

## CHAPTER 4: MIRACLES AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

“The Pharisees came . . . seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and said, ‘Why does this generation seek a sign?’” (Mark 8:11–12a)

Our belief in a loving God does not allow us to depict this Being as pulling strings to control events here on earth. Our common sense of how the universe works does not allow us to conceive of God as “zapping” into the normal course of natural laws. What, then, do we say about the Biblical accounts of miracles?

If God doesn’t go “zap” then we cannot simply accept all the miracle stories as true at face value. There are three different approaches to miracles generally used by those interpreters of the Bible who don’t simply accept them or reject them outright. These alternatives, we will see, boil down to a choice between explaining miracles away or ignoring them. We will begin this chapter by looking at (1) the “classic liberal” approach, which explains them away. Then we will consider (2) Rudolf Bultmann’s “demythologization”, and (3) “demiracle-ization”, both of which ignore miracles under the guise of interpreting them.

### 1. The Classic Liberal Approach

This first approach to dealing with miracles was especially identified with “liberal” scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was not confined to this era, however, and still has widespread appeal and usage. No doubt you have either used this approach yourself or have been exposed to it in others. It works like this: the report of a miraculous event is explained as being of a natural, unmiraculous event which was either misunderstood by witnesses or misinterpreted by those to whom it was reported. At the same time it is affirmed that what the Bible reports did in fact happen, or something very similar to it, albeit unmiraculously.

Thus, for instance, the stilling of the storm by Jesus is explained as a coincidental or predictable change in the weather following upon Jesus' prayer for calm. The disciples, of course, saw the calm follow upon his prayer and interpreted coincidence as cause and effect. (It would not be unusual for an allusion to be made to the ignorance and superstition of the witnesses. This is both arrogant and not entirely inappropriate.) Similarly, Jesus walking on the water becomes his undetected use of a sandbar or sunken log which no one else knew was there. The feeding of the five thousand becomes a "miracle" of the heart: all those people in the crowd who were selfishly keeping their picnic dinners to themselves were inspired to share with others, as opposed to there having been an actual physical multiplication of the five loaves and two fish.

Another example of this approach was passed on to us by Mark Twain. This was delivered by a certain ship's captain, who, says Twain, "was a profound Biblical scholar—that is, he thought he was. He believed everything in the Bible, but he had his own method of arriving at his beliefs. He was of the 'advanced' school of thinkers, and applied natural law to the interpretation of all miracles, somewhat on the plan of the people who make the six days of creation six geological epochs, and so forth. Without being aware of it, he was a rather severe satire on modern scientific religionists."<sup>1</sup>

Twain overheard and recorded his interpretation of the contest on Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18), which, though perhaps a caricature, illustrates well the shortcomings of this approach. So I pass on to you here a portion of one of my favorite pieces of Biblical exposition. After explaining how Elijah (the captain calls him Isaac), as "the only Presbyterian", challenged all the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God could cause an altar to ignite, the captain turns to the contest itself, beginning with the prophets of Baal:

So they went at it, the whole four hundred and fifty, praying around the altar, very hopeful, and doing their level best. They prayed an hours—two hours,—three hours,—and so on, plumb till noon. It wa'n't any use; they hadn't took a trick. Of course they felt kind of ashamed before all those people, and well they might. Now, what would a magnanimous man do? Keep still, wouldn't he? Of course. What did Isaac do? He gravelled the prophets of Baal every way he could think of. Says he, 'You don't speak up loud enough; your God's asleep, like enough, or maybe he's taking a walk; you want to holler, you know,'—or words to that effect; I don't recollect the exact language. Mind, I don't apologize for Isaac; he had his faults.

Well, the prophets of Baal prayed along the best they knew how all afternoon, and never raised a spark. At last, about sundown, they were all tuckered out, and they owned up and quit.

<sup>1</sup>Mark Twain, "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion", published with *Tom Sawyer Abroad/Tom Sawyer Detective* by Harper and Brothers. See pp. 234-7.

What does Isaac do, now? He steps up and says to some friends of his, there, 'Pour four barrels of water on the altar!' Everybody was astonished; for the other side had prayed at it dry, you know, and got whitewashed. They poured it on. Says he, 'Heave on four more barrels.' Then he says, 'Heave on four more.' Twelve barrels, you see, altogether. The water ran all over the altar, and all down the sides, and filled up a trench around it that would hold a couple of hogsheads,— 'measures' it says; I reckon it means about a hogshead. Some of the people were going to put on their things and go, for they allowed he was crazy. They didn't know Isaac. Isaac knelt down and began to pray; he strung along, and strung along, about the heathen in distant lands, and about the sister churches, and about the state and the country at large, and about those that's in authority in the government, and all the usual programme, you know, till everybody had got tired and gone to thinking about something else, and then, all of a sudden, when nobody was noticing, he outs with a match and rakes it on the under side of his leg, and pff! Up the whole thing blazes like a house afire! Twelve barrels of water? Petroleum, sir, PETROLEUM! That's what it was!

Petroleum, captain?

Yes, sir; the country was full of it. Isaac knew all about that. You read the Bible. Don't you worry about the tough places. They ain't tough when you come to think them out and throw light on them. There ain't a thing in the Bible but what is true; all you want is to go prayerfully to work and cipher out how't was done.

Now the usual point of this and similar interpretations is to shore up the Bible's believability and to defend its accuracy to people for whom the miraculous has become unbelievable. But as admirable as this intent may be, and as laudable was the good captain's sincerity of effort, the result of this kind of approach is to miss entirely the central point of the miracle accounts. The point of the account of the contest on Mt. Carmel is that the Lord is God and Baal is not. The point is *not* that Elijah could make fire. In defending the truth of this story with his "petroleum" explanation, the captain has changed it from a demonstration of whose God is God to a demonstration of whose prophet is cleverer (or perhaps sneakier).

The point of the miracle stories in the Gospels is to show that in Jesus, God was at work in a special way, and to affirm his unique authority. The point is not to show that Jesus could in fact predict changes in the weather, or appear to walk on water, or perform any other particular trick that might fool his disciples or the crowds.

Miracle accounts in general were not intended simply to relate the specifics of what happened, but to make it clear that God was at work here, intervening in worldly affairs in a special way, such that we should respond with faith and obedience. To interpret these accounts by concentrating on the event itself, and to explain this event as a misinterpreted

unmiraculous occurrence, is to remove God from the story and so is to miss the point of it.

This is not to say that this sort of explanation is never valid or helpful. In some cases it seems obvious that we ought to make use of it. But it should be used to help us gain understanding of a passage, rather than being used to interpret it. By this I mean that this “classic liberal” approach can be used to explain the background, origin, or development of miracle accounts. It may give us an idea of what really happened, and so aid in our understanding of the Biblical stories. But we can’t assume, as many people have, that this is all that needs to be said in interpreting these stories.

For instance, it is probable that what happened at the Red Sea—actually the Sea of Reeds—had more to do with darkness and an east wind and chariots mired in the mud and the change of the tide, than with the vertical walls of water rendered so picturesquely by Cecil B. DeMille. (These more impressive walls of water seem to be a later elaboration on the Exodus tradition. See Exodus 14:19–29.) Personally, I find it helpful to arrive at this understanding of the event itself.

But we cannot *interpret* this passage by saying that what really happened was a narrow escape in a dark marsh. The point of the story is not just to give the details of how they escaped from Pharaoh’s grasp. More important here is the profession by the people of Israel that it was the Lord their God who delivered them out of Egypt. To interpret the Exodus by just “explaining away” God’s miraculous intervention is to replace a grand example of God’s caring for Israel with a plain old lucky escape, and to replace one of the central formative events of Judaism with an insignificant incident. So while “explaining” a miracle may help us to understand “what really happened”, this explanation cannot give us a satisfactory understanding of what the Bible is saying.

## 2. The Bultmann Approach: Demythologization

While the classic liberal approach concentrates on the physical event and, in explaining what “really happened”, ignores any deeper meaning involved in the miracle account, the approach developed by Rudolf Bultmann does just the opposite by ignoring the event in favor of the meaning. Bultmann, a German theologian active in the first half of the twentieth century, developed the aptly named approach of “demythologization”. This approach merits our attention both because of the impact it has had and because many seminary graduates believe they use it themselves, though few actually do.

“Demythologization” does not refer to “myth” in its everyday sense of an imaginary legend or fairy tale. Instead, “myth” is used here in its technical sense to mean any story or account that makes reference to

God or to the supernatural in general, especially in relation to events on earth and the affairs of humankind.

Obviously, with this definition of "myth" the Bible contains a substantial amount of material that is mythical. This presents a problem, said Bultmann, for with our different world-view today we cannot understand or believe these mythical accounts. He sought a solution to this problem by examining the Bible—and the New Testament in particular—to see if it presented a truth that did not depend on its mythical content. He concluded that it did, that the true purpose of myth here was to give expression to human self-understanding.

Bultmann's reasoning went like this: he assumed that all statements are either (1) objective statements which are intended to provide information about the world, or (2) existential statements which are intended to confront the reader or listener with a decision about his or her possibilities of self-understanding. That is, all statements are either "this is what is" statements or "this is what you can be/ought to be" statements. Now, religious language in particular is addressed to answer the question of what ought to be rather than what is. Therefore, concluded Bultmann, religious myths are not intended to be objective statements—"what is"—but rather existential statements. So what we need is a translation of these mythical accounts into existential statements—or, if you will, demythologization.

For example, the mythical accounts of Jesus' miracles might be understood as pointing out his special authority and the need for us to respond to his life and message. The meaning of these accounts is obtained by demythologizing them. This is done by taking out the myth and translating the story into a challenge to answer Jesus' call to a new way of life. Thus, Bultmann might say that the miracle accounts can be translated into the existential message that "authentic existence"<sup>2</sup> is a real possibility for you and me.

No one should question the value of demythologization in helping to point out for us the important meaning that is implicit in the miracle accounts. But as practiced in a strict and thorough-going way it has two major flaws as a tool for interpreting the Bible: first, it prohibits us from making any statements at all about God; and second, it fails to do justice to the language of the Bible.

First: Since any reference to God is by definition myth (in the sense of the word we are using here), demythologizing means translating all such language into existential statements without reference to God. By emphasizing the distinction between God-talk and other uses of language Bultmann misses the chance to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate ways of talking about God, and throws out the former along with

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<sup>2</sup>"Authentic existence" is a phrase that Bultmann borrowed from the German existentialist Heidegger, and which he believed represented the kind of life to which Jesus called us.

the latter. To say the least, an approach that rules out all speech about God seems somewhat inappropriate as a tool for interpreting a book of religion.

Second: Even without this first defect, demythologization fails to do justice to the language of the Bible. The problem lies in Bultmann's assumption that all statements are intended to be *either* objective information statements *or* existential statements. This assumption fails to appreciate the multifaceted richness of language and leads Bultmann to a false conclusion. Since Bultmann views religious statements as existential, this "either/or" attitude forces him to conclude that they are therefore *not* factual statements. Therefore, to demythologize a miracle story into its existential meaning is not just to give us the existential implications of this miracle account. It is to make a complete translation of this account. Thus, for example, we would have to say that in relating the miracle stories the Gospel writers meant to challenge us with the possibility of authentic existence like Jesus' for ourselves. And this much is certainly true. But if we claim that this is a complete translation, then we are saying that they did *not* also mean to say that Jesus walked on water or stilled the storm.

Certainly the writers meant to point out the authority and specialness of Jesus, and thus to challenge us with a certain response, a certain way of life. But this is not all. They meant just as clearly to say that Jesus did as a matter of fact still the storm and walk on water. The fact is that language is quite capable of making an objective fact claim and giving us existential meaning at the same time, and so demythologization misses half the meaning.

### 3. Demiracle-ization

A much more common approach is that which I call "demiracle-ization". I am unsure whether the relationship of this to demythologization is that of offspring, parent, or sibling. Many people who have read about Bultmann and who believe that they use demythologization are in fact using this third approach instead.

In fact the thrust of demiracle-ization is much the same as demythologization: to extract and emphasize the *meaning* of the miracle. The difference is that demiracle-ization does not rule out all references to God—all "myth" in the technical sense. Instead, only those passages which are not in keeping with our common sense, such as the miracle accounts, need to be "translated" into different language.

Thus, for instance, the stories of Jesus walking on the water or stilling the storm can be said to be claiming that Jesus is the Son of God, or that he had special authority from God. Demiracle-ization would say that the *point* of these miracle accounts is that God was acting in and through