

# The Unparalleled Authority of Jesus

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article explores Jesus' miracles and their purpose in displaying Christ's authority over the physical order, spiritual powers, and pardoning sin.*

**KEY WORDS:** *miracles, proclamation, authority, belief*

The material herein posits that the miracles of Jesus exhibit his authority and that the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes his unique authority, not only in words but also in deeds (cf. 7:28–29; 9:8).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the discourse examines three representative miracles in Matthew 8–9—the stilling of the storm (8:23–27), the healing of two demoniacs in the region of the Gadarenes (vv. 28–34) and the healing of the paralytic (9:1–8)—to elucidate the nature and significance of Jesus' authority. However, an adumbration of a few controlling pre-suppositions *vis-à-vis* the miracles of Jesus must precede the analysis of these passages.

Astounding miracles characterize the ministry of Jesus. Biblical scholars, such as Mark Strauss, readily identify the correlation between the miracles of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God. He notes that miracles “reveal the presence and power of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself divulges that his “deeds of power” (*dunameis*) or miracles symbolize the powerful in-breaking of the kingdom of God in history: “But if it is by the Spirit of God

1 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 299.

2 Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 554; cf. Martin Hengel, and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus and Judaism*, trans. Wayne Coppins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 492.

that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28).

Although miracles corroborate the message of the kingdom, they fulfill an even more basic function: to authenticate the messianic identity—and consequent authority—of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> John Calvin affirms, “We know that Christ did not perform miracles for the purpose of amusement, but had a distinct object in view, which was to prove that he was the Son of God, and the appointed Redeemer of the world.”<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson fittingly observes that miracles themselves do not provide incontestable evidence of Jesus’ identity since they require faith to discern their true import.<sup>5</sup> Even so, Jesus adduces his miracles (and gospel proclamation) to validate his messianic credentials: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matt 11:4–5; cf. Isa 26:19; 29:18; 35:5–6; 42:7, 18; 61:1). Elsewhere, John discloses the evidential value of miracles in confirming the identity of Jesus. He recounts that many believed in Jesus and questioned, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” (John 7:31). Hence, miracles in the gospels signify the unequalled power and rule of Jesus, the divine Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

### WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

Since the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume depicted miracles as a “violation of the laws of nature,” New Testament scholarship has wrestled with the complexity of defining miracles.<sup>7</sup> Barry Blackburn recently holds that “*actual* miracles” are “events incapable

3 Cf. Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, (Bellingham: Lexam, 2022), 276.

4 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003): 2:57.

5 D. A. Carson, “Mathew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:262.

6 France, *Matthew*, 333.

7 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

of being produced by natural means.”<sup>8</sup> Robert Larmer offers a more elaborate explanation of miracles: “(1) an event which would never have occurred except through the action of a transcendent rational agent, (2) an event that has religious significance in the sense that it can reasonably be viewed as furthering God’s purposes, and (3), an event of such extra-ordinary nature that it is either directly perceived as a supernatural intervention in the normal order of nature or immediately inferred as such.”<sup>9</sup> A simple description must suffice: miracles are unforeseen, extraordinary, and awe-inspiring events, wrought by the supernatural power of God.<sup>10</sup>

Further, the gospels advance all the miracles of Jesus (“six exorcisms, seventeen healings, and eight so-called nature miracles” and other unspecified ones) as factual occurrences worthy of acceptance.<sup>11</sup> Many deny the miracles of Jesus, either in whole or in part, because of a philosophical commitment to naturalism. The nature miracles especially receive short shrift “as legendary embellishments of the Jesus tradition.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, Jesus’ contemporaries never disputed the authenticity of his miracles, rejected them as forgeries, or attributed them to natural factors. Even his critics acknowledged he performed many miracles (John 11:47). As Alan Richardson perceptively writes, “The first-century question was not whether Jesus could perform miracles, but by what authority he performed them (Mark 11:28).”<sup>13</sup> Also, the veracity of the miracle stories hinges not

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8 Barry L. Blackburn, “The Miracles of Jesus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 124; italics original.

9 Robert A. Larmer, “The Meanings of Miracle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, 36.

10 See also David Basinger, “What is a Miracle?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, 32; Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 1:110.

11 David E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity” in Band 23/2 Halbband Religion (*Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Verhältnis zu römischem Staat und heidnischer Religion, Fortsetzung*), eds. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 1980), 1523.

12 Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” 1524.

13 Alan Richardson, *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London:

upon research into the historical Jesus and the criteria of authenticity—multiple attestation of sources and forms, coherence, discontinuity, embarrassment, rejection, and execution—but upon apostolic, eyewitness testimony.<sup>14</sup> The apostle Peter declares, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet 1:16).<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the miracles of Jesus differ radically from magic. Morton Smith disagrees and intrepidly labels Jesus a magician. The title of his monograph says it all.<sup>16</sup> David Aune more judiciously asserts:

Jesus did in fact make use of magical techniques which must be regarded as magical because they were affected within the socially deviant context of a millennial movement and because he was able to harness supernatural power in such a way that he and his followers believed that success was virtually guaranteed.... However, it does not seem appropriate to regard Jesus as a magician.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding, any association of Jesus with magic, however tangential, is suspect. John Meier properly indicates that Jesus never employs “magician” as self-designation:

Neither his disciples during his lifetime nor the early church during the rest of the first century ever used it among the many titles and descriptions applied to Jesus. Nor, most significantly, did the adversaries of Jesus or the early Church

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SCM, 1958), 95.

14 For a discussion of the criteria of authenticity, see, John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:167–95; *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:619–31.

15 Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 353–4.

16 Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

17 Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” 1538–9.

in the decades immediately after his crucifixion attack him with the precise charge of magic.<sup>18</sup>

Not until the third century was magic ascribed to Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Besides, the miracles of Jesus differ drastically from magic in design, common practice, and nature. “Magicians and exorcists sought to coerce a deity to act on their behalf by using a variety of techniques, including rituals, incantations, spells, potions, herbs, and magical objects.”<sup>20</sup> Beyond this, magic bears sinister connotations. Jesus, by contrast, performs miracles according to the divine will (John 5:19) without the use of incantations, esoteric names, and amulets.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, his miracles are acts of divine goodness and frequently require faith on the part of the recipients and thus a personal relationship with him.<sup>22</sup>

### ***LORD OVER THE PHYSICAL ORDER***

Matthew 8–9 consists of a triad of miracle stories (8:1–17; 8:23–9:8; 9:18–34). Consequently, the narrator locates half of Jesus’ miracles immediately after the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, three of these miracles share geographical and thematic connections: the stilling of the storm (8:23–27), the healing of two demoniacs in the

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18 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:551.

19 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.6, 38.

20 Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 552.

21 Cf. Graham Stanton, “Message and Miracles,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Brockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66–67.

22 Cf. Walter Grundmann, “δύναμαι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 189.

23 Cf. France, *Matthew*, 300. Altogether, Matthew 8–9 comprises ten individual miracles: unit 1: the cleansing of a leper (8:1–4), the healings of a centurion’s servant (8:5–13), Peter’s mother-in-law and others (vv. 14–17); unit 2: the stilling of the storm (vv. 23–27), the exorcisms of the Gadarene demoniacs (vv. 28–34), the healing of a paralytic (9:1–8); unit 3: the healing of the woman with the issue of blood and the restoration to life of a dead girl (vv. 18–26), the restoration of sight to two blind men (vv. 27–31), and the restoration of speech to a mute man (vv. 32–34).

Gadarenes (8:28–34), and the healing of the paralytic (9:1–8). They occur around the Sea of Galilee and stress Jesus’ preeminence.<sup>24</sup>

The first miracle, the stilling of the storm (8:23–27; cf. Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25), emphasizes Jesus’ mastery over nature. After the discourse on the necessity of following Jesus in costly discipleship (vv. 18–22), the scene pivots from Capernaum to a perilous voyage across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, followed by his disciples, boards a boat (v. 23). John Chrysostom believes that the disciples accompany Jesus so that he might instruct them “to be undismayed in dangers [and] to be modest in honours.”<sup>25</sup> Verse 24 focuses on a “great tempest” (*seismos*, literally, “earthquake”) threatening to inundate the small fishing boat. Located six hundred feet below sea level, the Sea of Galilee is no stranger to sudden and intense storms.<sup>26</sup> The ferocious squall sets the stage for Jesus to manifest his kingly rule over the chaotic forces of nature.

Matthew includes the arresting detail that Jesus sleeps during the storm (v. 24), juxtaposing the tranquility of the Lord with the anxiety of the disciples. His unruffled sleep signals more than mere exhaustion: Jesus rests because of his mastery over creation.<sup>27</sup> But this reality escapes the panic-stricken disciples who awaken him with an impassioned plea: “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” (v. 25). The admonition, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” (v. 26), reveals the incongruity of anemic or “little” faith (*oligopistos*, cf. 6:30; 14:31; 16:8). Matthew grasps the indispensability of faith for the life of discipleship and deems it entirely justifiable for these disciples to trust Jesus, even in adversity: they are eyewitnesses of Jesus’ mighty works (4:23; 8:1–17). He expressly prohibits anxiety *vis-à-vis* material provisions (6:25–34)—and by implication, fear of apparently ungovernable

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24 France, *Matthew*, 333.

25 John Chrysostom, “Homily XXVIII,” in *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, (NPNF 10:189).

26 Carson, “Matthew,” 215; France, *Matthew*, 336.

27 Cf. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 100; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 244.

nature—and they ought to have known that God’s Messiah could not drown and so fail to accomplish the divine will.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus exhibits consummate *exousia* exhibited in his effortless rebuke (*epitimaō*) of the tumultuous winds. Instantaneous calm ensues (v. 26). The allusive question of the awestruck disciples: “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (v. 27), resonates with Old Testament texts ascribing supremacy over the sea to the Lord God of Israel (cf. Ps 65:7; 89:9; 106:9; 107:29; Isa 50:2; Nah 1:4). The question of identity arising from the disciples suggests that since Jesus governs the unruly winds and waters, he possesses divine *exousia*—a fact confirmed by a most unlikely source in the following narrative.

### **LORD OVER SPIRITUAL POWERS**

The second miracle story of exorcism (Matt 8:28–34) depicts Jesus’ transcendence over the spiritual realm of the demonic (cf. Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39). After the storm, Jesus arrives on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the mainly Gentile area of the Gadarenes.<sup>29</sup> Of the synoptic gospels, only Matthew mentions that Jesus encounters two demon-possessed men (*duo daimonizomenoi*) (v. 28).

These exceedingly violent demoniacs, living among the tombs, strike fear in the hearts of the inhabitants of the city near the sea. But the presence of Jesus strikes fear in the demons, prompting them to “cry out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?’” (v. 29). The query, “What have you to do with us?” or “What do we have in common?” hints at their recognition of Jesus’ superiority.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, the demons perceive the divine Sonship of Jesus and its implication for their destiny. The subsequent question, “Have you come here to torment us

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28 Cf. Carson, “Mathew,” 216.

29 See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 208.

30 Cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, 8–18 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 81.

before the time?” presages their inescapable appearance before Jesus, the eschatological judge.

The demons implore Jesus to send them into pigs grazing at a distance (vv. 30–31). Matthew highlights the potent, singular command of Jesus, “Go,” that banishes demons (v. 32). Like the winds, they instantaneously obey. The demons enter the pigs, causing them to stampede down a steep slope and drown in the sea. David Turner concludes, “This dramatic result from just a single word underscores [Jesus’] authority. But his authority is not yet universal since he permits the demons to destroy the pigs and presumably to continue their nefarious activities (cf. 12:43–45) until their ultimate judgement.”<sup>31</sup> Such an inference, however, appears gratuitous: permitting evil to flourish does not necessarily imply restricted sovereignty. Indeed, the context suggests quite the opposite: the demons know who is in charge.

Matthew documents the negative reaction of the citizens of the nearby city to the exorcisms. Instead of serenading Jesus with a hero’s welcome, they implore him to depart the region (vv. 33–34). They regard Jesus as bad for business. The citizens expose what they truly prize: “They preferred pigs to persons, swine to the Savior.”<sup>32</sup> These Gentiles remain unmoved by Jesus’ power over demons and ultimately reject him. Thus, they and their unbelieving Jewish counterparts are of the same mold. Spiritual blindness prevents them from comprehending the incomparable greatness of Jesus and drawing reliable conclusions about the allegiance they owe him.

### **LORD OVER DISEASE AND SIN**

R. T. France regards the healing of the paralytic (9:1–8; cf. Mark 2:1–12) as the climax of the trio of miracles exhibiting “the unparalleled authority” of Jesus.<sup>33</sup> The restoration of the paralytic (and the pronouncement of forgiveness) represents an intensification of the mir-

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31 Turner, *Matthew*, 246.

32 Carson, “Matthew,” 219.

33 France, *Matthew*, 333.



acles of Jesus. The healing and forgiveness of the paralytic signals that Jesus' dominion transcends the natural and spiritual realms. He exercises sole jurisdiction on earth over the moral sphere, annulling sins committed against God and thereby reconciling sinners to him.

The healing of the paralytic occurs on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Capernaum (v. 2). Jesus, aware of the faith of the men bearing a paralytic, kindly addresses the handicapped man: "Son [*te-knon*], be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." The expression of pardon for "sins" (*hamartiai*) provokes the ire of the religious authorities. They charge Jesus with blasphemy in their hearts (v. 3) because they estimate that the *carte blanche* declaration of forgiveness belongs wholly to God. Since they estimate Jesus as an ordinary man, he arrogates divine prerogative to himself when he claims full discretionary power to pardon sin.

Jesus deciphers the evil thinking of his opponents and challenges them (v. 4). He cements his indefeasible right to forgive (*aphiēmi*) sins, by healing the paralytic: "For which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Arise and walk?" But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins'—then he said to the paralytic—'Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house'" (vv. 5–6). W. Davies and D. Allison Jr. capture the drift of the argument:

Although it is certainly not easier to forgive sins than it is to heal disease, it is easier to pronounce the forgiveness of sins than to command someone to walk, this because only the latter can be objectively verified.... But Jesus, as the following verses show, can in fact heal the paralytic. So he can do the harder thing, and this should cause his critics to wonder whether he cannot also forgive sins.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, the healing of the paralytic intimates that Jesus has exclusive authority on earth to accomplish the greater task of forgiveness—an activity well beyond the ability of the Jerusalem priests.<sup>35</sup> The heal-

34 Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 92.

35 Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T & T Clarke, 2005), 135.

ing and its deeper import of forgiveness anticipate Jesus' once-for-all deliverance from sin's guilt ("hideous strength," to borrow from C. S. Lewis) and presence.

Matthew places great emphasis on the endings of the miracle stories. The narration of the restoration and forgiveness of the paralytic concludes similarly to the two preceding miracles, with the audience's reaction to Jesus' deeds of power: "When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men" (9:8). The response of the multitude falls short of genuine trust in Jesus (cf. John 2:24) and worship of God. However, it occupies an important place in the account of the healing of the paralytic, signifying the appropriate response to the supernatural power of Jesus manifested in his work.

What then do the miracles of Jesus signify concerning his authority? First, they verify his ubiquitous dominion over every facet of reality: physical, spiritual, and moral. To be sure, Matthew's portrait of Christ is paradoxical. He depicts Jesus as the ruler of the tumultuous winds and waves, diseases and demons. At the same time, he portrays him as rejected, homeless, and eventually crucified in weakness. Yet, these two seemingly antithetical portrayals mysteriously converge in the Lord Jesus. He is both the supreme Lord and the Suffering Servant. Matthew countenances no delimiting of his sovereignty or denial of his humble circumstances.

Second, when considered within the contours of the gospels, miracles act as eschatological signposts to Jesus' eternal rule. At first blush, the miracles transmit little or nothing about the duration of Jesus' reign. But reading the miracles of Jesus interactively with Matt 28:18 ("And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'") means that Jesus' miracles were hardly a dispensable addendum to his "real work" but stood at its very center. They, along with other blessings of Jesus' work, marked the beginning of the divine overthrow of the dominion of the Evil One, with all of its attendant maladies of humankind."<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, the miracles of Jesus anticipate the permanent denuding of evil powers, the complete

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36 Blackburn, "The Miracles of Jesus," 124.

renovation of the torn fabric of creation, and the wholesale liberation of redeemed humanity from the disorder of sin, disease, destructive elemental agents, and death.

Third, the miracles of Jesus magnify his gracious, beneficial authority. Whereas humans constantly exploit their acquired office to satisfy some personal end, Jesus refuses to perform miracles out of self-interest (Matt 4:1–10) or furnish miracles on demand to satisfy people’s perverse curiosity (12:38–42). “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). In every circumstance, his deeds of power achieve advantageous results for others. He applies the fullness of *exousia* to calm the storm, liberate demoniacs, forgive sins, heal leprosy, fever, hemorrhaging, blindness, muteness, and raise the dead. Precisely at the point of human impotence, Jesus exerts power to meet urgent needs and relieve misery. Larmer concludes, “Far from being an embarrassment to religious faith, [miracles] are signs of God’s love for, and continuing involvement in, creation.”<sup>37</sup> Matthew, therefore, presents the miracles of Jesus as merciful and generous demonstrations of the divine benefactor. They confirm that Jesus is willing and able to intervene with insuperable strength to relieve and defend his people.

Fourth, apart from displaying Jesus’ universal, eternal, and compassionate authority, the miracles of Jesus fulfill a paraenetic purpose: exhorting the believing community to eschew unbelief and to follow Jesus in discipleship with robust faith, even in adverse situations. The same protector and master present with the disciples in the storm also resides in the contemporary church.<sup>38</sup> He possesses immeasurable power to assist believers in all the trials of life. At the same time, the miracles of Jesus warn against spiritual indifference and encourage authentic devotion and worship of God. They summon all to stand in awe of Christ’s extraordinary authority as the future eschatological judge and to laud and magnify God for his mercy reflected in the greatest miracle of deliverance from sin.

37 Larmer, “The Meanings of Miracles,” 50.

38 Cf. Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 124.