, he's for us, and he's making a lot of difference with ordinary believers.

Gotta run--my reader just came in.

All the best, Tom