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John 6:14, NRSVue.

¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

If you want to know why, read John.

My mother very much believed in miracles. She had been raised a devout Catholic, lived in a convent school, and our family went to Mass every Sunday morning without fail. When our oldest child, Martina, was growing up, there was a large metal cross on the wall of her room. It had been a treasured possession of my mother's. My father lived his faith, obeying those two great commandments to love God and love his neighbor. But my mother was the truly radiant believer. When I was born, I was very sick. At the time, the Catholic Church taught that an unbaptized baby who dies does not go to Heaven, but rather to Limbo. (The Catholic Church no longer teaches this.) So, my mother baptized me herself right after I was born, using water provided by a nurse. And, being a believer in miracles, my mother went further in her attempts to save me. I'll get back to this.

There is literature outside of the New Testament to support the reality of Jesus' miracles. There is a famous Jewish man named Josephus, who lived from

the year 37, around the time Jesus died, to about the year 100. He was a soldier and a historian who happened to write about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D. He also wrote about the hostile and violent acts performed by Pilate against the residents of Jerusalem. Josephus – who was not a follower of Jesus – wrote that Jesus was a “*doer of startling deeds*”, certainly referring to the miracles of Jesus. The Talmud, a collection of ancient Jewish teachings, containing material on Jewish law, ethics, and history, says that Jesus was executed because he practiced magic. This is a very telling statement, as it comes from post New Testament, core Jewish writings. This clearly indicates that Jesus at least attempted to perform supernatural acts. Origen, who was born in 185 A.D., and who was one of the early church “fathers” and a famous theologian, quotes a contemporary of his, a Greek philosopher and fervent opponent of Christianity, his name was Celsus, as saying that Jesus had magical powers.

There is only one miracle of Jesus’ that is documented in all four Gospels, the Feeding of the 5,000. There are differences in the way the miracle is described in the four Gospels, but this is typical of the Gospels as a whole. The four Gospel writers were trying to tell us who Jesus was, what he taught people to believe, and how he taught them to live; they were not concerned with creating detailed, historically accurate histories. Here is an edited version of what we read

in Chapter 6 of John, what we believe is that last Gospel written, and the Gospel that is very different from the other three so-called “Synoptic” Gospels, which all give the same general overview or “synopsis” of Jesus’ life. My point today is that John, who if he did have the other three Gospels to work from, did not use them, and was clearly trying to write something with a different purpose:

6 A large crowd kept following Jesus, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, they gathered fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. They filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

Before we look at a very important point about this miracle that most people completely miss, let’s look at a passage from Chapter 13 of Matthew:

⁵⁴ He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.” ⁵⁸ And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Notice that John writes *“When people saw the sign that he had done”*, while Matthew says, *“Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?”* Both refer to Jesus’ miracles. The Greek word in Matthew that is being translated as “deeds of power” is *“dynamis”*. We also see this word being used in Mark and Luke. But in John, when the author is referring to the miracles of Jesus, he uses the Greek word *“semeion”*, which means “sign”. Let me note that I am using the NRSVue translation of the Bible; it is the one that translates *“dynamis”* to “deeds of power”, which I think is an excellent translation. Almost all English Bibles translate *“semeion”* to sign. But the important thing is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to Jesus’ miracles as powerful deeds. The focus is on the acts themselves and how impressive they are. The goal is to impress people with the nature of Jesus as the Son of God. On the other hand, John, whose Gospel is more theological, calls Jesus’ miracles “signs”. His focus is on why Jesus performed them, what he was trying to accomplish, their theological significance.

Here are the last verses of the miracle story called the Feeding of the 5,000 in the four Gospels. I list them in the order in which we think they were written:

Mark: ⁴⁴ *Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

Matthew: ²¹ *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Luke: ¹⁷ *And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.*

John: ¹⁴ *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."*

In the three Synoptic Gospels, the authors are trying to convey the magnitude of the miracle. In John, he tells us that the miracle is a sign that tells us that Jesus is indeed the final prophet, the Messiah. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are Bible historians, biographers of Jesus' life. John is a theologian. Here is another way of looking at it. Remember that the parables are only told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In a way, John makes up for this, because the miracles or signs of Jesus are like visual or living parables. The miracles of the Gospel of John - and there are approximately seven of them, depending on exactly how you count the miracles - tell us moral or spiritual truths. And so, in the Gospel of John, a lesson typically follows each miracle or sign, even when the word "sign" isn't used in the story.

Let's look at the healing of the man born blind from the Gospel of John. We read about it at the beginning of Chapter 9. This is abbreviated:

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and

washed and came back able to see. ⁸ *The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"* ⁹ *Some were saying, "It is he."* ¹⁰ *They kept asking him, "How were your eyes opened?"* ¹¹ *He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."* ¹² *They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

This story begins with the Apostles thinking that the blind man or his parents must have sinned for him to be born blind. This was a common belief at the time, that disobeying the tenets of the Old Covenant must be the reason for a family to be hit with tragedy. Jesus counters. He subtly, as he so often does in the Gospel of John, says two things at once. First, no, this is the New Covenant and God does not punish the innocent. Second, God did this so that I could cure him in front of all these people. Then, possibly in a way that would make people think back to the Hebrew Scriptures, and how God made humans out of the dust of the Earth and his own breath, Jesus uses mud and his spit to cure the man. Jesus then sends the man to the Pool of Siloam, which was built around 700 B.C. The Pool of Siloam was a place where Jews went to be spiritually purified during the Holy Festivals of Passover, the Feast of the Tabernacles, and Pentecost, and at other times. During the time of Christ, about a million Jews would make the pilgrimage to these festivals, and so the pool, which was about the size of two large swimming pools, would have been well known. Jesus is making this obvious reference to a holy site

of the Old Covenant because eventually, he will be making it clear that he is the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. Then, after the people around him are amazed by this “sign”, Jesus slips away and cannot be found. We see that often, early in his ministry, Jesus does not want to be overtly public in what he does, so that the Sadducees and the Pharisees don’t come after him – yet.

Look at what happens next. The Pharisees find out about this man. They get angry because Jesus performed a miracle on the Sabbath. Remember that there were very strict Old Covenant laws forbidding innumerable forms of work on the Sabbath, including lighting candles and carrying anything that any weight at all. They use this as an excuse to condemn Jesus. The blind man, much to the anger of the Pharisees, and recall that they are the officials of the many local synagogues, says this, and again, it is abbreviated:

“Here is an astonishing thing! ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

Jesus later confronts the blind man, the Pharisees and others:

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with*

him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

John does this often with miracles, the things he calls “signs”: he appends a lesson after a sign. Jesus does much more than simply heal then convert this man to the new faith. In this case, Jesus is his usual self, using language in a very clever, poetic fashion. He is using physical blindness as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. Jesus says that he has come into this world to be judged and executed. This is so that he can take those who do not yet see the truth of God, the God of the New Covenant, and make them see what it means to have faith. He tells the Pharisees that although they think they can see, they are in fact totally blind.

These “signs” in the Gospel of John are thus physical parables of a sort. Instead of Jesus telling stories that have layered meanings, Jesus lives out layered stories in the real world. And, as we see with the parables, these signs are about the Kingdom of God. This is another way in which we see how different, and in some ways, how much deeper the Gospel of John is than the other three Gospels. The other three use a lot of shared material and they focus to some degree on parables. The Gospel of John frequently portrays Jesus as discoursing in a theological fashion. That’s why the miracles are portrayed as special “signs”. It is a more thoughtful, reflective Gospel. Rather than focusing on a biography of Jesus,

the author wants us to fully understand exactly how a witness to the life of Jesus would have been very deeply and spiritually impacted - and thus inspired. I am not saying that the miracles of the other three Gospels do not portray spiritual lessons. It is a matter of emphasis, and it is often subtle. There is no denying, though, that the author of the Gospel of John wants us to consider the miracles as “signs” of theological truths rather than as “deeds of power” by a man who is a deity.

I’d like to get back to my mother. Again, I was apparently very sick when I was born and as a little guy, I had seizures of some sort. This eventually went away. After I was born, my mother sent away for water from Lourdes, the home of a shrine in the foothills of southern France. She poured that water on my forehead. My mother didn’t pick and choose when it came to faith. She didn’t buy the pigs, but not the cornfields. She bought the whole farm. It made her faith invulnerable. So, when she needed it, when she had to turn to God and lay her biggest worry at his feet, she was well prepared. She put me in God’s hands.

I am not telling you that if you are a true believer, you cannot question the literalness of the miracles. Everybody’s faith path is a bit different, and I do not question anyone’s path. However, a fragmented faith, a selective faith is almost always a weaker faith. Don’t be “spiritual but not religious”, which are in truth politically correct code words for saying that God might or might not be real, but

the Bible certainly is not. They are a way of saying that one has philosophical beliefs, but not faith. Give the Bible a chance. When in doubt, don't throw it out.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the miracles of Jesus impress us with the power of Jesus as the Son of God, as a man who was also God. They tell us that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, the Son of God who came to Earth and was crucified to save us. They tell us that Jesus is the deliverer of the New Covenant, a contract between God and all people, not just Jewish people. It is the Gospel of John, however, that more strongly relates the miracles of Jesus to the core of our faith, to the things we believe. If you want to know why something happens in the life of Jesus, why he does the things he does, if you want the deepest reading of the words and deeds of Jesus, read John. The Gospel of John tells us about the stunning nature of the divinity of Jesus. John does this by often writing on two levels, the obvious literal level, as well as a deeper theological level. I believe John assumes that we already know about Jesus. The author, whom we believe was the Apostle John, certainly was aware that other Gospels were in existence, were being read by believers. John knew that the people of his day knew about Jesus and what he did. John then wrote a Gospel with a different purpose - to inspire us to a mature level of faith. That's why the deeds of power performed by Jesus are to John "signs" of spiritual truths.